

(First published on May 8 2022)

<https://archive.org/details/james-somerton-youtube-2023-12-03/20220508+rg92PER6xvE+Nintendo's+Queer+Relationship+With+Gender.webm>

(Link to thumbnail art:

<https://www.deviantart.com/heikky/art/Gerudo-Link-684551465>

)

This video is brought to you by my patrons. If you'd like to support my channel and get access to extras like audio commentaries, a Patreon exclusive podcast and uncut videos, you can join by clicking the link in the description.

Nintendo is a company that is perceived as very conservative, socially and in their business practices, which isn't really wrong, there's a reason they've been able to weather the ups and downs of the video game industry for the last.. four decades without laying off half of their staff, but it's the socially conservative part that I think we get wrong. For instance; Nintendo has this odd, dare I say "woke" history of action when it comes to gender in gaming, like, while the gamergate harassment campaign against... literally anyone who wasn't a straight white male was going on, Nintendo released a video game where their most iconic characters dressed up as cat boys, and a girl, and meow at each other.

But Nintendo's gender journey didn't start in 2013. They've been on this raucous rollercoaster ride since.. well... since the original Nintendo Entertainment System. So let's have a look back at the grand history of Nintendo and its confusingly progressive, yet conservative stance on gender. (deep sigh) Not looking forward to the comment section on this one.

(Opening credits)

James Somerton presents:

Written by
Nick Herrgott
& James Somerton

Produced by
(Seventy(!) Patron names)

Executive producers:
(3 + 19 (unless the blank one is another patron's username, in which case 23) Patron names)

Thumbnail Art by

Theo Dokomi

Compositing by
Telos Pictures

Edited & Directed by
James Somerton

(Gender Switch (May be the video's working title))

Part 1: Lore

Nintendo was first founded as Yamauchi Nintendo in 1889 in Kyoto, Japan. At first they solely produced and marketed hanafuda playing cards. The cards soon began to rise in popularity and the company had to expand to meet the increasing demand. Fast forward to 1959 when Nintendo made a deal with Disney to allow the use of Disney's characters on Nintendo's playing cards because.. Disney can't.. NOT be associated with anything I talk about apparently. In 1963, the company, which had changed its name to "the Nintendo playing card company", changed its name once again. This time to simply "Nintendo". By generalizing their name, they were able to expand their businesses into markets such as snack foods, toy production, taxi companies, and.. love hotels. If you don't know what a love hotel is, it's a type of hotel you can stay in for a short stay, as in.. an hour or two? What we call a no-tell motel. With a nice lounge. That's right! Squeaky clean, family-friendly Nintendo owned a hotel designed for quick sex, with sex workers and mistresses. But because the typical Japanese home at the time was very small, sometimes with shared living arrangements between the parents and children, these hotels began to be used by parents to escape their children for a few hours to.. you know, go make more children, which lent the establishments a bit more of an air of legitimacy. However, all these ventures eventually failed, except toy production based on some earlier experience from selling playing cards. In 1964, while Japan was experiencing an economic boom, the playing card business reached saturation, leading households to stop buying new playing cards and the price of Nintendo stock dropped from 900 yen to 60 yen per share. During the 1960s Nintendo struggled to survive in the Japanese toy industry, which was already being dominated by Bandai and had yet to become the global powerhouse that it is today.

But, in 1972, the first commercially available video game console; the Magnavox Odyssey, went on the market.. which required a light gun to play certain games. Nintendo broke into the video game industry by producing said light gun. Nintendo saw how successful video games were becoming and took its first step in the gaming arena by securing the rights to distribute the Magnavox Odyssey in Japan. At the time video game consoles were extremely rare. Even Pong consoles had yet to be

produced. So after experiencing success at helping to sell other companies' products, Nintendo began developing its own video games.

Their first video arcade game was 1975's EVR Race, with a few more following in the next couple of years including Radarscope and Donkey Kong. Nintendo continued to see success in producing arcade games, including the original Mario Brothers game, but hit it big in 1985 when they announced the Famicom or Nintendo Entertainment System. A bold move considering the industry had completely cratered out in 1983. But this little contraption took the world by storm and Nintendo became an icon through releasing games like Super Mario Bros, the Legend of Zelda and Metroid.

The Super Famicom or Super Nintendo followed in 1991, leading to a war between Nintendo and Sega for the dominance of the 16-bit video game generation, which Nintendo handily won.

But consoles weren't Nintendo's only video game machine.

Handheld gaming was always a fascination with various companies. Though handhelds were usually small, cheap and featured black images that "moved" simply by swapping position on the screen. Nintendo's revolutionary Game Boy was a clunky, though still handheld, device with fully animated graphics. Like consoles it could play different games based on cartridges. Basically just a teeny tiny console. A philosophy that's carried on to Nintendo's current generation with the Switch. Though only black and white and very low res, the Game Boy spurred Nintendo's complete dominance over all handheld gaming until.. smartphones. This is where Nintendo launched some of its most profitable titles, primarily Pokémon, but also popular tie-ins to Metroid and the Legend of Zelda, with fans claiming that some of each franchise's best titles were released for the Game Boy and eventually the DS. In 1994 Nintendo announced that they had sold more than 1 BILLION game cartridges worldwide, one-tenth of which were Mario games. At the same time Nintendo announced Project Reality, a code name for what would later become known as the Nintendo 64, which helped home console games move from scrolling 2D images to fully revolving 3D ones and lead the way for some of the most iconic games in gaming history, including Mario 64 and the seminal best reviewed game of all time; Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

