

# I Coveted That Wind: Ganondorf, Buddhism, and Hyrule's Apocalyptic Cycle

Kathryn Hemmann<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

This article examines the cultural background informing the overarching narrative of the *Legend of Zelda* series, focusing on the references to Japanese religious traditions associated with the characters Ganondorf, Demise, and Calamity Ganon. The destruction enacted by these antagonists is not entirely negative; rather, it is a part of the cycle of rebirth that is necessary for the renewal of Hyrule both within the series mythology and in the context of the player's delight in the postapocalyptic and preindustrial green spaces that characterize the games in the *Zelda* franchise. A close reading of the original Japanese-language script of *Breath of the Wild* (2017), *Skyward Sword* (2011), and *The Wind Waker* (2002) reveals that the various permutations of Ganon add cultural depth to the games, thus endowing the conflicts underlying their stories with a greater sense of literary complexity.

## Keywords

*Nintendo*, *Legend of Zelda*, Ganondorf, Buddhism, Japanese culture

It is a truth universally acknowledged that every heroic fantasy in possession of a grand mythos must be in want of a suitably inspiring villain. In the *Legend of Zelda* series, that villain is usually a man named Ganondorf or a monster called Ganon. According to the lore of the games, Ganon is a manifestation of the curse of a

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<sup>1</sup> George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Kathryn Hemmann, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, 3E5, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA.  
Email: [khemmann@gmail.com](mailto:khemmann@gmail.com)

primordial deity known as Demise, who is the mortal enemy of the goddess Hylia, the ancestor of the eponymous Princess Zelda. Although the basic plot of each game in the series seems to set up an archetypal conflict between Good and Evil in the manner of a Judeo-Christian worldview, many of the Japanese terms associated with Ganondorf, Ganon, and Demise draw on the religious and literary traditions associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism in Japan. In this article, I will explore the roles of the antagonists of the *Zelda* series within the larger context of Buddhist eschatology, in which the end of the world is not permanent but cyclical. According to Buddhist ideology, the world must suffer disaster before it can experience renewal, which is why the *Zelda* games portray the postapocalyptic world as a gentle and visually beautiful place. I will argue that Ganondorf's stated goal as the villain in *The Wind Waker* (2002), which is to resurrect a green and vibrant world, is consistent with the role of Calamity Ganon in *Breath of the Wild* (2017) and Demise in *Skyward Sword* (2011). Without the destruction caused by these antagonists, the player would not be able to experience the beauty of the lush postapocalyptic natural environments that characterize the diegetic playscapes that serve as one of the trademarks of the *Zelda* series. In the myths of the games, the villains are harbingers of political upheaval, but the change they bestow upon Hyrule is not entirely negative. Ganondorf and Ganon are just as necessary to a cycle of hope, recovery, and renewal as the heroes, Link and Princess Zelda.

In his influential study of comparative eschatology, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade (1971) argues that religions predating Judeo-Christian traditions have a cyclical understanding of time. According to this understanding, an apocalypse is not a final ending but merely the beginning of an "eternal return," which is repeated as all living things are reincarnated across endless cycles. Many Buddhist traditions in Japan have also historically embraced cyclical eschatology. According to Mahāyāna Buddhist sutras and other scriptures transmitted through China and Korea, this cycle consists of three stages relating to the rise and decline of the dharma or Buddhist law: *shōbō*, the age of the true dharma, *zōbō*, the age of the corrupted dharma, and *mappō*, the end of the dharma. Medieval Japanese texts calculated the current era of *mappō* to have begun in 1052, and even secular writers, such as the author of the famed *Tale of Genji*, were influenced by the belief that their society would suffer from decline before the return of the political peace and harmonious natural order resulting from the reemergence of Buddhist law in the world (Field, 1987; Londo, 2007).

In her monograph *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction*, Tanaka (2014) demonstrates that a teleological approach to the apocalypse only became common in postwar Japanese fiction and popular entertainment media. Tanaka argues that this is not entirely due to the catastrophic devastation of the Pacific War. Rather, the idea of an apocalypse as a final end is related to a Western configuration of time as linear and progressive, an idea frequently embedded in modern narratives of scientific and social progress. Tanaka cites sociologist Masachi Ōsawa's study of how the extraordinary violence and loss of life in World War I

precipitated a global reemergence of apocalyptic narratives (p. 14) before clarifying that

we increasingly feel that the apocalypse has already happened: Our grand narratives have been lost, and we will not experience another major sense of ending in the future; the divine, nature progress, ideologies, and human rationality cannot play a role in contemporary life. (p. 22)

As described by the philosopher Lyotard (1984) in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the pervasive postwar cultural gestalt facilitated a flattening of history, rendering a linear understanding of time no longer feasible. According to this cultural theory, the apocalyptic horrors of the Holocaust in Europe and the Pacific War in Asia resulted in no catharsis, and the persistence of this trauma has in turn triggered a recurring cycle in international popular entertainment media whereby an apocalyptic event is experienced or narrowly averted only for the world to be threatened with annihilation once again in the sequel.

