

Self-Fashioning in Action: Zelda's Breath of the Wild Vegan Run

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"Hi, my name is Link and I am a Hylian. I am also known as "The Hero of Time". This is because I am the chosen one who explores the virtual world of the Zelda game series as a protagonist, while pursuing an important quest for justice and peace.

I am also a vegan.



Figure 1: The Legend of Zelda – Breath of the Wild (Nintendo, 2017)

This does not only mean that I refuse to eat animal products. In fact, I try to avoid all aspects of speciesism that I encounter during my adventures. I don't kill or bully other creatures, I don't buy any leather or wool clothing items, I don't pick up weapons made of bones, and I don't tame or ride horses. On the other hand, I eat a lot of veggies and I do my best to fight the evil spirit of Ganon.

It's not always easy being vegan. Others often ask me why I don't want to ride horses; they ask me to bring them the bodies of other animals for their own quests; they come up with challenges that would require me to abandon my values; and they try to convince me to hunt or bully other creatures for the sole reason to gain profit or to entertain myself.

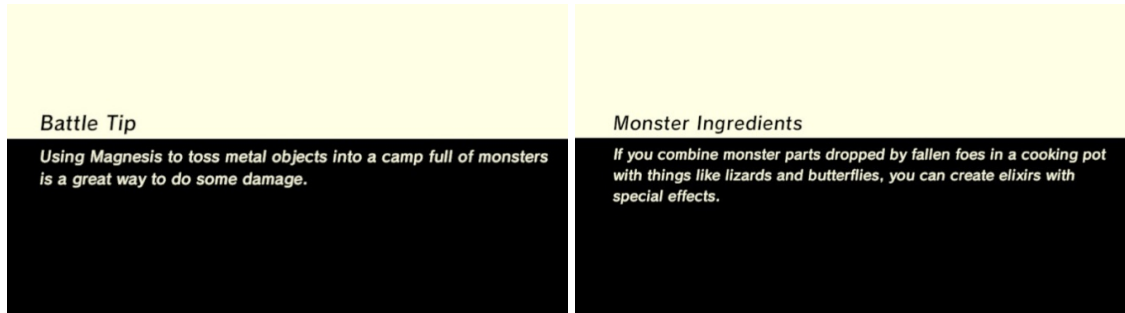


Figure 2: In-game tips

But I won't abandon my vegan lifestyle just because others don't share my ideas about respect towards other living beings in our world. What is the difference really between a Hylian man, a fish, a talking bird, a Gerudo woman, and a centaur?

Self-Fashioning in Virtual Worlds

“There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it” (Foucault, 1985, p. 9). According to, feminist philosopher Ladelles McWhorter, here Foucault makes a gesture towards a philosophical reorientation: an alternative conception of what philosophical work might be (McWhorter, 2004). Instead of a body of doctrine or a set of analytical techniques, a feminist Foucauldian philosophy is a way of living, a creative self-shaping, and a kind of self-transformation that opens towards differing (ibid). In other words, according to McWhorter, philosophical work then, is not about producing truth propositions or intellectual reasoning. Instead, philosophy is understood as an exercise of the self and being (Hadot, 1995; McWhorter, 2004). A kind of self-forming activity that is situated and exercised within life itself.

In his later work, Foucault emphasized the active and critical negotiation with power structures as well as practicing different ways of living with limitations. He aimed to reframe our understanding of concepts like power and freedom not as static limitations but as arbitrary constraints that can be negotiated with and that give us the possibility to continuously reshape ourselves (Foucault, 1988). The methods and practices that could be used for styling or transforming one's self and perform liberating operations on one's own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being were defined by Foucault as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). He hoped that freedom could be obtained through the practice of ‘care for the self’: to give a certain shape or style to one's own life as a form of ethical or aesthetic self-fashioning (Foucault, 1988). In this context, self-fashioning refers to the constant and life-long practice of exerting power over one's own life in order to find a personal sense of freedom. This is done by taking the liberty to impose rules and disciplines over our own lives that shape specific ways of living freely within existing structures of domination and oppression.

One particularly powerful example of this, I find, is the practice of ethically motivated vegetarianism or veganism regarded as Foucauldian self-fashioning (Tanke, 2007; Taylor, 2010). An individual's choice to abstain from consuming animal products (in order to refuse to participate in environmental destruction and/or violence against animals) is a deliberate, critical, and self-oriented decision. Thus, as an effort to liberate one's self from the normalization of animal consumption, the limited freedom to alter one's own dietary practices becomes a powerful tool to stylize a vegan/vegetarian-self within our meat-centered society. As McWhorter emphasizes, these power struggles and creative ways of shaping one's life can never be settled on paper, but can only be resolved in practice, by being enacted, incorporated, and personally lived (McWhorter, 2004).