Part 2: Assigned Game at Launch

When it comes to content, Nintendo's early game library didn't particularly break the mold as far as storytelling went. Woman is in danger, man saves woman, stories were kept simple to avoid text. And it's not like the mid-80s were locked in an era of simplicity. Final Fantasy 1 made its debut nigh two years after Super Mario and one year after the Legend of Zelda. And neither was Final Fantasy the first turn-based

combat RPG. Complex narratives were something that video games explored at the earliest available opportunity through text adventures. Though there can be an argument to say that even though video game narratives of this era could be long and even complex, the stories themselves and especially the characters, weren't really reinventing the wheel. Boil it down and a lot of it was still just sword man saves damsel. See in the long ago video games were seen as a lesser form of media and especially when your frame of reference was Frogger, Q*bert and Pac-man, that wasn't going to inspire any confidence that one day we could be using video games to tell epics that, at times, can match the pathos, if not the very prestige of cinema. Competent storytellers were more liable to be drawn towards other more established forms of media, like the novel, film or stage. When you have a truly good idea, it seemed like a waste of time to frame it in a media format that.. will not be remembered and for whose audience is incredibly narrow. And also a media format that likes to make older games unavailable to play, but we won't talk about that.

In fact, when we look at film and even the novel, both of these were media formats that struggled to fight for legitimacy early on. Early filmmakers had to make do with a lot of writers who either never managed to make it big writing for the stage, or who had been forced out of the theatrical community, and film didn't really begin to take off until you had those early screenwriters who really had the imagination to explore how screen could be used in ways that the stage could not. Perhaps it's worth mentioning here that film actually got its first artistic jump start because it was *seen* as a lesser medium. And so women and black creators, who could not get work in proper art forms, flocked to early film studios where they had creative freedom. They began feeling out the medium and found ways to make it visually distinct from theater and captivate audiences. And once it was clear that this new industry could be profitable, they were pushed out of these spaces by English white men who suddenly had an interest in it. Funny story actually; many early films would be shot twice. Once during the day for the English production and once at night for a different language, usually Spanish. While the white men went home and slept, the hispanic men moved on to the sound stages, having seen what was done earlier on in the day and went on to improve upon it in every way. A really great example of this is actually 1933's *Dracula*. Bela Lugosi is great but the spanish version's better.

But outside of film, some of you may be shocked to hear, due to the fact that you had to read about 50 of them in high school, that the novel also did its time as a lesser form of media. Though it's considered the staple format of literature today, the novel, as a format was regarded as pulp for most of its life. The ugly stepchild of poetry, non-fiction essays and stage plays. A long format story which had no real structure. The author was seen as not having had enough faith in their own idea to convince a theater troupe to act it out, a last resort for bad ideas if you will. In fact, early novels in Europe had to disguise themselves as factual accounts. Like with *Robinson Crusoe*. While not the first novel in human history, its publication date of 1719 is, by some scholars, viewed as the birth date of the novel format, and as per a stigma

against made-up stories that were neither poetic nor theatric, author and rebel Daniel Defoe included a foreword guaranteeing that this account of a man marooned on an island, who threw a stick at a parrot because he wanted a pet, was entirely factual. It actually *was* inspired by a real life story of a man who spent four years marooned on an island off the coast of Chile, but upon meeting said sailor, Defoe was so disappointed in the reality that he decided to “fix” some of the more unremarkable details. New artistic formats always take a couple of generations to find their footing and really figure out what the boundaries and limits of their storytelling capacities can be. Each one faces their respective challenges. It wasn't until you had creators who grew up reading novels that the advantages of the novel really began to shine. The loose freeform style of narrative allowed for quick changes of scene, tighter dialogue and given that there was no poetic meter, characters could be developed and framed through their vernacular, cadence and slang. If you've read much Edgar Allan Poe you know that this can also be done to a fault.

Film, by contrast to theater, allowed for the director to have greater artistic control over exactly what the audience could see. Rather than two people on a wide stage, the director could have the audience see nothing but the speaking character. Audiences could see nuances that even people in the front row never could. But film also had the advantage of cutting between characters and locations, controlling the emotional pace of a scene or transferring between the scenes and control over lighting specific aspects or even individual characters of a scene, which came to be known as film editing and cinematography respectively. Both of which.. are things that are incredibly difficult to do on stage.. and... which the Oscars apparently don't care about anymore.

When it came to early games however, the focus was to create an engaging entertainment experience. There wasn't really a push for political breakdowns like you'd get in the first four seasons of Game of Thrones. Like early films, the focus was for creators to feel out this media format. What were the limits of this format? What would audiences respond to? How will this technology develop? And in what direction will it drive the creative side of the developmental process? Delivering quality was second to figuring out how to deliver anything at all. And if I have to say, I'm not sure video games have really figured out what exactly their role in media is going to be. I feel like what we refer to collectively as “video games” is actually an umbrella term describing several different and distinct formats of digital immersion media. And without listing them, I feel like the reason so many big budget games end up being disappointments is that they're trying to be so many different kinds of video games without actually being good at any one of them. But if there's any AAA studio that isn't trying to cash in on the whatever's popular last year frankensteinian hybrid of Skyrim, The Last of Us, Final Fantasy and Bungie produced Halo games, and thus focusing their resources on the “game” part of “video game” then it would be Nintendo. And maybe this is why, when other studios in the 1980s were pushing video games to their narrative boundaries, Nintendo was focusing on minimal, for-granted narrative tropes to focus on how to give their flagship titles a clear and

distinct “feeling”. Whereas Square would have spent hours outlining and suggesting the political and cosmic world state that led to Zelda's imprisonment, Nintendo preferred to focus on gameplay and design. Find a hole in the wall, you get a sword. Save the princess!