Napier (1996) has highlighted the prominence of apocalyptic themes in postwar Japanese literary fiction and demonstrated that Japanese television and cinema animation also exhibit a fascination with apocalypse. In her monograph *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (2005), Napier explains,

If apocalyptic imagery and themes tend to increase in times of social change and widespread uncertainty, then present day Japan, shadowed by memories of the atomic bomb and oppressed by a more than decade-long recession that closed off an era of explosive economic growth may seem an obvious candidate for having visions of the end. (p. 250)

Napier clarifies, however, that Japan is far from the only culture that has embraced apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives, as Hollywood has released its own fair share of monster movies and survival thrillers. In fact, the American literary critic Susan Sontag (2001) expressly addresses the relationship between the violent imagery of the overseas military expeditions of the United States and the imagination of disaster in her landmark essay collection *On Photography*, in which she ties the emotional disaffection resulting from the excesses of capitalism to an almost voyeuristic pleasure gained from exposure to horrific images. Japan, which formerly hosted more than a hundred American military bases due to its relative geographic proximity to Southeast Asia, did not escape involvement in the Cold War, and there was a thriving cultural exchange between the United States and Japan during the latter half of the 20th century, especially when it came to giant radioactive monsters, cyberpunk dystopias, and epic fantasies set in postapocalyptic environments (Annett, 2014; Condry, 2013; Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2017; Tsutsui, 2004).

Even though Japanese entertainment media does not exist in a vacuum, it is nevertheless useful to read transnational texts like the games in the *Legend of Zelda*

series in the context of their country of origin, whose literary and religious traditions collectively serve as a cultural backdrop for their creators. In her monograph on the work of Shigeru Miyamoto, the executive producer of the *Zelda* series, Jennifer deWinter (2015) describes how Japanese corporate culture and the Japanese market have influenced the trajectory of many of the titles released by Nintendo. Mandelin (2015), the author of the meticulously researched *Legends of Localization* website and its corresponding book series, offers numerous examples of how the character design, dialog, and story elements of the *Zelda* series are drawn from specific aspects of Japanese culture that cannot be directly translated and must be localized in order to be accessible to a broad range of gamers outside Japan. Localization is never a perfect or a total process, however. Consalvo (2016), who has conducted extensive studies on the international reception of Japanese games, has pointed out that the “cultural odor” of graphic styles and aspects of gameplay can still attract players who may not understand the cultural contexts of these games. Moreover, Consalvo argues,

Even if revenues are comparatively small, the global operations of Japanese game companies have been key to the development of the industry generally, as Japanese games and firms have contributed much in the way of cultural (if not economic) influence on the global games industry. (p. 139)

Although every video game carries the traces of the time and place it was made, the games in the *Zelda* series, whose narrative and visual imagery is especially rich, contain numerous allusions that are likely to be missed by many players outside of Japan. The purpose of this article is to examine the cultural background informing the overarching narrative of the *Legend of Zelda* series through a close reading of key passages within the games and several paratextual materials released by Nintendo, with a focus on references to Japanese religious traditions associated with the characters Demise, Ganon, and Ganondorf. The broader goal of this study is to demonstrate that a culturally informed reading of the original Japanese-language text of video games originating in Japan can yield valuable insights into the digital stories and mythologies that have served as guiding influences for media creators and producers around the world.

### ***Hyrule Historia* and the Relationship Between Demise, Ganondorf, and Ganon**

Because the mythology established by a succession of games since the original *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) was released is relatively convoluted, it is useful to clarify the relationship between Demise, Ganondorf, and Ganon within the official time line of the *Zelda* universe as laid out in *The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*, a supplementary guidebook to the series licensed by Nintendo and published in Japan in 2011 before being translated into English and published by Dark Horse Comics

(Thorpe, 2013). According to the information presented in *Hyrule Historia*, specifically its official version of the series time line (2013, p. 69),<sup>1</sup> the conflict in Hyrule began with a war between the goddess Hylia and a demonic entity known as Demise. In order to save her people, called the Hylians, from being decimated in this war, Hylia sent them to live on a floating island in the sky before sealing Demise within the earth after a battle that wrought cataclysmic damage on the land. Time passed, and the seal on Demise weakened as the Hylians in the sky forgot that they had ever lived on the surface. This changes during the events of *Skyward Sword*, in which Hylia's mortal reincarnation Zelda is kidnapped by Demise's servant Ghirahim, and who intends to use her as a sacrifice in a ritual to resurrect his master. Zelda's childhood friend Link manages to defeat Demise using the power of a magical sword created by Hylia; but before Demise vanishes from the earth, he curses Zelda's descendants to be forever haunted by his malice.

The first known manifestation of Demise's curse is Ganondorf, the male king of the otherwise all-female Gerudo tribe in *Ocarina of Time* (1998). Ganondorf, seeking to claim Hyrule for himself, infiltrates the king's court and learns of the existence of the Triforce, a magical artifact left behind by the three creator goddesses that will grant the wish of whoever touches it. Ganondorf tricks Link and Princess Zelda into opening the gateway to the Sacred Realm, where the Triforce can be made manifest. He wishes to become the king of Hyrule, thereby replacing Zelda's father, whom he had murdered moments before. The imbalance within his heart causes the Triforce to break into its three component parts, and Ganondorf is left with only the Triforce of Power as Hyrule descends into chaos. Princess Zelda gives Link the treasure of the royal family, the Ocarina of Time, which allows him to travel back and forth between the present, in which Ganondorf has just overthrown the Hyrulean monarchy, and 7 years in the future, when Ganondorf reigns as "the Demon King," and Zelda has disguised herself as a wandering bard named Sheik. When Link and Zelda confront Ganondorf at the end of the game, he loses control of the Triforce of Power and transforms into Ganon, a porcine monster with incredible strength but a dubious level of sapience. After Link and Zelda emerge from the battle victorious, Ganondorf regains his sanity but is sealed within the Sacred Realm, and Zelda uses the Ocarina of Time to send Link back to the present, where she believes that he belongs.

