

“Do You Understand Your Destiny?”

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I came to college last year with a plan: to follow the pre-med track, study chemistry and biology, and become a doctor. I liked psychology and wanted to help people, and I assumed that psychiatry was a good career path for me. I knew where I was going.

Have you ever felt that way?

I also love video games. So it came to pass that I broke up Life Sciences 1a problem sets by turning on my Nintendo 3DS and immersing myself in the stories of games spanning entire universes. In “Kingdom Hearts,” I embarked on a journey to restore light to a world shrouded in darkness. Then, I put my hobby away and returned to arrow-pushing diagrams of chemical reactions. Now, in my sophomore year, my plan has changed. I am a philosophy concentrator. I study stories instead of chemicals.

How did this happen to me?

In the third grade, my parents gave me my first gaming console and a collection of games from the “Legend of Zelda” series. I turned on my television set and began to discover the story called “Ocarina of Time,” an epic which invited me into a world beyond my own, and which depended on me in order to exist. I marveled at this bizarre device that allowed me to be told a story, and – at the same time – to tell one. Before my eyes, the character I controlled – Link – was thrust from childhood into adulthood to slay the Great King of Evil, Ganondorf. But surely, this was child’s play – these were just games, not the literature taught in school.

At school, I found theater: a middle ground between games and novels. As an actor on the stage, I transformed myself into part of a story – Banquo in his dying moments in “Macbeth”; the priest on trial in “Doubt.” Of course, unlike video games, I could not be the audience and the actor at the same time; but theater has been accepted into the academic canon. I went to school, read, acted, directed, and wrote plays; but, late at night, I devoured video games.

As I have grown and played more games, I have found that their stories have shaped much of my philosophy. In “Ocarina of Time,” that game I discovered in elementary school, Link is sent seven years into the future so that he might be mature enough to fulfill his destiny as a hero. After the Sage who sent him through time explains to Link that he must defeat the world’s greatest villain, he asks Link: “Do you understand your destiny?” The player is given a choice to answer either “yes” or “no”; answer “no,” and the Sage will repeat what Link must do and then ask the same question, until Link answers “yes,” and is then allowed to proceed. When I reflect now on the path that led me to philosophy and video games, I understand it as a shift between two different interpretations of Link’s choice.

Interpretation Number One: life has a particular path for you, and you must accept the path in order to proceed. On this interpretation, the capacity to reject your destiny is superficial. The domain of what I could “do,” for a long time, was limited to the canon of what was taught: I could pick a “serious academic interest” only from the fields in which academia was already seriously interested, and develop as though following a pre-determined script. Medicine was my choice from that script.

But there is also Interpretation Number Two: the script cannot proceed, and the story cannot exist, without the player. The player can reject the script as many different times and ways as he wishes before he chooses to proceed; even though the script still exists, this interpretation describes a script which cedes authority to the player.

Through Interpretation Number Two, I learned to transform the path of my story and academic career. In my senior year of high school, I replaced one of my standard courses with a course on video games. Now, I am working with a professor in the philosophy department to study how video games tell stories. Right now, we're looking at how player involvement in the "Legend of Zelda" differentiates its world from the magical realism of Jorge Luis Borges. What I have learned since coming to college is that value and meaning depend on the choice to take your own passions seriously; that is what I seek to do in understanding my destiny.