So yes, Nintendo and most studios, leaned on existing narrative tropes that focused on men as the hero. Because in most cultures men dominated fictional landscapes as protagonists and principal characters. And because developers were still figuring out how to code for increasingly complex technology, reinventing the narrative wheel wasn't really on the to-do list. And while this did lead to a foundation of misogyny and homophobia in gaming, the narration style that often shafts women to supporting roles and ignores the existence of queer people, even while using historical accuracy as an excuse, this shouldn't suggest that there weren't attempts to subvert these tropes. When I say “attempt” it is both reverently and also condemningly. Because when it comes to a future space-faring society where human limitations are expanded by combat exoskeletons, you'd think it wouldn't be such a big deal that a woman could be powerful. And yet, “Samus is a woman” was the big reveal in Metroid. And even then this was only revealed after beating the game. The condemnation comes from the fact that this was set up to be a big deal in the first place. A vision of the future hundreds of years from now, with the same social expectations is kind of bleak. And also.. using underwear.. to indicate gender? Excuse me, that's breaking one of the cardinal rules of science fiction.

//Cut to video clip featuring Carrie Fisher (Leia in the Star Wars films) relaying anecdote from the making of those films, complete with sidebuns wig.//
They bring me to George, takes one look at me and he says: “You can't wear a bra underneath that dress”. He says “because there's no underwear in space”

/minor cut/

And the man said it was such a conviction too, you know.

//Back to JS//

On the other hand my reverence for this gender reveal post-credit scene indicates; A: that Nintendo was aware that their audience would not have picked up a game with a woman illustrated on the cover, and B: they were gonna find a way to force you to play as a woman, even if you didn't know it. Nintendo was going to make probably their most badass character, even to this day, a woman. And you have to respect that kind of creative determination. And perhaps, to the benefit of gender representation, the format of Metroid games usually does not permit a whole lot of story and character. Because Metroid is first and foremost an action game. There isn't anything to them, especially the first one, in the way of character development. Samus, as a badass, doesn't really come across that way due to cutscenes or snappy one-liners thrown at vanquished bosses.

//Clip from some film//

Blond woman: "Don't call me babe"

//Back to "regularly scheduled programming"//

Badassery is performed exclusively by unscripted character actions, which could probably be expanded to a greater statement about the gaming experience as a whole. Players are more likely to connect with and accept characters the more that they have direct control over their actions. The more a player is exposed to a character's capabilities through cutscenes and references, the more likely they are to be decried as a Mary Sue or less likely a Gary Stu.

It's worth mentioning at this point that when the series veered away from its format in *Metroid Other M*, fans were none too pleased with the result. Whereas before Samus was powerful and independent, in *Other M* she was immature, prone to weakness, being attributed to her being a woman and reliant on male characters to be effective. And also, *Other M* was wrought with.. overwrought cut scenes that went on for far too long. The more a character is developed through cutscenes, the less a player is going to be able to believe that this character is as capable as the game is trying to tell you. Gaming offers the ability to experience things.. that film.. could only ever show you. Maybe this more cinematic approach can work for certain games like *The Last of Us* or *Uncharted*, but the way the *Metroid* brand had been established before, fans simply didn't connect. Samus's long-standing ability to appeal to audiences was due to most if not all of her actions being something that the player could directly control. There is no need to suspend a player's disbelief, because the player themselves is being a badass by proxy of Samus. They wholly believe and understand how Samus is a badass because they are using Samus's toolkit to accomplish the badassery. But it could also be that Samus's long-standing celebration is something that was grandfathered in. From an era where she was "the girl" in an otherwise all-boys club. And now that they're starting to close the binary gender gap, the boys feel pushed out of what they thought of as "their" space in a way that Lara Croft did not make them feel threatened because she was a sex icon, where Samus was kinda.. well.. She was literally just "one of the boys", until her reveal. And honestly, ripping off her helmet to reveal a full blowout after hours of explosions and space monsters is one hell of a serve.

//Clip from "Metroid reveal", with spliced in audio from what I assume to be RuPaul's *Drag Race*//

//Visual from RuPaul's *Drag Race* (I think)//

//Back to visual from *Metroid* reveal//

//Visual back to RP's DR//

//Back to regular VE

I mean, again the fact that director Yoshio Sakamoto needed to basically trick gamers into fighting aliens while secretly playing as a woman is.. not fantastic. Especially because many gamers have since become even more allergic to women in gaming, which is very disheartening. What's concerning about gaming as a whole is that games with female protagonists equally seem to not enjoy using women as ciphers, instead, with most of them propping up a soapbox to either textually or subtextually, discuss their validity as a woman in the central role. And this becomes more true as studios spend more money on said game. Unless you're a core Metroid game. Then it's just all the badass stuff the boys are doing but with a pronoun reskin.

Funny that I mentioned pronouns, actually, because early Nintendo dipped its foot into the gender puddle long before gamergate bros were old enough to put together words, let alone open up the trans debate. For those in the know, you know what's coming. Birdo is a mess and we can look at it as a good mess or a bad mess, but either way, the character isn't a hot mess because Nintendo doesn't really seem to be uncomfortable with continued inclusion of the character and ongoing content. If you've gone through any Nintendo history videos then you know that Birdo was originally introduced as a mob enemy in Super Mario Bros 2, which was originally developed as Yume Koji Doki Doki Panic but then reskinned into a sequel to Super Mario Brothers because they thought the real sequel was too hard for American gamers. Which.. it's basically the dark souls of Mario games. Which in contrast to the prior Mario installment also featured princess Peach as a playable character, so more fem rep from early Nintendo. Going through the game there was no real indication about Birdo's queerness. She had a bow on her head, a pixelated bow, if you can pick it out. I suppose the implication was that you were supposed to automatically think of Birdo as she/her while playing. And if you went on to read the instruction manual, you'd see the description for the character.

