Case Study of Player Authority in "Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask"

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With a Terrible Fate

Introduction

In considering what differentiates video games[1] as a narratological medium, a natural place to start is with the player. It is often the case that the stories told in video games take as a crucial element the player, which is to say that the player herself is nontrivially a character in the game's narrative, in a way that the viewer of a play or the reader of a novel could not be. As a way into the study of the mechanics of player involvement in video game narratology, I analyze the dynamics of the player's role in "Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask" (Nintendo, 2000).

Although the game has particular metaphysical idiosyncrasies, such as time travel, I take it as a useful model by virtue of the degree to which it integrates the player into its world as the primary metaphysical agent. In Part I, I analyze the metaphysics of the game's world, Termina, and define a conceptual framework for defining the universe in terms of the player and the Happy Mask Salesman, another metaphysical entity. Part II then expands a thesis of metaphysical contingency with respect to the player to include the ethical domain. I show this by first claiming that Termina lacks substantive grounding for morality, and then by claiming that the player has the capacity to impose a value system upon the universe based on how she plays the game.

Part I: Metaphysics

Before moving to analysis, it will be useful to sketch the overarching story and mechanics of "Majora's Mask." The gloss of the plot will be rough, but I will embellish as needed in the analysis.

The game is set in a world that is constantly terminal – whence the name, Termina. The player's character, Link, arrives three days before the apocalypse: a child named Skull Kid, who has stolen Majora's Mask from the Happy Mask Salesman, is using the powers of the Mask to send the moon crashing into the earth, which he will accomplish in three days. To defeat him, Link must liberate four demigod-like guardians, the Giants, who hold up the moon and give Link the opportunity to best Majora in battle.

The problem is that Link cannot do all of this in three days; in fact, Skull Kid curses him when he first enters Termina, transforming his body into that of another species (the Deku), and Link has to find a way to return to his ordinary body before he can even explore the world of Termina outside of its nexus, Clock Town. However, Link can effectively "give himself more time" by playing the Song of Time on his instrument, the Ocarina of Time: this sends Link back to the point three days prior to the apocalypse (the "Dawn of the First Day"). Doing so resets most aspects of the game's universe, except that Link is able to keep most of his possessions, and certain (but very few) events of the main plot are not undone. By playing the Song of Time, he is able to give himself enough time to stop Skull Kid and defeat Majora.

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[1] What I have in mind by 'video games' for the purposes of this paper is bounded to the genre of role-playing games, or 'RPGs'. The genre as I use it is defined: by a main plot leading the player from its beginning to the credits at the end; side quests which flesh out the world of the game but which do not directly advance the main plot; and a substantive character who serves as the intermediary between the player and the game's world (i.e., the player's avatar).

What the game offers as the basic mechanic for negotiating Termina's universe, therefore, is a system by which the player moves Link through a single three-day timeline of Termina, then plays the Song of Time to instantiate a new timeline branching off of the prior timeline, and is thereby able to move through the game's main plot by creating and traversing a set of such timelines. Every timeline except that which ends in the defeat of Majora is ostensibly fated to end in the apocalypse on the Fourth Day, whereas those timelines in which Link *does* defeat Majora end in the credits and the conclusion of the game's main plot.

With that structure in mind, I now turn to a model of Termina as a function of the player's agency. To do so, I first must explain the metaphysical role of the Happy Mask Salesman in greater depth.

The Salesman himself is best described as what I term 'metaphysically adjacent' to Termina: existing alongside the world, but interposing himself between the world and Link. There are several lines of evidence substantiating this claim. Firstly, Link meets the Salesman at the beginning of the game inside the Clock Tower of Clock Town, before exiting into the town. It is only when Link exits the Tower that time actually starts counting; moreover, the countdown to the world's demise "pauses" whenever Link returns to the Tower and speaks to the Salesman. So, the Salesman resides, in a substantive way, outside of Termina's conception of time. Secondly, after Majora is defeated and the Salesman bids Link farewell, the Salesman turns and actually "fades out" of the world, implying that he can, to some degree, enter and exit the universe at will.