According to *Hyrule Historia*, this creates a tripartite split in the time line of series. In the "Downfall Timeline," Link is killed by Ganondorf at some point during *Ocarina of Time*. Zelda therefore confronts Ganondorf herself, but the monstrous Ganon is never properly defeated and periodically returns to threaten Hyrule, which falls into decline. This is the time line that leads to the original *The Legend of Zelda*. In the "Child Timeline," the Link who has been sent back to the past works with the young Princess Zelda and her father to oppose Ganondorf before he becomes a threat. This leads to the events in *Twilight Princess* (2006), in which Ganondorf eventually returns to Hyrule after having been banished to a nebulous otherworld called the Twilight Realm. Although *Breath of the Wild*'s director Hidemaro

Fujibayashi has stated in an interview with *Famitsu* magazine that it is up to the player to decide what time line the game occupies, there are several indications that it may take place in the Child Timeline, albeit several centuries after *Twilight Princess* (Sekai, 2017).<sup>2</sup> In the “Adult Timeline,” the act of Zelda sending Link back in time results in the Hyrule of the future losing the bloodline of the hero, so no one emerges to fight Ganondorf when he breaks free of the Sacred Realm. Daphnes, who is the King of Hyrule when this event occurs, prays to the gods and begs them to prevent the legendary monster Ganon from returning to power. The gods respond to his plea by flooding Hyrule, which is drowned under a body of water known simply as “the Great Sea.” This is the setting for *The Wind Waker*, in which Ganondorf manipulates the Link and Zelda of the current era to reunite the broken Triforce so that he can drain the floodwaters of the Great Sea and restore Hyrule to its former glory. Although Ganondorf successfully reconstructs the Triforce, his plans are thwarted by Daphnes, and he dies without becoming Ganon or resurrecting Hyrule.

This article investigates the meaning of the failure of Ganondorf the man as well as the purpose of the destruction enacted by Ganon the monster. I argue that the roles of both figures are consistent across the three (and possibly more) time lines of the *Legend of Zelda* series, and I believe that these roles are related to the mythology concerning Demise and the curse he laid on Zelda and her descendants. Demise’s curse has affected other characters in the *Zelda* series, such as the wizard Vaati in *The Minish Cap* (2004) and the demon Malladus in *Spirit Tracks* (2009), but this analysis will focus on Ganondorf, Ganon, and Demise because of the richness of the language and lore surrounding these figures in the canonical texts of the games in the *Zelda* series.

### **Calamity Ganon’s “Obsession” in *Breath of the Wild***

*Breath of the Wild* is set in Hyrule 100 years after an apocalyptic event destroyed the monarchy and decimated the kingdom’s population. This apocalypse is referred to as “the Calamity,” and it is believed to have been caused by a creature called “Calamity Ganon,” which currently haunts the ruins of Hyrule Castle. This entity is confined within the castle by Princess Zelda, who uses the sacred sealing power of the Triforce to keep it at bay while Link recovers from the injuries he sustained while protecting Zelda during the Calamity. One hundred years after he is put into a healing stasis, Link wakes with no memories and sets off into a world largely devoid of people. Over the course of the game, the backstory of both Link and the Calamity is gradually revealed as the player undertakes tasks that help to reverse the damage caused by Calamity Ganon, which has once again begun to exert its influence as Zelda’s power weakens.

At a distant time in the past, the kingdom of Hyrule developed incredible technology to combat the foretold return of Ganon. This technology included giant mechanical war machines styled as “Divine Beasts,” as well as Sheikah Towers and the Sheikah Slate, which might be likened to signal towers and a tablet equipped

with geopositioning technology, a camera, and several other functions that are so futuristic as to be perceived as magical, such as teleportation. With the help of this technology, Ganon was successfully defeated, but the king of Hyrule decreed that these devices and the knowledge necessary to create them must be buried and forgotten, presumably because they were too dangerous to remain in common use. Almost a thousand years after these events, it is once again foretold that Ganon will return. King Rhoam, the current king of Hyrule and the father of Princess Zelda, therefore orders the ancient technology to be excavated and returned to full commission. Ganon does indeed return, erupting from deep within Hyrule Castle, but this time it manages to hijack the technology once used to defeat it, turning the Divine Beasts and other military robots on their users and thereby devastating Hyrule before Zelda is able to seal it—and herself—within the castle.

When Link wakes up a hundred years later, Hyrule's population has sharply declined, with only a few settlements scattered at the far corners of the map. Link, who suffers from amnesia, seems to take this state of affairs for granted. The narrative architecture of the game design encourages the player to do so as well, as the relative absence of human habitation does not imply that the world of the game is empty. Far from it, as *Breath of the Wild* is an open-world game in which almost every object the player encounters can be interacted with in some manner. Link can forage for mushrooms, hunt wild game, explore ruins in search of abandoned weapons, and scale cliffs to get a better view of his surroundings, perhaps spotting one of the game's 120 hidden shrines, each of which contains a series of puzzles. Link must investigate the environment thoroughly in order to become stronger, an element of gameplay that allows the player to witness the beauty of the natural world while progressing through the story. In *Breath of the Wild*, Hyrule is a gorgeous green space containing settings ranging from dense jungle forests to oases in the desert, and this world is beautiful precisely because it is postapocalyptic. Writing for *The New Yorker*, author and game critic Simon Parkin (2017) claims that "*Zelda's* essential purpose" is "to bring the great outdoors—the rollicking hills, the whispering caves, all that breezy, alfresco escapade—indoors," and that the game succeeds in this purpose, as in "this Hyrule, a wilderness of hills and lakes and mountain peaks, you are free to go wherever you please."