Quote:

"He thinks he is a girl"

Okay we're off to a not great start, but,.. like 1980s.

"He thinks he is a girl. He spits eggs from his mouth. He would rather be called Birdetta"

Well great job Nintendo, you're dead naming your own trans character. Great start.

Nintendo creative never did go ahead with Birdetta, probably more to do with branding and copyright, but they did begin using exclusively feminine pronouns in their English material. The gender thing has never since been addressed with Birdo

though. So even though she decided not to change her name, I'm very glad that everyone in the mushroom kingdom respects her transition. The mindset in the 80s was more likely that Birdo's alleged gender confusion was seen as a great way to contribute to the wacky, zany vibes that made up early Mario games. I don't really think there was any intended statement about making a trans character a villain. The heroic cast was primarily composed of italians and mushroom people so I think that this was meant more to represent the kind of antics that you would expect from the world as a whole. But it is interesting to know that in spite of the hot button gender identity, Nintendo was interested in keeping this character around. Instead of continuing on with the gender confusion angle, they simplified it to she/her and brought out the visual elements to better accommodate ongoing Mario vibes. Now when it comes to modern Birdo, did they keep her on "queerly" or are they cis-washing an otherwise queer character? My money's on the former. If they wanted her to not exist, they could pull a Disney and refuse to acknowledge her existence while doing their best to wipe her from history. The decision to keep her in the cast indicates that they are validating her girly thoughts referenced in the manual. Either way, you'd have to admit that this is an instance of AAA gaming learning from cultural feedback and adapting to responses. Which is wild but.. stranger things have happened. But as time goes on, and representation becomes more and more of a visible conversation, Nintendo's right there with us being weird about it.

Part 3: Homo Hyrule

In this modern day of throwing around the word "agenda" at any available opportunity, it's tough to say what Nintendo's "agenda" is when it comes to representation. And meanwhile, now that I said it, I'd like to know exactly how "agenda" came to receive such a negative tone. Having an agenda just.. means you have a collection of appointments and schedule dates. The implication in reference to the "gay agenda" is that there is some "end goal" in mind and so when queer folks dismiss the idea of having an agenda... I get confused, because.. you know.. the road to rights does take a lot of political planning in order to pass various hurdles and milestones. Maybe if we had an agenda, things would be going a bit smoother for our american queer siblings than it is. Maybe the agenda ended with marriage and since then, queer organizations have been running around like headless chickens, acting reactively to bigoted countermeasures. Maybe we got bullied out of having an agenda and since then queer circles have been lacking for any organizational skills whatsoever, because when you don't have a gay agenda, you end up looking a lot like Nintendo's take on gender and sexuality in their post-Wii era of game development, which at times kind of feels like they're throwing every opinion they can muster onto a dartboard. Like Nintendo doesn't really miss the mark entirely, but at the same time it's not fantastic either. Which on one hand, the lack of gender spectacle is kind of what queer audiences are looking for, but on the other hand,

there's this ambiguous laziness that kind of triggers the need to overanalyze, that a lot of us have. Starting with the bad, we have Nintendo's infamous weirdness when it came to Tomodachi Life. Tomodachi Life was the second installment in a social simulation franchise made by Nintendo. The first; Tomodachi Collection, was a Japan-only release, and when the sequel was announced for the 3DS, the distinct lack of an option to engage in same-gender relationships was immediately brought to the front. This was an issue, provided that other life sims had already made same gender relations an easily available option, with the Sims kind of setting the standard. Nintendo's first response was that they based this new game on code from the original and that it would be too difficult to release a patch to change it, which.. given that DLC, even in those days, was more or less a patch to an existing game, I don't know what the fuss was about. In this way, at least you can say that Tomodachi Life is a mirror to our social structures for how.. bizarrely deep heteronormativity is encoded into our society's expectations, that you can't just patch the game so that little fake digital people have the same social interactions with he/him avatars as they do with she/her. Post release and following negative reception and negative press to the mechanic, Nintendo released the statement "we never intended to make any form of social commentary with the launch of the game" which I don't know who approved that statement, but that just makes it a whole lot worse to me. Don't you love when your life is automatically social commentary? I'm so.. exhausted from being a social commentary, I guess this whole channel is just social commentary making a social commentary of media, which is in and of itself a social commentary. I guess we're all just social commentaries. (clap) New gender identity. Nintendo did say that if they were to make a third installment of the game, they would "strive to design a gameplay experience from the ground up that is more inclusive..." etc etc etc. Yeah well (sigh), they haven't made the third game, so... In reality this controversy likely arose from the game's presence in Japan, where the game is marketed as an "all-ages social sim" and where japanese censorship laws prohibit queerness (at least same-sex relations) from being in all ages content.

Gay and lesbian romances and personality types are something that Nintendo has flirted with in the past and present, albeit indirectly, most commonly in their most prolific narrative series; "the Legend of Zelda" barring the strong indication that several, if not all, versions or reincarnations of Link across the franchise are gay or bisexual. No, I will NOT be taking questions.

There are other queer elements in the franchise.

That being said, a queer Link is something that is impossible to find conclusive evidence of. Nintendo has made staunch work to assure that Link is a voiceless cipher for the player. Very little, beyond the bare minimum of each game, is done to facilitate any personality for Link. Link is meant to be the connection that the audience has to Hyrule itself, so the less personality, the better, because it allows the player to feel like *they* are experiencing the world rather than *observing someone*

e/se experiencing the world. Which neither is necessarily better than the other but Link is usually handled exceptionally well.