The Salesman is also the first being to frame the plot of the game for Link and the player. He says that Skull Kid stole a mask from him and asks Link to retrieve it for him, offering in exchange to lift the curse placed by Skull Kid on Link. The caveat, he adds, is that he "must leave this place in three days." When Link first entered Termina, Skull Kid had stolen his Ocarina of Time; once Link reclaims it, the Salesman teaches him the Song of Healing, a song with the ability to create masks out of spirits. The song converts Link's Deku form into a mask, returning Link to his original form; but when the Salesman learns that Link did not recover Majora's Mask (it is nomologically impossible to do so at this early stage in the game), he admonishes Link that the mask possesses "an evil and wicked power" and must be recovered in order to avert catastrophe.

The significance of the Salesman is that he is largely responsible for establishing the parameters of Termina as a universe. Link encounters him and accepts his fetch-quest before even entering the world; even though the standard understand of the three-day time limit within Termina is that the apocalypse occurs in three days, the first definition of the time limit within the game is that the Salesman is leaving the world in three days. Similarly, the game concludes when the Salesman exits the universe. We will also see in Part II that the Salesman imposes an artifice of morality on a morally nihilistic universe.

Yet as much as such metaphysical significance might at first glance suggest that the Salesman is some sort of God, the relationship he has with the player reveals that ultimate metaphysical authority is vested in the player rather than in the Salesman. I define this relationship in terms of the model depicted below.
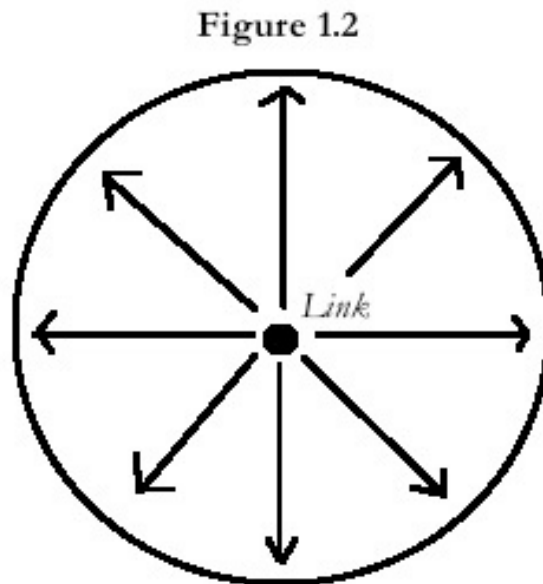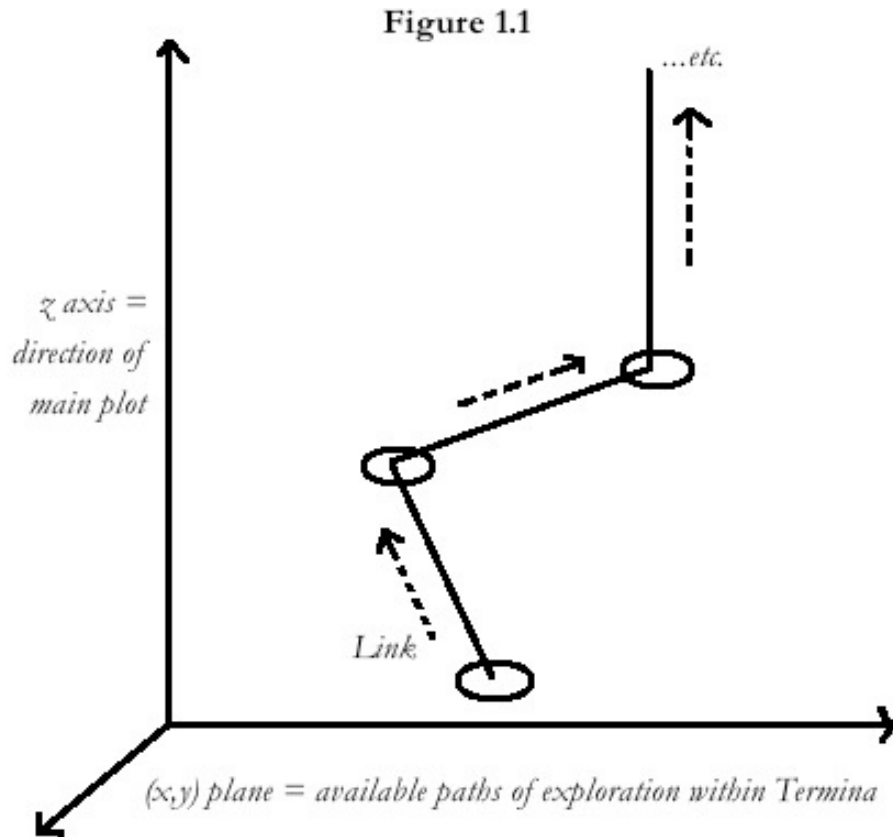
Figure 1.1

