

# How Zelda Saved Me: The Inspiration, Feminism, and Empowerment of Hyrule

written by Guest Contributor | November 2, 2020



My shield glistens in the filmy haze of morning light. I am alone, free to roam this vast expanse. With a whistle my loyal horse appears, armored in steel, teleporting to my side in swirls of blue light. I leap onto his saddle, yank the reins and off we ride, racing as one seamless entity. Today, like so many days before, we're on the hunt for treasure chests and the last three shrines that have escaped my detection; perhaps they're hidden deep in a cave or within columns of ice on a snowy mountain peak. Monsters and machines lurk everywhere, guarding the many secrets of this land, and no matter how many times they perish at my hands, the blood moon resurrects them each fortnight. But I am not afraid. An arsenal of weapons is fastened to my back, among them the legendary Master Sword, wielded only by a hero.

\*

I asked my mom to buy me a Nintendo Switch for my birthday...my thirty-fifth birthday. I was old enough to buy the Switch myself, or to ask for a more practical gift, but my generous mom obliged my request, buying me the console along with *Zelda: Breath of the Wild (BotW)*—the real reason I wanted the latest Nintendo system in the first place.

As a child of the '80s and '90s, I grew up on Nintendo, first by watching my father play, then by making my sister watch me. With its narrative saga of mazes, puzzles, and ancient magic, *Zelda* has always been my favorite Nintendo franchise (sorry, Mario). I fondly remember the anxiety-provoking beeps of a low-hearts Link in the original *Legend of Zelda* and the swirling portals to the Dark World in *A Link to the Past*, but it was the N64 version that made the biggest impact. I was in seventh grade when Nintendo released its breathtaking, game-changing *Ocarina of Time* and the graphics blew my middle-school mind. Improving upon previous *Zeldas*, which followed a more linear, structured gameplay limited by the hardware capabilities of their eras, *Ocarina* offered an expansive three-dimensional space in which I could lose myself for hours. I can't begin to estimate how much time I spent in front of the TV, finger curled around the controller to hit that back Z button, my

sister, Laura, equally glued to the on-screen action and pretending to be the faithful fairy guiding Link through his quests.

Though I ate up *Ocarina's* character-driven storyline, with its time-travel leap that ages Link seven years, I felt even more immersed aimlessly riding Epona through fields, fishing in the pond, chatting up villagers, hook-shooting to high towers, and learning sweet new melodies on that nifty ocarina. The same was true of *Super Mario 64*; Laura and I would take turns working our way toward Bowser, collecting all the stars in each new level, but we also enjoyed chilling out in Mario's fancy digs. We invented a crew of made-up characters who "lived" there and we'd pretend to be them while making Mario bounce around his sprawling estate. We often went off-script for games: the minecart levels of *Donkey Kong Country* became roller coaster rides for our Barbies (who would scream during dips), *Mario Paint* became a fabric and wallpaper design studio, and the *Wave Race 64* Jet Ski riders had their own romantic entanglements—spicy!

I'd always been a compulsive storyteller and daydreamer, unashamed to pace the curb talking to myself in full view of the neighbors. Whether at home, in school, or in dance class, I effortlessly escaped reality to pretend I was a completely different person. Almost everything I did in those early years was layered; I wouldn't just read a book, I'd act it out as an episode of a television show that aired on my imaginary channel. I didn't just listen to music, I'd picture ballerinas performing an elaborate routine as part of my imaginary dance troupe. My notebooks filled with lists of names for all the dancers, actors, athletes, and students who populated my little universe.

It's clear to me now that I approached Nintendo for a similar reason: not as a chance to *win* but as an opportunity to put my Amy spin on pre-existing source material and thus further enrich my inner world. *Zelda*, however, was immersive enough, and I respected the fantasy of Hyrule without needing to bend it to fit another vision or add a more interactive layer. When I played *Zelda*, I was Link through and through. And in this I found a different escape—a break from my overactive imagination and incessant need to make things *mine*.