In a prerelease interview with the gaming and geek culture website *Polygon*, the game's executive producer Eiji Aonuma confirmed that "there is a little bit of a sci-fi element" in *Breath of the Wild*, adding that "I thought it would be interesting for Link to use technology to explore through this wild and ruined world" (Kollar, 2016). Both critics and fans were enthusiastically receptive to "this wild and ruined world," with the highbrow British gaming magazine *Edge* awarding *Breath of the Wild* a perfect score and the title of "Game of the Year," while fan art continued to flood social media sites a year after the game was released.<sup>3</sup> In a Tumblr post that has received more than 12,000 responses at the time of writing, user Hoodiemob (2018) claims that

*Breath of the Wild* is still one of the most unique and gorgeous takes on a postapocalyptic world because the world is still so alive in spite of all its struggles. The dust has settled, but instead of being dark and devoid of life, nature has crept over the ruins and roads.

To encourage engagement with the environment, Link's Sheikah Slate can be used to take pictures of plants and wildlife. These photographs are recorded in the device's "Hyrule Compendium," which also includes narrative notes on the special characteristics and habitats of the flora and fauna recorded therein.<sup>4</sup> *Breath of the Wild* therefore invites the player to explore the beauty of a natural world in which human settlements are conspicuously few and far between.

It is ironic that Calamity Ganon is instrumental to the pleasure to be gained from this experience. Because of Ganon, Hyrule remains in a preindustrial state. A few characters in the game research ancient machines, but most of the kingdom's former technologies have been lost.<sup>5</sup> Not only has Ganon destroyed the civilization of the present age, but the very threat of Ganon has influenced the monarchy to keep Hyrule's population and level of technology stable for hundreds of years. There are no factories in Hyrule nor are there any cities or railways between them. In the absence of an industrial revolution, the kingdom has remained verdant and free of the environmental destruction caused by urban centers and their concomitant pollution. It almost seems that Ganon strikes when the civilization of Hyrule reaches a certain level of urban density and technological sophistication, thereby affording the natural world an opportunity for regeneration. Within *Breath of the Wild*, Calamity Ganon is responsible for a cycle of renewal and regrowth through a phenomenon called "the Blood Moon," which resurrects all of the animals and monsters that Link has slain. The Blood Moon is a necessary gameplay mechanic that ensures that the world of the game remains populated and filled with possibilities for player interaction and engagement, but the association of this process with blood and the moon also functions as a symbolic analogy to menstruation, a female-coded regenerative cycle.

The connection between Calamity Ganon and recurring cycles is not accidental. In *Breath of the Wild Master Works*, a companion book published by the *Nintendo Dream* magazine editorial staff in collaboration with Nintendo (2017a), Ganon is described as having "refused to give up on resurrection because of his obsession" (*fukkatsu o akiramenu mōnen*; p. 75).<sup>6</sup> This description uses the Buddhist term *mōnen* to describe the nature of Ganon's attachment to Hyrule. The concept of *mōnen* is generally associated with a Buddhist scripture called *The Awakening of Faith* (*Daijō kishin ron*), which was written during the 6th century. This is one of the key texts that the Japanese monk Saichō brought back with him from China at the beginning of the 9th century, and it was instrumental in the establishment of Tendai, one of the two main schools of Japanese esoteric Mahāyāna Buddhism (Stone, 2003). The concept of *mōnen* is deeply rooted in Japanese Buddhist religious traditions, which emphasize the ultimate ephemerality of all things.



According to the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, *mōnen* is “mistaken, attached thought,” and it refers to the attachments people have to the world that prevent them from attaining enlightenment or freedom from the cycle of transmigration. “Mistaken” in this context does not carry the same moralistic connotations as it might in a Judeo-Christian value system; instead, it indicates a failure to understand that everything in the world is impermanent and will eventually fade or change. Our attachments to the world cause suffering, and it is from this suffering that various evils arise. Unless we can sever our “mistaken attachments” (*mōnen*) to the world, we are doomed to suffer endlessly throughout each of our successive incarnations. The use of the term *mōnen* in *Master Works* therefore suggests that the man who became Ganon was so strongly attached to his conviction that Hyrule should belong to him that the sheer force of his will trapped him within a cycle of suffering and reincarnation. Ganon’s *mōnen*, which I have translated as “obsession,” suggests that it is not necessarily his desire for power that resulted in his transformation into the Calamity Ganon but rather his absolute refusal to give up on attaining his desire. Eventually, the frustration of being repeatedly thwarted led to an urge to enact revenge, which became the sole motivation of the otherwise mindless Calamity Ganon.

Medieval Japanese Noh drama, which is also visually and linguistically alluded to in association with Ganondorf in *The Wind Waker*, often involves a narrative arc in which a defeated warrior is cursed by his own *mōnen* to wander throughout the world as a vengeful ghost only to be confronted by a priest or other religious figure who helps him achieve release from his suffering by means of sharing Buddhist teachings, which are often conveyed through a mixture of chanting, liturgical references, and magic. Noh plays thus structure their dramatic catharsis through the pacification of the anger that arises because of mistaken attachment (LaFleur, 1986). This narrative arc has remained constant in many works of Japanese popular culture, from contemporary horror cinema to the animated films of Studio Ghibli’s former star director Hayao Miyazaki, in which monsters and villains are more often pacified than they are slain (Napier, 2018). The worldview that underlies this narrative pattern is the idea that one cannot take up arms against a manifestation of lingering malice without perpetuating a cycle of destruction and ill will<sup>7</sup>; one can only attempt to show it compassion in the hope that it can be persuaded to let go of its grudge against humanity. In the world of the *Zelda* series, however, the malice of demons like Calamity Ganon drives the cycle of destruction that is necessary for the renewal of Hyrule.