z axis =
direction of
main plot

...etc.

Link

(x,y) plane = available paths of exploration within Termina

Figure 1.2

Link

Figure 1.1 illustrates a narratological three-space in which the universes of video games can be defined. The z-axis represents main plot, with the plane $\{z = 0\}$ representing the beginning of the game's main narrative, and the upper z bound defining the conclusion of that narrative – typically, this is when the credits roll. The (x, y) axes represent the domain of the game's universe that does not directly advance the main plotline – this is what

I refer to as the game's 'exploratory domain'. Taken as a whole, this coordinate system is useful for understand the unique narrative structure of video games, because it accounts for the fact that the storytelling devices of video games can embed narrative within a larger world which, while still related to the main narrative, is to be explored only at the player's discretion.

When we think about Termina in this three-space, it is apparent that the Happy Mask Salesman plays a substantial role in establishing the universe. By saying that he 'defines the main plot', I claim in this framework that he establishes the upper bound of Termina's z value. He also establishes the length of timelines within Termina – three days – whether one sees in terms of his departure in three days' time, or in terms of the fact that it was he who introduced Majora's Mask, the apocalyptic force, into the world. Each line segment in Figure 1.1 signifies a single timeline of Link within Termina, so we can say that the Salesman determines the upper bound of the length of any given timeline (i.e., three days). Since the Salesman seems to frame the universe of Termina for Link and the player, it might also be reasonable to infer that he defines the universe's x and y bounds – and we can support this claim by the fact that, if Link presents the Salesman with any mask he acquires from helping people or completing quests within the game, the Salesman remarks on the mask with an ontological knowledge to which he would have to other reason to be privy.[2]

Beyond establishing the outer bounds of the universe, the Salesman also partially defines the paths available for Link to take in navigating the universe. To wit: by teaching Link the Song of Healing, the Salesman enables Link to return to his original form, in which he is allowed to leave Clock Town and engage the rest of Termina, accessing more of the main plot and exploratory domain. The circles at the beginning of each timeline, shown in greater detail in **Figure 1.2**, describe the different paths available to Link in terms of distinct three-place vectors. The vectors can range from the form [x, y, 0], by which Link only explores Termina without advancing the main plot, to the form [0, 0, z], by which Link undertakes actions that solely advance the main plot. We can imagine the set of available vectors as a semicircle with a base parallel to the {x, y, 0} plane, rising in the positive z direction; vectors with a negative z value do not make sense, because the game has no mechanic for reversing progress in the main plot.[3]

This is roughly where the metaphysical import of the Salesman ends. Although it seems like he has free reign in determining the world of Termina, the analysis reveals that this is far from the case: the Salesman is responsible for establishing all *potential states* of Termina as a universe, yet the reality of Termina's existence is ultimately the player's responsibility. To see this, consider the shape of Termina if Link were to enter it after

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[2] To take one instance of this as an example: the player can undertake a long side quest which ends with Clock Town's Postman being freed from his duties as a civil servant, thereby being allowed to flee as the moon descends. To mark the occasion, the Postman gives Link the Postman's Hat (this counts as a 'mask' within the game). If the player addresses the Salesman while wearing the Hat, the Salesman remarks: "That's the Postman's Hat, isn't it? That is a fine thing. It is filled with the joy of freedom. You have done some good work…"