I had started playing *Ocarina* from the beginning—young Link in Kokiri Village first meeting his fairy—but the cartridge I'd rented from Blockbuster also contained a saved file for a game some other player had finished; all too tempting for a girl who prioritized open-world exploration over leveling up to kill foes. I loved it so much that Mom agreed to pay the fifty dollar fine for "losing" the cartridge so I could keep the finished game while slowly making my own progress. This lasted about two years, until my twenty-two-year-old cousin, Bryan, came to stay with us for a few days. Like most boys I knew, he played video games to beat the scariest boss or achieve the highest score, not to find reprieve in a fantasy world. Bryan didn't need Hyrule the same way I did.

So when he saw that I'd reaped the benefits of some other player's hard-earned victory, he claimed that I was cheating. "You didn't earn it," he said like a teacher, swiftly erasing the file. I sat there shocked, then flew to my bed in tears, mourning the loss of the wide-open kingdom I had peacefully

explored for years. To this day, I still haven't been able to beat the Water Temple (which means no unlocking the fishing pond) and still haven't entirely forgiven my cousin.

Perhaps this loss kept me from wanting to revisit *Zelda* on the GameCube or Wii, or perhaps I'd aged out of Nintendo by the time those consoles were released. I did own a PS2 toward the end of college—largely to play a fast-paced music coordination game called *Amplitude* and to drive the mean streets of *Grand Theft Auto* while purposefully abiding traffic lights—but no other game recaptured the magic of Hyrule. A kind of magic I didn't realize I was missing.

\*



My horse and I cover well-trodden terrain, trotting on and off the paths. Suddenly, I hear a cry for help. In the distance, a pair of grotesque Bokoblins are attacking two unarmed civilians with their crude bludgeons.

Without a second thought, I leap off my saddle, flip midair, and dash into the shadows, stealthily drawing my sword. A moment later I emerge from my hiding spot to slash the nearest beast, catching him off-guard for an easy kill. An arrow hits me, but I recover quick, lunging at the second Bokoblin. He deflects my first strike with a spiked shield. I parry his next blow and eagerly slice into his blue-gray flesh: once, twice, three times before he too falls, bursting into a puff of smoke, leaving fangs, horns, and weapons scattered on the ground.

The spooked wanderers thank me for my good deed by handing over an energizing elixir. They already know my name, my history, my purpose. As we wish each other luck and safety, I feel one step closer to defeating Calamity Ganon: the ultimate enemy corrupting this land. It is my destiny to save Hyrule.

\*

Throughout my youth, video games—as well as Disney movies, musicals, and television shows—taught me that women needed a man to either save them, validate their existence, or both. What’s more, women were inferior to men when it came to feats of strength, bravery, and heroism. Most games for NES, SNES, and N64 had only male characters, even if they weren’t human. I remember the excitement of getting to choose between Mario, Luigi, Toad, and Peach for the delightfully bizarre *Super Mario 2*—of course I chose Peach, more because she could float while jumping and less because she was my only female option in an arena lacking representation.

As a kid, it never dawned on me that a game called *Zelda* wasn’t really about *Zelda*, and that I could only play as Link. In most versions, *Zelda* acted as nothing more than a motivating force for our hero, much like the eternally kidnapped Princess Peach. Early into playing *A Link to the Past*, I had to rescue *Zelda* from imprisonment in the castle dungeon, and after I valiantly saved her, she tailed me so we could escape together. My nine-year-old self found it hilarious that wherever Link moved *Zelda* followed, close at his heels. I’d make Link run in dizzying circles just to watch *Zelda* chase him like a blindly loyal dog. Stupid her.

Although playing *Zelda* as the archetypal male hero may have reinforced gender stereotypes, it also gave this girl-gamer a taste of her own nascent power. Even if Nintendo had designed their games to engage a largely male audience, they inadvertently leveled the playing field when it came to us girls competing with boys. At the risk of physical injury, small or sensitive girls like me weren’t encouraged to go toe-to-toe with male counterparts. Our options were to follow the boys’ lead, like *Zelda* in the castle, or to limit contact almost completely. Parents prioritized safety over independence, sometimes suggesting self-defense tools in the not-so-unlikely event that a boy or a man decided to use their brute force against us—the same force that could turn someone into a villain or a hero. A Ganon or a Link.