Some of you may notice that the Zelda games that are best received are the ones where Link has less of a personal involvement in the game itself. Both Twilight Princess and Skyward Swords suffer from this and while each has its fanbase, audiences at large had trouble connecting with them. In both cases, the game struggled with an eluded romantic interest for Link, so a player may feel uncomfortable not knowing to what extent they were witness to the actions of a character and what Nintendo was telling them they ought to do. One may say there's a problem with "forced *heterosexuality*" depicted in these titles. Link himself, as a result, is frequently subject to any number of ships. Specifically in games where,.. you know.. Nintendo doesn't try to force him into a hetero corner. Most notably Prince Sidon from "Breath of the Wild" comes to mind, which itself features in-game interactions that maybe even dive into queerbaiting. Not to say that "Breath of the Wild" doesn't also suffer from some very.. forced.. heterosexuality issues of its own, they had all the chemistry of oil and water and yet she wanted to get married (snickers). Also not the only time Link had been forcibly pushed into a marriage engagement with a fish woman. Meanwhile there's no mystery why the fish boy with the transatlantic accent is the only one he had any meaningful physical contact with.

//Video footage of Link riding on Sidon like a dolphin in the water

Quote shown on screen from Sidon:

Ha! I am unstoppable in the water!

"Quick, Link! Tenderly embrace me! ...To save the world of course"

But now we're getting into the territory of reading into things and the straight people hate it when we do that. But it's fine when they do it. Don't worry about it. But once again.. it *is much* more clear that Sidon is more attracted to Link than Link is to him, which, while the main character is rarely depicted with romantic chemistry, Nintendo does shyly include queer illusions, sometimes accidentally stepping into trans ones. In "Ocarina of Time" Zelda disguises herself and hides in plain sight as Sheik, a Sheikah agent who guides Link through Hyrule, who presents as a man. And while this was quote "just a disguise", Sheik has been adopted by queer elements of the Zelda fandom regardless. The titular character of Zelda herself is a bit of a mixed bag of a mixed bag when it comes to gender expression. It seems, as far as the pattern goes, that Zelda becomes less capable the more frills her skirts have. Her role ranges from badass to damsel. Often being both in the same game, like with Ocarina of Time. The second she puts on a dress then she just gets snatched up. Same thing with Wind Waker.

That said, this franchise is weird in general when it comes to women and capability, for instance the Gerudo, a desert fairing race, exclusively made up of women, were introduced in Ocarina of Time but have become a franchise staple. These independent ladies who featured in many Zelda games since, either as neutral NPCs or antagonists, have a staunch warrior vibe and regularly carry weapons. In these sections of the game, Link is forced to use stealth and go unnoticed, presumably because Link, though a competent warrior, can *not* face the full force of these women in open combat. Gerudo culture in the game focuses around leaving the desert to find husbands. In spite of the fact that this is a whole race of ladies with abs, thighs, legs and back muscles, there is an in-game cultural obsession with finding a husband. There's a nighttime classroom in the settlement dedicated to teaching young ladies how to snag a man. The deceased leader, Urbosa, is lightly inferred to be a lesbian, but the best reference we have to same-sex relations in the body of the Gerudo population is that some ladies simply have no interest in finding a husband. And while Breath of the Wild freely engages in a widespread.. "commentary" about monogamous heterosexual romantic dynamics of Hyrule, we are reminded that same gender attraction is a commentary Nintendo is not willing to get into. In fact any illusion about lesbian relations among the Gerudo are so scant.. that I can't even call it queerbaiting. Y'all know by now I'll say anything is queerbaited. But I should give Nintendo some credit for filling out my favorite trope of all time; the incredibly handy man who is also effeminate as f-

//Clip from Breath of the Wild (I presume), featuring the character Bolson right in a conversation, complete with audio:

ine/on

Quote shown on screen from Bolson: Karson! We are ON!

//back//

Which, abundantly femme construction workers is also a staple of 3D Zelda games. Is he..? you know.. and really, all of this wouldn't be as much of a problem.. if it weren't for the growing trend of video games to become more dynamic and complex on a social level. Even tots these days are becoming freakishly culturally literate, so games require a greater exploration of personality types to flush out NPCs. Some of these personality types just so happen to be queer. And let's face it: we're hilarious.

It really sucks that queer bigotry exists because this whole damn community is right for roasting. There's a reason so many gay directors make bad comedies about us, but is that what queerness is to this franchise? A punchline? I would agree if effeminate men and masculine women were played exclusively for laughs or if there was an element of mockery, however neither Link nor anyone else respond to these characters negatively. Everyone in this world kind of.. goes along with everyone else.

It's a non-issue. And like Bolson and his twink- (ehm).. Bolson and the other construction workers, their prancing femininity doesn't really interfere with their ability to work. While there *can* be an argument made about the Gerudo being gender critical exclusionary gatekeepers, they do permit Gorons who have no gender to enter the village. And at the end of the day, in spite of the guards posted outside Gerudo village, nobody's checking anyone else's pants for entrance into otherwise fem exclusive spaces. And once Link's inside, nobody really questions it, even though there are some raised eyebrows around town. So in spite of the fact that he's slightly clockable, nobody cares.

Nobody.

Be like the Gerudo and just.. get on with your life.