[3] It's worth noting two things about timeline articulation in relation to vector analysis. Firstly, although the diagram only shows Link's available vectors at the start of each timeline (for simplicity's sake), Link has multiple vectors available to him at every point throughout a given timeline. This means that, although timelines are all represented as straight in Figure 1.1, they can just as easily be curved. Secondly, with respect to timeline length, note that the Salesman only sets the *outer bound* for the possible length of a timeline: Link can play the Song of Time at any point in a three-day cycle, thereby terminating that timeline and instantiating a new one.

speaking with the Salesman, but the player did not thereafter engage with Link as an avatar: by our analysis, the potential states of Termina as bounded by the Salesman would still obtain; yet Link would never make a choice as to which vector to pursue. The world would end in three days with no narratological development because Link would not engage the world, nor would he play the Song of Time to instantiate any further timelines.

But by virtue of the player extending her agency through Link as an avatar, Link is able to choose path vectors and advance a range of timelines throughout the three-space. In so doing, the potential forms of Termina defined by the Salesman are transformed into the actual universe of timelines determined by the vectors chosen by the player. It follows that Termina's reality is substantively dependent on the player as a metaphysical agent. So, even though the Salesman may set the universal parameters available to the player, metaphysical authority, in so far as responsibility for the obtaining universe is concerned, is vested in the player as a narratological entity.

Part II: The Ethical Domain

Thus far, I have defended the claim that the universe of Termina can be described as a function of the player's determining x, y, and z values for vectors within a three-space bounded by the Happy Mask Salesman. Now, I want to bolster the case for a more general notion of player authority within Termina by showing that the ethics of Termina as a universe are also somewhat determined by the player. More precisely, I argue that Termina as a universe is metaethically nihilistic, but that metaphysically adjacent entities are able to impose a 'moral artifice' upon the world – an ability which is ultimately ceded from the Salesman to the player. The argument proceeds in three sections: firstly, I defend metaethical nihilism within Termina by comparing "Majora's Mask" to "Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time" (Nintendo, 1998), its direct predecessor; secondly, I explain the concept of 'moral artifice', and show how the Salesman imposes such an artifice upon Termina at the outset of the game; lastly, I show how the game's narrative ontologically moves the player's epistemology from belief in the Salesman's moral artifice to moral skepticism, and ultimately to a position in which the player herself is responsible for Termina's moral artifice.

Important to "Majora's Mask" is the fact that it is framed as a direct sequel to "Ocarina of Time," a game that takes place in Link's native land of Hyrule instead of the parallel world, Termina. Hyrule is important for the current study because of the three goddesses that frame its ontology. Each goddess represents one of three cardinal virtues: Power, Wisdom, and Courage – collectively known as "The Triforce." Three characters within Hyrule act as literal personifications of the components of the Triforce: Link is the bearer of the Triforce of Courage; Ganondorf, "The Great King of Evil," bears the Triforce of Power; and Princess Zelda bears the Triforce of Wisdom.

The result of this ontology is that "Ocarina of Time" is a heavily, overtly moralized game. Ganondorf is literally named the Great King of Evil, and Zelda is portrayed as the paragon of moral goodness; in Link's final battle against Ganon, Zelda pierces Ganon with a Light Arrow – described as "the light of justice [which smites] evil" to allow Link to deliver the final blow; the Master Sword, which Link must wield in order to defeat Ganon, is described as "a sacred blade which evil ones may never touch." In relation to the cardinal virtues of the Triforce, this makes sense: Ganondorf is defined as an unchecked lust for power; Link is a conduit for taking action and effecting change by virtue of serving as the

player's avatar; and Zelda is the guiding moral force of wisdom that charts Link's path against evil.