But whenever I picked up that second controller to play against my cousins, or stepbrother, or even my father, they no longer possessed a physical advantage. When I played basketball on the driveway with my cousin Shaun, he won every time, but when we played *NBA Jam* on the TV in his room, I had a fair shot. I’d joyfully shatter the backboard after a powerful slam dunk (“Boomshakalaka!”) and push Shaun’s players with my aggressive defense tactics. “My controller has a sticky button!” he said once, indignant and unable to accept my victory, though we both knew I’d won fair and square.

When it comes to the *Zelda* franchise, physical prowess isn’t the only thing helping Link save the day; these games also require cunning problem-solving skills. All the challenging puzzles at the heart of *Zelda* force players to rely on logic, memory, order sequencing, spatial reasoning, and attention to detail. In this way, *Zelda* appeals to any puzzle lover, regardless of gender, while demonstrating that heroes need brains as well as brawn. Simply drawing a sword isn’t going to cut it; intellect, reason, and patience are equally crucial to Link’s success.

Of course, it still felt good to kick ass on the virtual plane, even if that wasn’t my primary goal. I remember the day I sat alone in my basement making

my way through every computer-controlled male rival in *Street Fighter II*; I always played as Chun-Li and had learned all her special moves (“hi-ya!”). Committed to the task, I fought long and hard for hours until I reached the final villain, M. Bison. And oh the triumph of finally defeating him! In the real world, at that time, little else could inspire such a feeling of empowerment.

Many years later, at thirty, I encountered a different test of strength when my boyfriend, Joel, proposed the idea of a nine-month backpacking journey along Asia’s Pacific Rim. I was anything *but* an experienced traveler, prone to anxiety, digestive sensitivity, and chronic migraines in addition to more common fears about the dangers of the unknown. Though it took a good deal of convincing and reassurance, I decided to trust Joel’s vision and forced myself to leave my comfort zone to embrace wider pastures. Together we charted a strategic and ambitious route through eleven countries on the other side of the globe. Backpacking truly put things in perspective—*this*, I realized, was living. This was the world at my fingertips and not just in my head. This was adventure, with plenty of misadventure to go around.

Along the way, solving puzzles left and right and finding treasure nearly everywhere we turned, something mysterious occurred. I was further from New York than I’d ever ventured, exploring streets, landscapes, and cultural spectacles I never knew existed, yet I sometimes found myself filled with an aching nostalgia. The dark labyrinth of Zhangbi Underground Castle felt eerily familiar. At first I couldn’t put my finger on it...had I been a Tang-dynasty soldier in a past life? Or had I once dreamed prophetically about this moment? (It’s happened before.)

Then a more likely explanation came to me: I had navigated similar tunnels while playing *Ocarina of Time* all those years ago. Chickens wandering the ancient town of Tongli likewise transported me to a village in *Zelda*. Turtle Tower in Hanoi lit up at night—*Zelda*. Bali’s floating Ulun Dau Beratan temple—*Zelda*! There I was, a grown woman on a global trek, and I couldn’t stop referencing an outdated video game. A different person might have felt embarrassed, but mostly I felt awed—I was Link come to life, minus the sword. My courage and confidence had blended the two worlds.

The experience must have stuck because I got the itch to play *Breath of the Wild* a few years later. I’d heard the latest *Zelda* installment was a visual feast, but nothing could have prepared this old-school gamer for what wonders lay in store. On January 27, 2019—the night of my thirty-fifth birthday—I plugged in my new Switch, popped in the mini-cartridge, and woke up as Link, with *Zelda*’s dreamy, disembodied voice telling me to open my eyes. And with that, I was back, reclaiming a kingdom I thought I had lost.