### Demise’s “Malice” in *Skyward Sword*

The character Demise was introduced in *Skyward Sword*, which was released in November 2011, followed shortly thereafter by *Hyrule Historia*. As Duncan and Gee (2008) chronicle in their essay “The Hero of Timelines,” a vocal contingent of the *Legend of Zelda* fandom has always been obsessively concerned with how the

various games fit together. *Hyrule Historia* attempts to provide definitive answers to the questions posed by members of the *Zelda* fan base, and *Skyward Sword* establishes something resembling a foundational mythology, with the goddess Hylia locked in an eternal battle with the demon Demise. According to the summary provided by the original Japanese edition of *Hyrule Encyclopedia*,

Demise was eradicated using the power of the gods, the Triforce, but the hatred and resentment he bore against the blood of the goddess and the soul of the hero created a curse of cyclical reincarnation that would last through the ages until the end of time. [...] When he was sealed by the Master Sword, Demise's spirit disappeared, but his grudge remained in the world and gave rise to a history drenched in blood. (p. 95)<sup>8</sup>

There are several words in Japanese for “reincarnation,” the most common of which is *saisei*, which literally means “rebirth.” The word used in this description of Demise, however, is *rin'ne*, which is the Japanese expression for the Buddhist concept of *samsara*, the endless cycle of death and rebirth perpetuated by spiritual energy referred to as “karma” (*in'nen* or *inga* in Japanese).

As a religious philosophy, Buddhism seeks to explain why both good and bad things happen to people who do not seem to deserve them. One of the solutions to this problem is the concept of karma, which carries over from life to life through *samsara*, which is often translated as the “transmigration” of the soul (or, more specifically, of karmic energy) from one life to the next. According to this worldview, if something awful happens to a person in their current life, it must be because they did something awful in a previous life. As a numinous conservation of energy, there is no statute of limitations on how long it takes a person's karma to exhaust itself. One of the more unfortunate aspects of the way karma functions within *samsara* is that it is affected not only by an individual's actions but also by that individual's emotions, as well as the emotions that the individual in question engenders in other people. If other people feel strongly about someone, this can guide the transmigration of their soul from one life to another. What this means is that, if enough people hate someone, then that person can literally become a demon.

In Japanese, the Buddhist term used to refer to the effect of lingering hatred within the cycle of *samsara* is *on'nen*, a word that Dark Horse's English-language publication of *Hyrule Encyclopedia* (2018) translates as Demise's “curse” and the English script of *Skyward Sword* renders as “hatred.” Demise's *on'nen* is targeted at the goddess Hylia, who sealed him within the earth during an ancient war and later sacrificed her divinity in order to set into motion a series of events to ensure that he would be dealt with once the seal containing him eventually broke. Although Hylia is no longer a goddess by the time *Skyward Sword* begins, her soul is reincarnated as an ordinary girl named Zelda, who discovers her divine heritage during the events of the game and presumably goes on to establish the kingdom of Hyrule. Zelda uses the magic of the Triforce, which can be used to alter reality and to utterly eradicate Demise from the face of the earth. Nevertheless, at the end of the final battle, Demise

tells Link that his *on'nen* will remain, claiming, “An incarnation of my hatred shall ever follow your kind, dooming them to wander a blood-soaked sea of darkness for all time!”<sup>9</sup> In other words, as long as Zelda’s bloodline remains in Hyrule, her kingdom will suffer from Demise’s lingering resentment.

Although Demise’s curse appears to be a standard villainous taunt in English, the grammatical structure of the line in Japanese implies that it is not “your kind” (*kisamara*) who will suffer; rather, the “incarnation” (*gonge*) of Demise’s *on'nen* will “walk the earth alongside” (*tomo ni* [ . . . ] *urotsuku*) the princesses and heroes of future generations. What Demise is saying is that the violent actions of Link and Zelda will give rise to circumstances that bring about resentment against them in the future. The original Japanese line therefore reads less like a curse and more like a warning concerning the effect of such strongly and mutually held malice (*on'nen*) within the cycle of transmigration (*rin'ne*). The word Demise uses to refer to the “incarnation” of this karma, *gonge*, is also a term associated with Japanese Buddhism, specifically the Shugendō sect of esoteric Buddhism. Shugendō is highly syncretic in its incorporation of elements from multiple religious traditions throughout Asia, including native Japanese Shintō animism. Within Shugendō, as well as in other Buddhist sects, local deities are believed to be *gonge*, or temporary manifestations that a Buddha or bodhisattva takes in order to save living beings (Miyake, 2001). Judging from the use of this Buddhist terminology in the Japanese script, Demise seems to be aware of the apocalyptic cycle of destruction that will be created not merely by his own fury but also by the violence enacted by Hylia, Link, and Zelda, all of which contributes to karmic *on'nen*. The origin of Demise’s “curse” is not merely a result of his own hatred but the hatred of the goddess Hylia as well. Within the “blood-soaked sea of darkness” of the future that Demise envisions resulting from Hylia’s actions, the avatar of his malice is a *gonge*, a manifestation of higher powers tasked with performing actions necessary to end human suffering. Demise’s understanding of himself as a force that transcends simplistic concepts of good and evil therefore complicates his role as a villain. Whereas Hylia seeks to bring an Apollonian order to the world at any cost, Demise might be understood as a Dionysian chaotic drive that restores balance to the world by disrupting a rigid and unchanging stasis.