When we turn to Termina, the first thing to notice in the ethical domain is that none of what I have just described obtains. There is no mention whatsoever of the Triforce; Link never takes up the Master Sword, nor does it exist in the world; and Zelda, Link's guiding moral force, is absent throughout the game. In fact, in a game entitled "Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask," Zelda only appears once, and then only in a flashback to when she ostensibly taught Link the Song of Time before he left Hyrule.[4] The result is that the explicit, substantive grounding for morality that was established in the prior narrative is lacking in Termina; in my view, the inference to best explanation is that Termina is metaethically nihilistic, unless the metaphysics of the world give us good reason to believe otherwise.

On the contrary, it seems that Termina rejects at every turn attempts to pin morality down within its metaphysics – the only apparent ethics, as I have already mentioned, seem on analysis to be artificial, without substantive grounding in Termina's metaphysics. To explain what I mean by 'moral artifice', I return to the case of the Happy Mask Salesman: after the Salesman asks for Link to fetch Majora's Mask for him and Link returns with his Ocarina (but not the Mask); the Salesman flies into a rage and tells Link the history of the Mask.

> If you leave my mask out there, something terrible will happen!
> The mask that was stolen from me... It is called Majora's Mask. It
> is an accursed item from legend that is said to have been used by
> an ancient tribe in its hexing rituals. It is said that an evil and
> wicked power is bestowed upon the one who wears that mask…
> But now, that tribe from the legend has vanished, so no one really
> knows the true nature of the mask's power... ...But I feel it.

There are two things worth noting about the Salesman's ontological account of the Mask. Firstly, the Salesman only offers a moralized explanation of the Mask after Link has already failed to retrieve it once. This suggests the possibility that the Salesman is only deploying a moral explanation in order to motivate Link since Link has tacitly expressed that a fetchquest alone is insufficient motivation. Secondly, baked into the Salesman's explanation of the Mask's negative moral valence is the fact that no one knows as a matter of fact the Mask's true nature – in fact, the Salesman himself does not purport to know that nature, but instead makes the weaker claim that he "feels it." Unless we have good reason independent of the Salesman to ground ethics in Termina's metaphysics, we ought to be suspicious of his moral account for these two reasons. As we saw from the lack of Triforce earlier, this independent line of ethical reasoning seems absent.

Recall, moreover, that the Salesman as an entity is metaphysically adjacent to the universe of Termina. As such, he is in a position to characterize and describe the entire universe from an unaffected viewpoint; and, because he is the one who introduces Link to

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[4] Matters of timeline continuity and narratological unreliability actually leave it unclear if this is even a genuine memory on Link's part; I am inclined to argue, based on the fact that the events of "Ocarina of Time" imply that the Zelda in this flashback recalls events from timelines other than her own, that Link, too, is experiencing a "residue" left by former timelines. This residue, on my analysis, is only superficially taken to be a memory; the result is that Zelda is absent from the game's narrative to an even greater extent than if Link was recalling a genuine interaction with Zelda.

Termina, he is in a position to exploit this viewpoint in order to manipulate Link's perception of the world, increasing the likelihood that Link will in fact retrieve the Mask for the Salesman. The inference to best explanation that I make from this preponderance of evidence is that the Salesman imposes a moral artifice on Termina: more precisely, this refers to an appearance of an ethical dimension to the universe which, when the universe is analyzed, factors out of the analysis and is determined to be entirely ascriptive on the part of the Salesman.[5] The result of this is that the player thinks that the Salesman is *describing* the ethical state of Termina when he explains the ontology of Majora's Mask, when he is in fact *ascribing* his own moral beliefs to the universe instead.

But since the player is also a metaphysically adjacent entity with respect to Termina, we might suppose that she is also capable of imposing moral artifice on the world in the same way that the Salesman does – and in fact, there is reason to believe not only that this is the case, but also that the game functions on one register to move the player's epistemology from acceptance of the Salesman's moral artifice to a place where she can impose her own moral artifice. What the game reflects on the level of player epistemology is a series of shifts in understanding Termina's ethical domain: the player begins by accepting the moral artifice of the Salesman as metaphysically substantive; then, by thoroughly exploring the universe of Termina, the player becomes skeptical of substantive ethical grounding; next, the player comes to believe that Termina is metaethically nihilistic; and lastly, the player realizes that she herself has the authority to impose moral artifice upon Termina.