\*

Bathed in the glow of golden hour, I watch the sun dip below volcanic mountains weathered by time. I catch fish in my bare hands, sleep near crackling campfires, scarf apples and mushrooms, heal my wounds in hot springs, and trade wares with wandering merchants. I harness the wind of a Korok leaf to sail frigid seas on a wooden raft. I trudge through snowdrifts,

bundled in fur, as the blue-green aurora borealis lights up the heavens. I trudge through desert wasteland too, staving off dehydration by eating hydromelons and hitching a ride on a wild sand seal through blinding dust storms. I brandish blades of flame, thunder, frost, and steel; fight howling wolves, rock-throwing octopi, and bats with fiery wings. I dodge lightning bolts, break opalescent stones that glow in the moonlight, and chase fragments of stars as they shoot across the midnight sky. I follow the shifting shadows of dragons, riding currents of air to skillfully shoot off their claws and scales without causing any pain. I scope out enemy encampments and soar in from great heights, blasting lizard-tongued Lizalfos with bomb arrows and dynamite.

\*

But in the beginning, I was a coward. When night fell, skeletal monsters would rise from the dirt and clumsily stalk me with arrows and clubs. Instead of fighting them off like the hero I was presumed to be, I hid in a tree or halfway up a wall, waiting many (in-game) hours and (real-world) minutes until the sun rose anew and turned their bones to dust. My fear was a testament to how real the game felt, but it also made me wonder what had happened to my courage.

Early missions to find the first four shrines scattered throughout the Great Plateau—and to acquire clothes, supplies, and weapons deadlier than a tree branch for survival—motivated me to play *BotW* as its creators had intended, but I was equally enthralled with the kind of aimless exploration I'd enjoyed in seventh grade. What can I say, I liked cutting grass with my new sword to see if any restless crickets flew up to catch. I may have run from every salivating Bokoblin, maxing out my stamina wheel until I doubled over gasping, but I sure did love traipsing about while getting the lay of the land. Though as it turned out, all this land I had laid was just one tiny slice of Hyrule.

When, about two months into playing, I scored the paraglider and chose a spot on the outer wall, I looked down, spread my new sail, and took my first leap into the unknown. No longer confined to the raised Great Plateau, I had no idea where to go or what to do; I felt vulnerable, alone, paralyzed by indecision amid the boundless territory now expanding in all directions. Hyrule's breathtaking scale both terrified and exhilarated me—a feeling that recalled my travel anxiety but also reawakened a potent wanderlust and inner resolve. This was the Hyrule I'd been waiting for, and just like in real life, I decided to cautiously embrace adventure.

My primary strategy still involved running away, so I traded most of my Spirit Orbs for Stamina Vessels rather than Heart Containers. I also paid 1300 Rupees to buy the Stealth chest guard and tights as soon as I could afford them (and later dyed the fabric light blue, then purple), since they helped me sneak past enemies without starting a fight. I maintained my trusty technique of throwing bombs from a reasonable distance and putting off missions that required riskier hand-to-hand combat. I certainly didn't feel ready for the "Major Tests of Strength" that awaited me in some shrines.

Little by little I filled in Hyrule's empty map by locating and climbing the tower of each new region. For a while my map looked like hungry caterpillars had gotten to it: a hole here, a hole there, along with a smattering of stamps denoting weapons, cooking pots, and certain scary beasts I'd happened upon during my travels. With its whopping nine-hundred Korok seeds hidden throughout the kingdom like a nonstop Easter egg hunt, *BotW* rewarded my off-the-path exploration as well as my snail's pace approach to gameplay; it took time, for example, to bond with a new horse or to meet the various requests of townsfolk. There were so many side-quests branching off the main storyline that no matter how long it took to unlock certain sites, I was always gaining skills and making progress. But letting my whims, fears, and curiosity guide me often made things more difficult, like when I found all four Divine Beasts before gaining the nerve to tackle each one, and then doing so *before* acquiring the regenerative Master Sword—so many weapons lying broken in my wake!