In fact for the Zelda franchise as a whole, as much as I can't really celebrate it for being woke, it doesn't seem to be doing anything explicitly wrong either. Maybe little nitpicky things sure but broad strokes it's staggeringly neutral. Which I have it on good authority that those who are queer of gender sometimes really relish in the opportunity to not think about gender and gender dynamics. In some ways, this is very much Nintendo's philosophy for games they produce: kind of pay no attention to the gender behind the curtain, while at the same time they also seem to like distributing games.. where gender expression is at the very center of the attention.

Part 4: I Choose You!

Pokémon is generally considered an old franchise, even though it was first released in 1996. While early on you were forced to play as a boy, later games allowed you to pick either a boy or a girl to play as. Which has carried on through future installments. Though this seems like a simple choice. A little binary, given that gender restricts what clothes you can wear in the most recent games. Pokémon has plenty more weirdness when it comes to gender. A Pokémon's gender never really mattered in the games until the breeding mechanic was introduced which.. cue the torrent of grown-ass gay Pokémon fans snickering to themselves. First of all, gender is probably, uh,.. not the best term to use for discussing procreation, but this is also a world where inter-species breeding has its advantages. We're already off the rails so why not just dive in?

Various Pokémon have separate evolutions, depending upon their gender, but also some Pokémon with distinctly feminine or masculine traits are exclusively female or male. However.. there are some curious exceptions, namely the ralts family. Ralts can be male or female at a 50% rate, first of all. Ralts has a white robe in its first stage, very non-gendered, but evolves into Kirilia. By default Kirilia evolves into Gardevoir, male or female, who is probably one of the most rule34:ed Pokémon out there. However, Ralts has another third stage evolution which is only available to male Kirilias: the ballet-inspired effeminate dancing psychic and later psychic fairy dual type can be exposed to HRT, I mean the Dawn stone, and evolve into the

psychic fighting type Gallade. Significantly more masculine. And there's a flip side to this too, a female Snorunt will evolve into a Froslax when exposed to a dust stone. Otherwise male or female will evolve into Glalie, you know, to mirror the evolution progress of Ralts.

Game Freak, the producer of core Pokémon games, as a subsidiary of Nintendo, has been a bit more nonchalant about sneaking in adult humor and references into their games, you know, the kind of stuff that goes over the kids heads. Kind of like Sesame Street from the 80s and early 90s. But Game Freak also likes to toss in a queer nod every once in a while and unlike parent company Nintendo, it's a little less ambiguous, as long as you know what's what. Like in Pokémon X/Y's Random Battle Manor, you may come across a beauty trainer who says:

“Yes, a mere half year ago I was a Black Belt!

Quite the transformation, wouldn't you say?”

and it should be highlighted that “beauty” is a title for trainers that are exclusively women and that Black Belts are titles that apply exclusively to male trainers.

This is also to say nothing of Game Freak's habit of throwing on very cute little young love overtones when it comes to scripting your character's rival regardless of gender, including a very strong allusion to the principal characters of Red and Blue being a traveling Pokémon duo who just.. *may* be more than friends and trainers. But unlike our beauty queen, this is a little bit too subtle to be visible representation, even though “chatty-boy” and “quiet-boy” are kind of an archetypal gay couple.

But given all the other evidence, it seems like Game Freak's heart is in the right place. Someday they will kiss and I will live to see it.

This is also in conjunction with the fact that some Pokémon just don't have a gender. Especially the legendary types like Mew. So hear this my non-binary genderqueer friends: as far as Pokémon is concerned, you are legendary.

And while it may have taken a while, parent company Nintendo has caught up to this “meh”-approach of gender identity for playable characters. Both Splatoon 2 at least and Animal Crossing's New Horizon allow players to swap genders willy-nilly, and with no discernible change to body type or clothing availability. Especially with New Horizons, there isn't really a limit to mismatching otherwise traditionally gendered clothing.

Realistically everything is kind of urban and unisex in Splatoon anyway, where really the only difference is available hairstyles. Do you identify as a fade or a ponytail?

Now what's fun about this is while Nintendo is widely known for being squeaky clean provider of all ages electronic entertainment, they've started to dip their toes into stuff that's a little more... exciting...

//Footage from a Bayonetta game//

In stark contrast to the wholesome Pay-it-no-mind genderlessness of Splatoon and Animal Crossing, Nintendo also owns, by proxy of Sega and Platinum games,

Bayonetta. All right, Nintendo doesn't own it but there is an exclusivity agreement. Maybe Nintendo wanted a high octane action game to help move the floundering Wii U off shelves? Maybe they wanted to get back in touch with their sensual love hotel side? Maybe they wanted counter programming to their regular content? Who knows.. Because if they wanted to present an M-rated title, they could have gone with something far less extra. Bayonetta is about the horniest, campiest game you can possibly find from anything anywhere near a AAA-title.

Yeah, Devil May Cry comes close but Bayonetta is queer culture and I don't mean that figuratively. The in-lore magical dance moves is voguing, a dance style developed within queer circles and on the streets of queer heavy urban centers. Voice delivery and animation is straight out of a drag performance.

//Audio from one of the games, the third game was not released yet. Speaking character: Bayo herself:

"It's not Christmas without caviar." //

//back//

And it's all done so shamelessly clear.. that I still get a little shooketh when I see straight gamers on Twitter insisting that this is all done for the male gays/gaze. Honey, the kind of males this game is made for.. are the gays. But whatever.. Understanding your media your way is your prerogative. I'm not saying that all Bayonetta fans are gay.. but... there is a pattern.. And it's there for a reason.