The player has more reason to believe the Salesman than doubt him at thee outset of the game – Link is known throughout the "Legend of Zelda" series as a hero who battles evil, so someone with the background knowledge that "Majora's Mask" is a sequel to "Ocarina of Time" would expect a moral system to obtain in Termina. Even if the player lacks this background knowledge, an intuitive component of playing any sort of game is that there must be stakes that make playing the game in some way worthwhile from the player's perspective; otherwise, the player would not see the game as worth her time, and would decline the invitation to participate. In a story-based video game, it makes sense that a narrative of good-versus-evil would be more motivating than a quest to merely retrieve an item for someone; moreover, this brand of moralizing fits a broad hero-trope of video games, meaning that the Salesman's imposition of moral artifice initially amounts to little more than articulating the standard form of many game narratives. All of these factors coalesce into a mindset that leads the player to heed the Happy Mask Salesman's moral framework with little-to-no skepticism.

But things change when the player actually enters Termina, and finds that the laws of "Ocarina of Time" no longer seem to apply. Zelda does not guide Link, there is no Great King of Evil, and the world itself is terminal by definition. The only apparent grounding for morality is the Salesman; once the player, by exploring the world of Termina, recognizes this, she moves from skepticism to an understanding of Termina as metaethically nihilistic.

Once the player grasps Termina's metaethics on the substantive level, the stage is set for her to understand her own authority on the procedural level of metaethics. I see the best way into this epistemological "pivot point" as examining the last set of lines delivered by the Salesman to Link (and, by extension, to the player), before he disappears from Termina.

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[5] Put another way: if we distinguish substantive metaethics from procedural metaethics, then metaphysical analysis of Termina suggests that the world is substantively nihilistic with respect to metaethics, and that the seeming-ethics of the world are the result of a metaphysically adjacent entity procedurally imposing his beliefs upon the world.

> Oh… So the evil has left the mask after all… Well, now… I finally have it back. Since I am in the midst of my travels… I must bid you farewell. Shouldn't you be returning home as well? Whenever there is a meeting, a parting is sure to follow. However, that parting need not last forever… Whether a parting be forever or merely for a short time… That is up to you. With that, please excuse me… …But, my, you sure have managed to make quite a number of people happy. The masks you have are filled with happiness. This is truly a good happiness.

If my analysis of the Salesman's relation to Termina holds, then his "bidding [Link and the player] farewell is tantamount to concluding the universe as he so defined it. Yet something more nuanced also happens here, for immediately after announcing his own departure from the universe, he suggests that the player does the same – something that, nomologically, he can *only* suggest and cannot enforce. The reason why is explained by his following line, which can be coherently read as describing the metaphysical authority of the player: the player will eventually stop playing the game and close out the universe of Termina on her own, but she can enter the game again and reconstitute Termina whenever she wishes. This is reinforced by the fact that the game actually has features which can only be accessed after the credits roll[6] and the story is ostensibly concluded, meaning that the game's own mechanics present the player with an option to meaningfully continue exploring the universe even after the world's upper z bound is reached. In this way, the Salesman cedes to the player the metaphysical authority that we derived in the analysis of Part I.

After ceding metaphysical authority to the player, the Salesman goes on to cede procedural metaethical authority to the player. The argument runs as follows: the Salesman acknowledges that the masks Link has, which are artifacts of people he has successfully helped or otherwise made happy, are filled with a 'truly good happiness'. Given what we know about his imposition of moral artifice, the Salesman's explication of the truth of the happiness' moral valence suggests that he is acknowledging something fundamental here, rather than continuing to impose his own artifice. However, we also know that Termina is substantively nihilistic with respect to the moral domain. The parsimonious explanation for the Salesman's expression, given all of this, is that the Salesman has actually switched roles with the player in terms of Termina's ethics: now the Salesman is acknowledging as true the moral artifice imposed by the *player*.