When I eventually faced off against axe-wielding Shrine Guardians and Divine Beast bosses, old feelings of empowerment resurfaced. These battles made my heart race and sometimes took many tries, but I could do this; I knew I could. I thought of other girls and women in the same position, all of us breaking the barriers of self-doubt to become the heroes we knew we could be. Every fight I won proved I was brave, every puzzle I solved proved I was smart, and every failed attempt proved I was undaunted by defeat, willing to get back up and try again or find an approach that worked better for me.

And unlike *Zelda* games of the past, Nintendo finally had my and every girl's back. Over the past decade, the cultural paradigm shift in how women are portrayed in film and other media has also impacted the male-dominant realm of video games. Whereas the entire premise of *Zelda* once hinged on Link saving a defenseless princess, this time, the titular character has to save Link. For once, this is her story.

A hundred years ago, Link was gravely injured while fighting the Guardians that Ganon had reprogrammed, so Zelda—along with a female scientist named Purah and her team of ancient technology researchers—brought him to the Shrine of Resurrection to heal him. Though there was no time to properly test the shrine's restorative capabilities, Zelda and Purah put Link in a suspended-animation coma. Suspecting that this healing process might rob him of crucial memories, Zelda used the Sheikah Slate to preemptively photograph places that would help him remember their history. She then left the Slate (basically an iPad, but one that also controls bombs, magnesis, water-freezing, etc.) at his slumbering side.

While Link dozed for an entire century, Zelda made other prudent preparations. She entrusted the Master Sword to the Great Deku Tree, knowing that Link would eventually retrieve it even if his memory was compromised. She left Link an auditory message as she plunged the precious sword into a block of stone, then ventured alone to Hyrule Castle, where she summoned her divine powers to contain Calamity Ganon before he could regain his full strength. Link's ultimate task, therefore, is to help Zelda stop Ganon from annihilating their world.

In this treacherous task lies the crucial difference between *BotW* and earlier *Zelda* games—not only does the heroic Zelda save Link’s life, she takes the lead in fighting Ganon to save the entire kingdom. Link may be physically stronger, but he essentially acts as her sword-wielding sidekick, the muscle to her mastery, and though it’s important that he fulfill his destiny too, it is Zelda’s destiny, as well as her intelligence, that takes centerstage.

All of the memories Link slowly uncovers over the course of the game reveal Zelda as anything but a needy princess. Prizing her independence, she views Link’s presence as a nuisance—“Stop following me!” she shouts in one memory; “I am not in need of an escort,” she states plainly in another—and a reminder of his unfair advantage as a male knight. He never even speaks, let alone voices an opinion. She believes herself to be more knowledgeable, intuitive, and devoted, yet it’s Link the Master Sword chose.

Despite her frustration over Link inheriting the sword that seals the darkness, Zelda teaches him important lessons; there’s a fine line, she explains, between courage and recklessness. She shows him a flower called the silent princess, a rare, endangered species that can only thrive in the wild. To me this seems an obvious symbol: Zelda, like the flower, craves the freedom to choose her own path. She wants to feel power blossoming within her, but can’t help feeling like a failure. Her father scolds her for spending so much time on her research—“Quit wasting your time playing at being a scholar”—and despite her best efforts to attain ancient wisdom from the Hylian goddesses, she has trouble harnessing the holy powers passed down through her lineage. “What’s wrong with me?” she asks, tearful.

Zelda is not always nice or level-headed or right. Still, it’s an honor for Link to protect her, not because she can’t handle most threats but because she’s the one person their world truly needs. After Calamity Ganon reawakens, Zelda is devastated, blaming herself for his wrath. But when the corrupted Guardians attack, she selflessly tells an injured Link to run and save himself, saying, “I’ll be fine!” He still staggers to his feet to carry out his duty. Just before a Guardian can kill him with its laser beam, Zelda moves in front of Link, shouts “No!” and raises her palm. Her powers rush to the surface, glowing around her hand in a sphere of holy light, which grows and expands until it stops every single Guardian on the field, and further incapacitates Link. She cries for him but knows he can be saved. Realizing that her role is unfinished, she does everything in her power to protect him and Hyrule.