Bayonetta exists in stark contrast to Metroid in that Samus is powerful in spite.. of her gender. Mowing down aliens with a power suit is kind of a unisex look, whereas the power of umbra witches seems to be drawn *from* their gender, or rather from their expression of gender. They vogue to open up portals to hell and use magical hair extensions to literally bind a demon and puppet them into munching down hordes of angels. This is also probably the most faithful depiction of biblically accurate angels in any form of major media to date. Now my take on voguing is that, opposed to dance forms like ballet where the focus is upon grace and finesse, vogue's focus is on power. Actions that are otherwise supple and delicate are exaggerated to grand flourishes. Femininity is the highlight, but a performance of vogue that is understated isn't going to win the crowd or the judges.

Unshakable regal authority is the objective. Be someone who can not be pushed off the stage.

It's very interesting that Bayonetta takes that principle and applies it to hellish summons. To witchcraft, for which men in history have used that accusation to take power away from women, whereas in the lore of Bayonetta, when wrenching these kinds of monsters out of hell, it's a fun extra layer of lore that a single flinch or yielding one's queenish authority, could lose control of the summon. However, next to Nintendo's whole library, this is just one title. Which definitely earns its hard M-rating.

Not just the violence, but as witch clothing is made out of their own hair which they also use to summon monsters, you spend about 20 percent of the game tits out. There are also a significant number of Nintendo titles that I haven't played or that I haven't played in some time; I hear Fire Emblem has some touch-and-go representation, although I'm intrigued by the fabulous outfits and beautiful anime boys. And honestly, when it comes to Captain Toad or Kirby, I can't imagine gender discourse is front and center there. So as always you're free to discuss in the comments below.

Part 5: Player Choice

Now the problem with assessing Nintendo for its take on gender and sexuality is that.. it's barely a take to begin with. Outside of tomodachi life, which they addressed in a statement as being a bad move, Nintendo doesn't really have any strong inclination one way or another. Peach has a female empowerment moment in Odyssey, which is fine, but giving a girl boss moment to otherwise stalk female characters has kind of already been done. Gender and sexual identity in Nintendo games are so low presentation that it's really hard to celebrate or criticize them. Which honestly is fascinating that they're managing to stay so middle of the road in this day and age when every executive is expected to have a canned response about queer issues. And while everyone's looking to Disney for a whopping 12 seconds of queer representation in Doctor Strange, and while EA is under a magnifying glass for equal opportunity queer romance options, Nintendo is escaping a lot of the scrutiny. Could it be that Disney is simply held up on a pedestal for laying the psychosexual foundation for little tots and children, defining for them what their romantic expectations are as they grow up? (As a monopoly.) And that EA and their contemporaries are explicitly going out of their way to build their games like a paint-by-numbers canvas, for which the simple omission of a particular color would stand out? By contrast, the extent of Nintendo's gender- and sexuality-conditioning usually begins and ends at Mario getting a kiss on the cheek from Peach. So queer rep doesn't really feel particularly absent, because cishet rep is also lacking.

Gender discourse isn't really necessary for creating the kind of gaming experiences Nintendo is trying to give the player. In many cases it seems Nintendo is trying to generate worlds where the player brings with them their own experiences and expectations. But what I can't really decide is, whether Nintendo's approach is good or bad. Certainly Nintendo creates an environment where cultures and social leanings are player developed. The best example of this is in Splatoon, where players can generate messages and images to project to other players. Frequently the game is host to a trend of proudly proclaiming one's identity as a queer person and or furry and Nintendo doesn't seem inclined to remove these images. While they do remove bigotry, bigots can't find a place to feel at home in Inkopolis. So the player

base can superimpose queerness into the otherwise absent culture of the game, whereas the textual depiction of the game is characteristically mostly neutral. The principal exception are Splatoon 2's hosts Pearl and Marina, who are girlfriends in everything but name. I would call this baiting except that this eluded lesbian couple is the closest thing that the Splatoon franchise has to any kind of relationship. It's just not a part of the game's atmosphere, so I really don't know how to qualify that. Queer rep is something that Nintendo's content never really promised, but as games become more dynamic, there is naturally going to be a call for a greater range of identities going forward. For instance NPCs in Zelda games will get stale if they can't switch up the kinds of interactions you can have. That said, in spite of Nintendo's avoidance of starting a gender discourse, they really don't shy away from it. While no character has ever really gone out of their way to explain to Link that they/them pronouns are plausible in Hyrule, Nintendo certainly doesn't mind playing NPC characters against type. Queerness is displayed, but it's not explained or justified. Which to a cultural benefit, Nintendo still does direct its games primarily at a youth audience.

//Footage from a Bayonetta game (again), a chipmunk passing between Bayo's very spread out legs, she eyes it, we see stretched out butt//
Maybe not it's subsidiaries but, y'kn- Nintendo proper.

Because the next generation of gamers will play these games and spot the internal cultural acceptance of suggested queerness, which means that they have queerness associated with a positive experience in a virtual world. Which establishes a channel of influence for this young gamer to also approach queerness this way in real life. That being; gender is only a big deal if the individual wants it to be. In which case, it's really not worth getting up in arms over.

Queer people like bird people, octo people and mushroom people, simply are. The alternative, which we normally see in gaming, is a grand spectacle about gender and sexual identity being represented, going hand in hand with the marketing campaign to let gaming news and everyone who reads it know who's going to be seen in an upcoming title. And maybe there is some benefit to that, but from everything I've seen, propping up a queer character on a pedestal does little to convince bigots to come around to allyship. Especially in M-rated titles. You're dealing with an audience who are not likely on the fence about the topic at that point.