One could push back here by remarking that the Salesman could always merely be imposing a *new* moral artifice, grounded in the happiness of people rather than the evil of Majora. For the claim that he cedes procedural metaethical authority to the player to hold water, we must be able to show that the player actually has a choice in which ethics she imposes on the world of Termina. Without at least two distinct ethical vectors to choose from in charting the timelines of Termina, we cannot meaningfully say that the player has authority in this domain.

Thankfully, there are two different ways in which the player can traverse Termina, each of which described a different program of ethics. To see the difference, recall the

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[6] I point in particular to the Fierce Deity's Mask: though the mask is outside the scope of the study, it suffices to say that this mask can only be acquired in the main plot's endgame, but can be implemented at specific places in the game's world outside of the endgame.

definition of Termina within narratological three-space, as described by Figure 1.1. What is trivially true from that model is that exploratory vectors increase the number of timelines from the beginning to the end of the main narrative, because such vectors fail to maximize the z vector of each timeline and fraction thereof. So there is a *prima facie* choice to be made by the player between reaching the conclusion of the main plot as quickly as possible, and exploring as much of the world as possible.

Alone, this result is unsurprising: we can rightly say that most games offer a choice to the player between swift completion and thorough completion. Unique to "Majora's Mask" is that each of these paths is bound up in a different sort of ethical considerations. In order to acquire every mask in the game, Link must take the time to help resolve the problems of virtually every inhabitant of Termina. Helping many of these people has no impact on the main plot, which means that making everyone in Termina happy significantly increases the number of timelines from the game's beginning to its conclusion. This matters because, as I mentioned earlier, every timeline that does not end in the defeat of Majora is presumably doomed to suffer the apocalypse of the moon crashing into the earth. In contrast, progressing through the main plot as efficiently as possible minimizes the number of ill-fated timelines, but also reduces the number of people made happy. We can therefore say that in establishing the reality of Termina, the player is able to choose between prioritizing the happiness of people across Termina's universe, and prioritizing the survival of as many people as possible by minimizing the universe's set of timelines.

This ethical disjunction means that the authority of the player's agency extends to the ethical domain of Termina. Though the player cannot negate the substantive metaethical nihilism of Termina, she can choose what moral artifice to impose upon it. The Happy Mask Salesman, in parting with the player and Link, acknowledges that the player has taken the Salesman's place as the authoritative metaphysical agent within Termina.

Conclusion

Particularly to those uninitiated in the medium of video games, it is not readily apparent that their interactive nature affords them any unique narratological or artistic mechanics. What I have endeavored to show through analysis of "Majora's Mask" is that this is absolutely the case. Just as novels use different narrative architectures, we should by no means expect every video game to reflect the same theoretical features articulated in this case study. Nonetheless, there are two aspects of the analysis that I do think will prove to be particularly generalizable, and it is worth underscoring them in closing.

Firstly, the vast majority of video games today possess some combination of main plots and side quests. This aspect alone differentiates them from other media, because it allows them to function as a singular work of narrative art in which some aspects of the world are narratologically *optional*; as we saw in the case of the metaethical choice Termina compels the player to make, such schematics can have a nontrivial impact on the art object in question. As such, I think that the narratological three-space I established in Figure 1.1 will be a useful theoretic tool in analyzing video games beyond "Majora's Mask."

Secondly, the conceptualization of the player as an actual figure within the art object's narrative is something to look for in future video game studies. This is more subtle than the first point: I do not think that most players of "Majora's Mask" would understand themselves, at first glance, as actual characters within the universe of the game. Perhaps because no other aesthetic medium works this way, we do not intuitively connect the fact that we control someone within the game's universe to a notion of ourselves as crucial to the

narrative. Yet the preceding analysis of "Majora's Mask" has shown that the very reality of Termina, as well as its moral structure, is irreducibly dependent on the player. I do not believe that every video game, merely by virtue of the player being connected to the world via an avatar, will yield similar results – indeed, we might end up realizing that some games are better described as films, if the role of the player factor out in analysis. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to suppose that such an interactive dynamic only lends itself to player significance in the instance of "Majora's Mask." Analysis on more video games, therefore, should lead to a more robust framework for the ways in which a player can take on significance within video game narratology.