There is strength in Zelda’s unwavering dedication. Sometimes it’s the trying that matters most, even if you don’t succeed. Though trying, for me, often came with a price.

\*



Across the moat, Hyrule Castle beckons, though it's anything but inviting. Red sparks and embers singe the air, as if the entire structure is aflame. I know no fire blazes within, only evidence of Calamity Ganon's corruption, like the impenetrable purple and black ooze, known as malice, that covers walls, towers, and doorways.

Flying Guardians eye me from above, buzzing around the castle like sniper drones. Stationary Guardians are also positioned along the serpentine footpaths, parapet walkways, and circular gatehouses. I must remain vigilant—at nearly every turn a Guardian's laser beam burns my back, and I know how deadly they can be; if I don't move fast, I'll be knocked off my feet in an explosive blast.

I take my chances, letting their targets track me before I leap from harm's way. I climb stone walls, swim up waterfalls, and look for openings in the crumbling exterior so I can walk the castle's red-carpeted corridors. I search the regal dining hall, observation room, guards' chamber, and a library swarming with Lizalfos. I ride the mine-cart through the west passage and explore the damp docks to reach the Saas Ko'sah shrine. Within secret rooms I find finely crafted weapons and armor, along with other items of value: a gold Rupee, royal recipe, bundle of ancient arrows, and even Zelda's personal diary and research notes sitting open on the desks in her room and study. Flipping through these pages makes me miss her even more.

The higher I climb the redder the sky appears, like when the dreaded blood moon washes over these lands to bring every monster back to life. I am almost there—past the Moblins and the Lynels and all those watchful Guardians, almost to the castle sanctum, where I will meet Calamity Ganon, at last. He is waiting for me.

\*

"Can you stop playing *Zelda*?"

The question soured the air in the small apartment I shared with Joel, now my husband. It wasn't so much a question as a statement. No, a demand: Joel wasn't *asking* me to stop, he was telling me enough was enough.

The two of us have a lot of common ground, but with one major difference: Joel isn't a gamer—never has been, never will be. He didn't own a Nintendo growing up, didn't frequent loud arcades with his dad, didn't mull over video-game puzzles at night, and he never played *Zelda*.

In his mind, games reinforce a competitive culture that pits people against each other rather than encouraging them to work cooperatively, and save for his daily *Jeopardy!* fix, he thinks most games are a total waste of time, even when played specifically to pass time. Since games serve no purpose for Joel, he rarely attempts to compete or improve. Try playing a board game (my favorite being *Carcassonne*) with someone who doesn't care whether they win or lose—trust me, it's no fun.

Joel is especially dismissive toward video games, whether or not they involve competition, because he associates them with the worst kind of laziness. He claims that the skills someone might gain while playing such a game are never applicable to the real world, and that all those hours spent achieving this or that virtual goal leave me with nothing to show for my time, which I could have spent doing something productive...like the dishes. He considers my obsession nerdy at best and pathetic at worst, and also claimed I was addicted.

Maybe I was, especially at first. I thought about the game constantly and couldn't wait to get back to it. I remember the agony of not getting to play during our nine-day Curacao vacation; I kept wanting to lift the light-up rock outside our traveler's hotel to see if a hot-footed frog was hiding underneath. Even in my dreams I would drift peacefully across Hyrule's grasslands, floating just above the ground like in the lucid dreams I'd had as a child. I loved to push Hyrule's boundaries until "You can't go any farther" popped up on screen—no horse, no other people, just me and my paraglider at the edges of the world.