Just as Hylia was reincarnated as Zelda, the karma generated by Demise was not extinguished, and it is eventually inherited by Ganondorf. When he first appears in *Ocarina of Time*, Ganondorf murders the king of Hyrule and uses the Triforce of Power, which augments his already considerable magical abilities, to conquer Hyrule for himself. He is defeated by Link, whom Zelda then sends back 7 years into the past to prevent Ganondorf from rising to power in the first place. In this second time line, Ganondorf is successfully banished to a separate dimension referred to as “the Twilight Realm,” but he returns to Hyrule once again in *Twilight Princess*. By this point, he seems to have become aware of the cycle perpetuated by malice, and at the end of the game, he says to Link and Zelda, “Do not think this ends here. . . . The history of light and shadow will be written in blood!” This warning echoes the final

words of Demise, who similarly cautioned Link regarding the manner in which violence can only beget violence.

In *Twilight Princess*, Ganondorf blames the perpetuation of this cycle of bloodshed on the “light” of Hyrule. He uses this word with bitter irony, as he has learned that the Twilight Realm was created to prevent the rise of Ganon, which was believed to have been associated with the advanced magic and technology of a group of people who were exiled from Hyrule into the shadowy otherworld. As in *Breath of the Wild* and *Skyward Sword*, the actions of ostensibly villainous forces, as well as the countermeasures used against them, have resulted in widespread destruction that has reduced Hyrule to a preindustrial state. If Ganondorf truly wished to free himself from the cycle, he would need to give up his attachment to his dream of reshaping Hyrule’s history with his own hands. Nevertheless, he refuses to do so, an attitude resulting in the obsession, or *mōnen*, that ultimately transforms Ganondorf the man into Ganon the monster. In the distant future of Hyrule that serves as the setting of *Breath of the Wild*, historical memories of Ganondorf have been lost to time, and only the “malice” (*on’nen*) of Ganon remains to ensure that the order and light of Zelda’s monarchy are balanced by the chaos and darkness of the natural world.

### Ganondorf’s “Fate” in *The Wind Waker*

In an interview with Itoi (1998), a writer known outside of Japan primarily as the creator and director of the *Mother* series,<sup>10</sup> *Ocarina of Time* character modeler Satoru Takizawa explained that, when he worked with lead artist Yūsuke Nakano to create Ganondorf’s design, he requested that “he had to be an appealing character, even though he was the enemy,” further explaining that “I wanted him to have clever eyes so you knew he was a man of high caliber.”<sup>11</sup> In *Ocarina of Time*, Ganondorf is meant to be cool and edgy like the heavy metal–inspired antihero of a *shōnen* manga.<sup>12</sup> In *The Wind Waker*, however, Ganondorf has undergone a character shift and become older and wiser, having acquired a measure of gravitas in the process. He accomplishes his goals by means of strategic manipulation and other indirect action, and although he ultimately engages in a physical battle with Link at the end of the game, he never transforms into Ganon or otherwise presents himself as anything more or less than human.

Link’s companion in *The Wind Waker* is Daphnes, the former king of Hyrule whose spirit resides in Link’s magical talking boat, which introduces itself as *The King of Red Lions* at the beginning of the game. Daphnes refers to Ganondorf as “Ganon,” telling Link that he is a legendary demon who once destroyed Hyrule and must therefore be slain. Daphnes does not explain the full truth to the boy, however, as Ganondorf is clearly not a demon nor is he directly responsible for the flood that sunk Hyrule. Nevertheless, the story that Daphnes relates to Link implies that Ganon led a war against Hyrule (as Ganondorf was said to have done in *Twilight Princess*) and that the people of Hyrule prayed to the gods to save them from the wrath of the rampaging warlord. The gods responded by encasing Hyrule Castle in a timeless

bubble under the Great Sea, presumably killing the vast majority of people living in Hyrule in the process. By the time that *The Wind Waker* takes place, Hyrule exists only in legends, while the descendants of the people who once lived in Hyrule have made their homes in a few isolated island communities. As in *Breath of the Wild*, the player's goal is not to prevent the apocalypse that occurred hundreds of years in the past. Rather, Link is told to defeat Ganon so that no additional destruction can visit Hyrule. Ironically, this entails preventing Ganondorf from reversing the prior apocalypse that created the Great Sea.

Although the relatively calm and stately Ganondorf of *The Wind Waker* seems to have little connection to the violence of Calamity Ganon or the fury of Demise, he performs a similar villainous role within the game's narrative. Like Demise, Ganondorf seeks to upset the established order, and like Calamity Ganon, his purpose is to return Hyrule to a green wilderness free from the oppressive influence of the divine powers commanded by the Hyrulean monarchy. Before the final battle of *The Wind Waker*, Ganondorf explains to Link that he longed for the green land and gentle winds of Hyrule and that he once acted as he did because "I coveted that wind, I suppose." Shortly thereafter, when he extends his hand to the Triforce to make a wish to return Hyrule to its prediluvian state, he exclaims, "Expose this land to the rays of the sun once more!" In his hubris, Ganondorf believes that he alone will be able to restore Hyrule to a paradise blessed by nature. Moreover, his methods for assembling the Triforce to realize his wish, which include kidnapping young women whose pointed Hylian ears mark them as the possible scions of the former royal family, are problematic. Still, as Ganondorf explains to Link, the order imposed by Hyrule's gods is too rigid to allow life to thrive in the enchanted waters of the Great Sea. "None can swim across them. They yield no fish to catch," he says to Link, who regards him with an almost comically confused expression, implying that the boy has taken the ruined state of the environment for granted. Like Calamity Ganon, who is responsible for the beauty of the natural world in *Breath of the Wild*, and like Demise, whose actions caused the surface of the earth to flourish in the relative absence of human habitation in *Skyward Sword*, Ganondorf's wish in *The Wind Waker* is for the barren and empty Great Sea to give way to the lush and healthy landscape that entranced and delighted players in *Ocarina of Time*.<sup>13</sup>

