

‘I Want Bigger Games with Better Graphics’: Mapping the Response to *Tears of the Kingdom’s* Graphics in Technomasculine Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

A popular internet meme featuring Sonic the Hedgehog in a witty pose states: “I want shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less and I’m *not kidding*” (KnowYourMeme 2023). The meme, originating in 2020, has been employed by videogame enthusiasts in response to games industry crises increasing in scale and volume, such as ‘crunch’ (Vanderhoef and Curtin 2016; Cote and Harris 2023), the shutting down of medium-sized studios (Games Industry.biz n.d.), and industry layoffs (Carpenter 2024). The existence and popularity of this meme hints at a growing awareness among gaming communities that the games industry’s business models, as well as its perpetual graphical upgrade cycle, are unsustainable (cf. Abraham 2022; Keogh 2023).

Gaming communities have traditionally been white male-dominated and identified with ideals of technological masculinity (Kirkpatrick 2013), while enjoying games that have critically warranted attention for their centering of ‘militarized masculinity,’ or “strongly gender coded scenarios of war, conquest, and combat” (Kline et al. 2003, 247). Accordingly, mainstream game developers run a ‘fewer, bigger and better’ strategy of blockbuster game design where new titles need to legitimize increasing development costs with more technical features (Nieborg 2011), and mainstream game journalism has been guilty of reviewing games as technical appliances rather than cultural artifacts (Bogost 2015). Despite the ‘casual revolution’ (Juul 2010) that saw a diversification of prominent game genres and opened gaming culture to players with various backgrounds, reactionary movements such as #GamerGate (Mortensen 2018) and toxic masculine gaming culture at large have put the legitimacy of these developments in doubt (Consalvo and Paul 2019). Nowadays, the struggle to redefine games and gaming culture continues, and demands a renunciation of traditional formulations of ‘gamer identity’ (Shaw 2011; Cote 2020; Butt 2022).

The intensifying climate crisis and the increasing struggle of the games industry as a work- and marketplace put further impetuses on gaming communities to change. Some game enthusiasts have already adapted to these circumstances, for example by slowing down the pace at which they consume new releases (Scully-Baker 2024) or in how they reframe their fandom of certain games in increasingly sustainable ways (Lamerichs 2024). These views are diametrically opposed to traditional ideals of technomascularity

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and therefore indicate that the question of sustainable gaming is directly intertwined with the question of redefining gaming culture and its prevalent identities. Therefore, through an analysis of gaming community discourse following the release of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (Nintendo EPD 2023), this study demonstrates how reactionary claims to the effect that the game did not graphically upgrade enough since its prequel *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017) are representative of technomasculine gaming culture through its dismissal of sustainable modes of game design, aligning these perspectives as united in adversity.

Tears of the Kingdom only featured marginal graphical improvement and size, and mostly starred an only slightly altered version of the fictional kingdom of Hyrule (Black 2023). Despite critics universally acclaiming the title, even stressing its creative innovation as a highlight (e.g. Mahardy 2023), the days following its release had some calling out the game for its supposedly lackluster graphics and performance issues – arguing that its console, the Nintendo Switch, was clearly outdated and required a more technologically sophisticated replacement (Byrd 2023).

Among those criticizing *Tears of the Kingdom*'s visuals was *God of War*'s creator David Jaffe, who asserted that “it’s staggering how [*Tears of the Kingdom*] can look like this and not get at least a little dinged by reviews” (David Jaffe 2023), adding a screenshot of the tutorial area of the game. Likewise, some proclaimed *Zelda* fans on the r/zelda subreddit have taken issue with the perceived lack of graphical improvement over seven years of development (BlueMANAHat 2023). The criticism has not remained unnoticed by journalism, either, which has in at least one instance affirmed that the game looks awful, openly admitting that they “can’t help but wish that Nintendo didn’t make hardware at all and that they would release their games on Playstation 5 and Xbox” (GameCentral 2023).

The presence of this kind of criticism among developers, journalists and fan forums shows its broader significance for gaming communities. However, these critiques are not necessarily new – in fact, they can be viewed from the traditional perspective of games as a technomasculine medium that is conservative in its view of equating innovation in game design with upgraded graphics, a view inherently contradictory to the limitations on growth demanded by climate crisis. Nintendo, while historically a thoroughly unsustainable company in an environmental sense (Chang 2019, 150), has stressed efforts not to be sucked into crunch in the development process (Amini 2019), thus diverting somewhat from unsustainable industrial practices by mainstream game developers. *Tears of the Kingdom*'s lack of graphical upgrades can be considered as a sustainable design choice, but it is at odds with the necessities of the technomasculine expectations of new games. The dismissal of sustainable game design can therefore be considered an extension of technomasculine discourse in gaming communities. Future research may consider to what extent counternarratives, such as those employing the Sonic the Hedgehog meme, are accordingly representative of more diverse gaming communities.

BIO

David Harold ten Cate is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre of Queensland University of Technology. His PhD research concerns the interrelations of sustainable game design between aesthetic, industrial and environmental perspectives. By conceptualizing sustainable game design as at once beneficial to communicating environmental themes, the games industry as a work- and marketplace, and limiting the negative environmental impact of games production and consumption, his research negotiates the formulation of an ecological philosophy of game development.

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