To appease Joel's irritation, I tried to limit *Zelda* to times he wasn't home or stationed in our TV room—I couldn't abide reducing Hyrule to the Switch's small handheld screen—even when doing so interfered with my schedule. Funny how I seemed to have more trouble playing in my free time as an adult than I ever did as a kid under Mom's jurisdiction. I didn't want to admit it, but Joel's attitude toward my gaming habit was starting to cause conflict. I wanted him, and perhaps other naysayers, to understand how much *Zelda* could enhance and enrich my normal life.

Yes it was designed to distract me from reality (and again, the dishes), but *BotW* offered a welcome reprieve from the cyclic thoughts that often caused me stress. Escaping as a child meant retreating from the real world into one I could create and control—something I still craved as an adult. This time, though, I wanted to relinquish my *need* to control or make sense of the world's unpredictability by escaping into a game with distinct rules, expectations, and perimeters. At times my emotions and anxiety felt difficult

to manage, but *BotW* helped redirect harmful thoughts, or at least relocate them to the back of my mind. Any panic I suffered as Link funneled my generalized anxiety in a safe and constructive direction; *BotW* could feel as comforting as a security blanket, as meditative as a focusing technique, or as fulfilling as any accomplishment. Such a tangible sense of achievement wasn't easy to attain from my other pursuits, like writing.

As a thirty-something plugging away at a YA novel with fantastical elements, *Zelda* nourished my imagination. With childlike wonder and *Ocarina* nostalgia, I watched *BotW*'s storyline unfold memory by memory in a nonlinear fashion, prompting me to piece together what had happened to Link prior to his restorative coma. I actively wrote Link's present-day narrative by embracing all the quests throughout Hyrule: stories inside of stories like nesting Russian dolls. I bought my own home, helped two people from different domains fall in love at a heart-shaped pond, and even arranged a full wedding ceremony after gathering the necessary people and resources to build Tarrey Town from scratch. Clearly there were more inventive opportunities than simply gutting the bad guy.

And simulation though it was, *BotW*'s accurate reflection of the earth's natural beauty helped me temporarily escape my cramped urban confines. After an adventurous trek through Hyrule, I felt a heightened appreciation for any nature I came across, longing to run in the rain, climb trees, collect rocks, forage for mushrooms, swim the Hudson, or chase small creatures scampering through Washington Square (as a vegetarian for twenty years, I had no desire to fry them in a cooking pot). I even looked at passing strangers with a newfound curiosity, wondering if they needed a favor or had any valuable wisdom to share.

Joel didn't notice the extent to which *Zelda* inspired me, and failed to acknowledge my artistic contributions to the game, namely the way I utilized the Sheikah Slate camera. Maybe it's a stretch to call such a thing *artistic*, but the ability to capture scenes in an already nostalgic game appealed to my lifelong affinity for creative documentation. Beyond the camera's function in specific quests, I captured as many artful scenes as there was space for them in my album, preserving the anthropomorphized parrot playing accordion atop a hill, the old woman dozing behind the counter of her shop, and my own shadow looming behind a village child sitting on the floor. I also snapped more obvious shots, like a gorgeous sunset view, and posed for silly selfies wearing different outfits in odd locations. Personalizing my gaming experience harkened back to my early desires to make things *mine*, as did getting to decide which horses to board at the stables; I loved giving them names—Navi, River, Sky, Pearl, and Magnus the giant horse!—then changing their manes and other accessories.

But most importantly, all the time I spent as Link made me feel better, at least some of the time, about being Amy. Having battled chronic migraines and other pain since high school, living vicariously through Link reminded me that I was strong and capable. This boost in self-esteem extended far beyond the screen. Though I can't contribute it entirely to *Zelda*, I started pushing the boundaries of my comfort zone, this time branching out on my own without needing Joel to guide or protect me.

In the fall of 2019, I decided to get involved with the climate change activist group Extinction Rebellion. I'd closely followed their actions all summer before attending meetings and events at which I met people from all walks of life. In the spirit of trying new things and doing my part to fight for environmental protections, I took a nonviolent direct action training; participated in a temporary occupation of a university building; disco-danced for a creative die-in around Union Square; handed out fliers to drivers during a street-block swarm; acted as a de-escalator for performative dancers; and worked with a small group to conceptualize and construct an installation art project about the predicted sea level rise in my neighborhood, which I welcomed Joel to work on as well.