Like Demise in *Skyward Sword* and Ganondorf in *Twilight Princess*, the Ganondorf in *The Wind Waker* is aware of Hyrule's apocalyptic cycle, and the language he uses to describe his worldview in the original Japanese script references Buddhist texts relating to cyclical and ephemerality. When Link ventures beneath the surface of the ocean to challenge Ganondorf, he finds him at the bedside of Tetra, a pirate captain whom Daphnes commanded to remain underwater in the ruins of Hyrule Castle after she was revealed as the last scion of the bloodline of Hyrule's royal family. Instead of fighting Link, Ganondorf asks him to wait until he is able to explain the situation. Unlike Daphnes, Ganondorf does not conceal the truth of the Great Sea behind legends. Instead, he reveals that it was not he who doomed Hyrule but the gods worshipped by the Hyrulean royal family and commanded by the

former king. He explains to Link that Hyrule will not be saved if he is defeated; rather, the continuing unnatural stasis will result in nothing more than the slow decline of life on the Great Sea. “So many pathetic creatures, scattered across a handful of islands, drifting on this sea like fallen leaves on a forgotten pool,” he says, referring to the hostile environment that Link has already experienced throughout the course of the game.

In the Japanese script,<sup>14</sup> Ganondorf’s words are recognizable as an allusion to the famous opening passage of the *Hōjōki*, a classic of Japanese literature written by the Buddhist monk Kamo no Chōmei in 1212 after a series of natural disasters ravaged the imperial capital of Kyoto. The opening lines of this text read as follows:

The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world. (Chambers, 2007)

In addition to this poetic allusion, Ganondorf speaks using archaic language, conjugating many of his verbs and adjectives according to the conventions of pre-modern Japanese, or *kōgo*, a literary language used in texts written before the late 19th century.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, although Ganondorf does not speak in perfect poetic meter, many of the lines in his monologues follow the syllabic emphasis patterns of classical *tanka* poetry and its successor, haiku.<sup>16</sup> When he speaks of his people’s difficult life in the desert, for instance, Ganondorf employs this meter to describe how “a burning wind punished my lands” and “a frigid gale pierced our homes.” His choice of words, such as *shakunetsu* (burning) and *kōryō* (frigid), is notably literary and poetic.

The richness of Ganondorf’s language and the poignancy of his loss help to render him as a sympathetic figure in the eyes of the player. What Ganondorf does not seem to understand, however, is that the magical wish-granting Triforce, which is a manifestation of the same power that caused the watery demise of Hyrule, cannot be used to suddenly force the Great Sea to vanish without incurring the same environmental shock as the initial apocalypse. Furthermore, Ganondorf only views the environment in its relation to humanity. He thus privileges the gentle wind of Hyrule over the harsh winds of the desert and the Great Sea, and he will do anything in his power to shape the existing environment according to his desires. Ganondorf does not consider the effect of his actions on individual lives, and this is why he is positioned as the antagonist of *The Wind Waker*.

In *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva (1993) argue that modernist and contemporary neoliberal ideologies align with common Western configurations of masculinity in their injunctions to be stronger, to work harder, and to shape the environment according to one’s will (see also Kheel, 2008). Such ideologies found expression in Japanese colonial expansion and public policy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, resulting in international and domestic conflict in their disregard of

individual lives and the interconnected ecosystems that support human communities (Miller, 2013). As indicated by his archaic language, which contains traces of the early modern Meiji Period (1868–1912) of Japanese history, Ganondorf represents a mode of thought that belongs to the past and must be dispatched in order for humanity to begin to reevaluate its place in the natural world. *The Wind Waker* is a postapocalyptic narrative through which an elegiac story plays out against a setting in which human civilization is already in decline. Far from presenting the gradual downfall of humanity as a fate to be avoided, however, *The Wind Waker* encourages its audience to consider the apocalypse in a positive light. The destruction of Hyrule's outdated political structures and ideology, represented by the young Link's victory over Ganondorf, therefore presents an opportunity to erase the mistakes of the past and start over anew.

In *The Wind Waker*, Ganondorf is associated with an apocalypse that is presented as an opportunity for growth and adventure in much the same manner as Calamity Ganon and Demise in *Breath of the Wild* and *Skyward Sword*. The necessity of an apocalyptic catalyst for rebirth and renewal is connected to a worldview inspired by Japanese Buddhist traditions, which are referenced in the Japanese text associated with Ganon, Demise, and Ganondorf, including the ways in which these characters speak and refer to themselves. Far from being a collection of one-dimensional villains who mindlessly strive for power and control, the various permutations of Ganon in the *Zelda* series add cultural depth to the games, thus endowing the conflicts underlying their narratives with a greater sense of literary complexity. The storytelling of these games is largely environmental, with the narrative architecture of the gameplay and diegetic landscape encouraging the player to form their own conclusions regarding the deliberately fragmented worldbuilding. This interactive player-driven hermeneutic structure is perhaps one of the reasons why the *Legend of Zelda* franchise has established itself as a common source of contemporary mythology among transnational communities of gamers. Nevertheless, it is still crucial to examine the cultural specificity of the contexts of these contemporary gods and demons in order to achieve a better understanding of the mythological narratives that have become so influential on a global scale. The application of culturally informed literary analysis to video game scripts and extratextual material can contribute a great deal to our understanding of the stories that have already begun to influence and shape transnational digital mediascapes.


### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Kathryn Hemmann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2408-8807>

## Notes

1. The English translation maintains the page numbers and format of the original Japanese publication.
2. These indications include Princess Zelda's speech as she appoints Link as a Champion, during which she refers to a former bearer of the Master Sword who was "steeped in the glowing embers of twilight." In addition, the player can summon the wolf form of the aforementioned hero to serve as Link's temporary companion, and the physical form of Calamity Ganon bears a strong resemblance to the Ganondorf who appears in Twilight Princess.
3. *Breath of the Wild* received a perfect score of 10/10 in the review printed in Edge 304 (April 2017), and it was awarded the distinction of "Game of the Year" for 2017 in "The Edge Awards" feature printed in Edge 315 (February 2018).
4. Although this is not clear in the English translation, these notes are presumably written by Link himself, as they are recorded using first-person linguistic markers in the original Japanese script.
5. For example, the English-language description of Link's "Rubber Armor" set of equipment on the "Inventory" screen reads as follows: "This armor has built-in electricity resistance thanks to its source material—an ancient marvel called 'rubber.' Such technology does not exist in this modern age."
6. This is my translation. The passage quoted from the Japanese edition of Master Works echoes a line of text from the game itself. During Link's fight against Calamity Ganon, Princess Zelda describes the boss's final form as *fukkatsu o akiramenai mōnen kara bōsō shita sugata*. The official English translation of this line reads: "He has given up on reincarnation and assumed his pure, enraged form." Despite rampant speculation on online forums, it is not currently known why the game's localizers decided to render the text in this way, with *akiramenai mōnen* (meaning "an obsession so great that he cannot give up") rendered as "he has given up." The sequel to *Breath of the Wild* may explain this translation choice, but it is still unclear at the time of writing. See Mandelin (2017) for a more comprehensive linguistic analysis.
7. *On'nen*, officially translated as "Malice," is another Buddhist term associated with Calamity Ganon in *Breath of the Wild*. It signifies the negative energy perpetuated by *mōnen*, and it is often translated as "grudge" or "curse." This word is also associated with the character Demise in *Skyward Sword*, as discussed in the following section.
8. The quoted passage is my translation from the Japanese edition of *Hyrule Encyclopedia*. The original Japanese reads as follows: *Shūen no Mono wa kami no chikara Torai fōsu ni yotte shōmetsu shita ga, megami no chi to yūsha no tamashi ni tai suru zōo to on'nen wa, yūkyū no toki no hate made rin'ne o egaku jubaku to natta. [. . .] Shūen no Mono no tamashi wa Masutā Sōdo ni fūin sare kiete itta ga, jubaku wa kono yo ni nokosare, chi mamireta rekishi o umidashita.*



9. In the Japanese text of *Skyward Sword*, the complete line reads as follows: Kono zōo to on'nen ga . . . Sono gonge ga kisamara to tomo ni chi nurareta yami no umi o eien ni mogaki urotsui tsuzukeru no da!!
10. The second game in the *Mother* trilogy, *Mother 2*, was released in North America as *EarthBound* in 1995. The first game was given a global release as *EarthBound Beginnings* on the Wii U Virtual Console in 2015. At the time of writing, the third game in the trilogy, *Mother 3*, has yet to receive an official release outside of Japan.
11. This English translation is taken from Usher (2017).
12. Specifically, Ganondorf was inspired by the character Raoh from *Fist of the North Star*, a popular manga serialized in weekly installments between 1983 and 1988 and adapted into a televised animated series that ran between 1984 and 1988. Nakano added that he wanted Ganondorf to be “charismatic” and “something like an older brother” (these translations of the interview are my own).
13. Many professional video game critics who have written retrospectives about *Ocarina of Time* highlight the game’s setting in the green hills and forests of Hyrule as being particularly memorable and pleasurable. See Alexandra (2018) and Massey (2013).
14. In the Japanese script, Ganondorf’s line reads: Tadayou ko no ha no yō na, kazoeru bakari no shima de nani ga dekiru?
15. One example of Ganondorf’s archaic grammar can be found in his iconic line, “I coveted that wind, I suppose.” The original Japanese reads: Washi wa, kono kaze ga hoshikatta no kamo shirenu. The “-nu” ending (instead of the contemporary -nai) is specific to its linguistic context and designates the end of a sentence in premodern Japanese.
16. As stated above, Ganondorf does not speak in perfect poetic meter, but many of his key phrases generally fall around seven syllables. This is consistent with premodern *tanka* poetry, which generally follows a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic meter. A similar device in English would be a character speaking in blank verse with an iambic pentameter. For more on the religious aspects of nature imagery in premodern Japanese poetry, see Arntzen (1997) and Shirane (2012).

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## Author Biography

**Kathryn Hemmann** is an assistant professor of Japanese Studies in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at George Mason University. Her writing on comics and video games has appeared in venues such as the *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*, the *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, and *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, as well as on websites such as *Kill Screen* and *Geek Feminism*. She also runs the blog *Contemporary Japanese Literature* ([japaneselit.net](http://japaneselit.net)), which features reviews of fiction in translation and essays on gender, society, and popular culture.