But how can you quantify and measure a transgenerational reduction in homophobia specifically as a result of a couple of prominent if not entirely obvious gay lumberjacks in Breath of the Wild? It's so much easier for queer media to quantify the effect that an anti-bigotry plotline has in an RPG. When it comes to the gender as aesthetic approaches in Splatoon and Animal Crossing, which allow players to swap at any given time, can we really understand at this time what an impact that will have on the next generation of trans or non-binary teenagers or allies? Again I feel that

queer bigotry exists less among individuals who are raised in situations where queerness itself is unremarkable. And though we have no specific representation from Nintendo, either deliberately or inadvertently, this is the kind of mindset around gender that Nintendo seems to be projecting. This process establishes a normative environment where playing with gender and gender expression is both possible and entirely irrelevant to your gaming experience, to which the youngins may ask themselves:

“If it's possible virtually, why not in real life?”

“Why does my gender expression need to be such a big deal in real life when it's not in a Nintendo game?”

and to those who may grow up and be indoctrinated into a bigoted mindset, Nintendo opening a game by saying that it's possible to switch your gender whenever you like, and that it has no effect on gameplay.. may normalize the idea of gender non-conformity. Which.. now we're getting into the wild, wild world of bigotry in gaming, which is a rabbit hole that doesn't ever stop once you jump in.

Given that there is a new wave of bigots using.. child grooming as a publicly acceptable shield to disguise their bigotry, Nintendo, being the child-friendly gaming studio, would no doubt come under fire if they made gender and sexuality any more overt than they already do. And that seems like a controversy the company does not want to deal with. I wouldn't be surprised if the developers feel like they have to walk on eggshells. Their existing fandom already seems to dangle by a thread. Every other Nintendo Direct an army of fans take to social media to decry the company for not dropping any announcements for their personally anticipated game. Part of me is glad that Smash Brothers post-release content on the Switch is slowed down because now people can stop.. being upset that Master Chief isn't the next Smash fighter. A widespread assault from.. definitely not homophobic parents would not likely tank the company, since Nintendo has cash reserves that could see them lose money for decades without going under, but it would put a stress on the creative side of game making. And as a creator, I can say my creative process becomes a whole lot less fun the more restrictive it is.

Big shout out to my patrons by the way. Thank you.

And when things aren't fun to make, they're not fun to experience. So I understand that politically, Nintendo is in a sticky spot. As per censorship regulations, existing audiences, concerned parents and gaming toxicity as a whole. That said.. you can't shake a stick in a gay bar without whacking a muscle bear with a tattoo of Jigglypuff or Kirby. The gays have put out for Nintendo and friends, and even if we're not explicitly depicted, we aren't shunted and rejected either.

In real life, you can't just go around asking people about their birth gender. Or at least.. you shouldn't. So it would be wrong for Nintendo to establish that precedence.

If Birdo's not the kind of trans lady who likes to bring up her gendered experiences, then.. she's just not that kind of girl. And that's fine.

In real queer communities, especially in North America, we're engaged in a hearty debate about needing real-life queer icons, while also claiming that it is important to come out on one's own terms. So celebrities face enormous pressure to come out, in spite of the possibility that their careers may be destroyed. Which despite what you think.. it's still a very real possibility. But a lot of us seem not to care about that and care more about needing the icon of a queer celeb. Because while we talk about the need for visibility, we risk pigeonholing ourselves into a mindset where we treat people as symbols or icons. And yes, that even includes fictional people who often serve as models of available options for how we can live our lives. Treating people as symbols to signify certain identities may not be sexual, but it is nevertheless an objectification of someone. That is, reducing someone's personhood to being an object with a specific purpose and intention, rather than honoring their right to exist as a person.

Part 6: Cheat Code

Weirdly enough, I find that Nintendo may very well be the first major studio of media providers to give us regular consistent queerness, if not explicit queer representation. Not because they particularly have an agenda to do so, but that Nintendo knows how to shift when culture shifts. That's how they've kept themselves around for so long. These are developers who have been working in creative fields since the 80s, rather than executives who are trying to sell you loot boxes. Reflecting culture seems to be an integral component of creation and I find creators want to express their view of society and their work. And really when you think about it Nintendo has been normalizing non-typical gender expression for almost 40 years. From Samus being their most badass space marine to Link being more than a little comfortable in Gerudo drag. They've never been shy about subverting your expectations when it comes to gender. And though they avoid stating the sexuality of almost any of their characters... maybe that's okay.

You don't get a lot of gay romance options in Nintendo games, but you don't get a whole hell of a lot of straight ones either.

In many cases the heterosexuality is just as inferred as the homosexuality. We read the straightness into their games because that's the default we've grown up with. We assume Link and Zelda are an item, even though the vast majority of the games do not show them that way. We assume Mario and Peach are together, if not married, but the most loving Mario ever gets from Peach is a kiss on the cheek. Who knows, maybe she's got her own princess in another castle?

If nothing else, at a time when the queer community is being demonized by major figures in politics, trying to reinforce cisgender heterosexuality as the only acceptable game mode, Nintendo games almost seem like a breath of fresh air *because* they're not shoving their binary gender heterosexuality in our faces. It's kind of a safe space for the people who don't fit the default mode and I think that might be enough. Nintendo isn't trying to be the gayest company in the world, but they're not trying to let the bigots save face, like that other company that's known for producing formative media. Plus Nintendo Switch was the first console to release Hades and if that isn't an ally move, I don't know what is. And Nintendo games give me a bit of hope in an odd way. Like in Breath of the Wild, the kingdom fell to the destructive hatred of the calamity, but it didn't last forever. People of all sorts of different genders and races and sexualities, yes i'm counting Sidon, come together to fight back the darkness. And they won. And so will we. We just have to stick together, focus our energy and fight. When we do that... nothing can stand in our way.

//End credits (which is seemingly just his list of patrons)