One November evening, I traveled up to Harlem to attend a protest organized by Decolonize this Place and other marginalized groups affected by the MTA fare hike and increased police presence in the subways. I spotted a few people I knew to some extent, but otherwise I was alone in an unfamiliar part of the city. I noticed another girl, some years younger, who also appeared to be flying solo, struck up a conversation and asked if she wanted to be buddies for the night. She seemed thankful for the gesture and the two of us bonded almost instantly. And it was a good thing too, because that protest sure got hairy. There I was running down the streets holding hands with a girl I'd just met—what a rush! Months later, when the Black Lives Matter movement swept my city, I was ready to chant and march among other passionate strangers.

Further expanding my circle of trust that fall, I joined a nonviolent communication group that met once a week on Zoom and promoted empathy chats and needs-based language. After a long hiatus, I returned to cognitive behavioral therapy, opening up to a new therapist every week and paying her myself. I also took the necessary steps to find a new physical therapist after a few past fails. We talked extensively about my pain and I tried to follow his exercise regime to improve my posture and ward off migraines.

My friends started to notice some positive improvements. I felt more motivated to go out and do things (even when tempted to stay in and play *Zelda*), and with fewer debilitating headaches keeping me home in the dark, I could commit to plans more solidly. Taking a break from my novel, I turned to poetry as a cathartic form of expression and rekindled my passion for the genre. I developed meaningful, important relationships grounded in the poems we wrote, edited, and shared, and attended a more diverse array of literary events, some at which I read my new work.

Joel wasn't crazy about this streak of independence, and would certainly refute any connection to *Zelda*. Nor would he give a video game credit for instilling creative inspiration or feminist empowerment. But Joel hasn't waltzed into Gerudo Town disguised as a voe (their word for woman), a desert oasis where only girls and women are allowed to live, work, socialize, and train as soldiers. He hasn't engaged in close combat with masked Yiga Clan ninjas who appear out of nowhere swinging Vicious Sickles. He hasn't navigated confusing labyrinths or pitch-black ruins or the foggy Lost Woods, following the embers of his torch to make it through the maze. He didn't start from scratch on Eventide Island—no weapons, no food, not a stitch of

armor—and have to scavenge for all the basics before fighting a massive Hinox and other beasts. He didn't stick with the game long enough to find and beat all one-hundred-twenty shrines—yes, I have now unlocked them all, earning a special gift from the monks. And naturally, he hasn't faced the most powerful enemy in all the land before pulling back because he didn't want the game to end, even though it's really the only thing left to do.

I doubt Joel will ever see *Zelda* with my kind of reverence; it just isn't the place where he finds meaning or magic. And that's okay, because it was never really about a video game anyway. As cheesy as it sounds, it's about seeing yourself as a worthy competitor, or a protector, or a hero, no matter what the world tells you. It's about trusting your instincts and strength so you can take risks and rise to any challenge. It's about feeling power flourish from within, then using that to fight for whatever you believe in. To this end, Joel would agree.

Today, I still escape to Hyrule on screen and in my dreams, flying and climbing and riding my horse to my heart's content. I'm still savoring its magic, still discovering treasure in unexpected places. Maybe one day I'll finish the game.

Then again, maybe not.



**Amy Dupcak** published her debut collection of short stories, *Dust*, in 2016 and co-edited the anthology *Words After Dark* in 2020. Her prose and poetry has appeared in *Fringe*, *Phoebe*, *Litro*, *Hypertext*, *Sonora Review*, and *District Lit* among other publications, and she has written a plethora of arts and culture articles and reviews for *Beyond Race Magazine* and *Death + Taxes*. Amy is a creative and essay writing instructor for kids and teens at Writopia Lab, a writing instructor for adults at The Writer's Rock, and an assistant editor of *Cagibi* journal.