With regards to the interactive and experiential qualities of games, it is therefore not surprising that several *Philosophy of Computer Games (POCG)* scholars have thus far theorized Foucauldian practices of self-liberation, for example in relation to self-fashioning through expansive gameplay (Parker, 2011) and the design of virtual worlds as a transformative practice (Gualeni, 2014). However, I suggest that the feminist-philosophical approach I am outlining here could offer a different perspective to this discussion.

In this paper, I argue that a more feminist-philosophical take on the topic of Foucauldian self-fashioning in virtual worlds does not concern itself with analyzing the affinities and differences of Foucault's work with gameplay or game design with the purpose of illuminating its connections from a general perspective (Gualeni, 2014, p.6) or to remain skeptical of games' possibilities for self-liberation (Parker, 2011). Although these ideas are highly relevant and valuable in this discussion, they also aim to put forward a passive and generic theoretical answer to the possibility of Foucauldian self-liberation in games. Whereas I suggest that a feminist theorist take on the topic could be more concerned with active, subjective, and individual perspectives raised from specific, experiential, and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Therefore, I wish to focus on the active engagement with (feminist) Foucauldian philosophy in ways that are actualized by specific people, with and within a specific virtual world. In other words, instead of seeking broad understandings that describe what virtual worlds can and cannot do as outlined by Parker and Gualeni, I aim to focus on one particular act of self-fashioning and the practice of discussing this experience with others, specifically by looking at the game: *The Legend of Zelda – Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) (*BOTW*)¹.

¹ I chose to explore this game as a vegan player purely out of personal interest at first. However, many other games could be approached from a vegan angle. Games including *Stardew Valley*, *Skyrim*, *Oregon Trail*, *The Sims*, *Minecraft*, *Fallout*, *Civilization*, and *Dayz*. For each of these games, vegan player communities and expansive playing style discussions can be found online on forums like Reddit and GameFAQs. Therefore, even though this paper takes *BOTW* as an example, its theories and findings could be extended onto a variety of other games as well.

“Indeed, I am the light. I am the chosen one. I am Link, a.k.a. ‘The Hero of Time’. I am here to bring back peace to the world of Hyrule. I will succeed in defeating the evil spirit.”

The more I try to repeat these words out loud to myself every morning, the more I start believing they are true. This is what the woman’s voice must be telling me in my dreams. I am here to restore peace and harmony. My job is to – somehow – convince every single being in Hyrule that we don’t have to kill one another. That we can live together without violence and suffering.

Although I know it will probably take time to destroy the evil spirit, I feel motivated to get started. Loaded up with mushrooms, apples, acorns, carrots, peppers, durians, some sticks, a map of Hyrule, and a bow and arrow (just in case I need to defend myself), I plan my way through dense forests, cold mountains, and warm deserts.

To do what exactly? I don’t know yet. I guess I will find out along the way...”



Figure 3: Link’s inventory of vegan ingredients

Creating Virtual Safe Zones

The first part of this story is one of practicing self-fashioning with my-self (both virtual and actual) through disruption and destabilization (McLaren, 2002) of the default gameplay. This narrative is created through the practice of expansive gameplay: a vegan-run. Similar to speed-runs or pacifist-runs (Parker, 2011), but with a clear focus on improvised decision making that is based on a guiding set of broadly

interpretable values. Veganism is understood here as a general and interpretable ideology, not a strict set of rules. So instead of a predefined set-out challenge (such as “don’t kill anyone” (in the case of pacifist-runs) or “complete the game as fast as possible” (in the case of speed-runs) the game is approached according to values that can be negotiated with. Questions that come up while playing characterize the vegan movement at large and include things like ‘what is considered a living creature?’, ‘when is hurting another creature as a form of self-defense appropriate?’, ‘what should I do if I receive an item that contains animal products as a gift?’. In other words, it requires a constant exploration and willingness to reinvent what it means to be vegan within the specific game-world that is presented to the player.

By embodying Link, my-temporary-self, as a vegan, I construct new images and practice familiarity with my personal stances. In my daily life, it is often very difficult to avoid animal consumption entirely (I might not be fully aware of the ingredients of certain types of food, there might be no adequate vegan options available, or I need to take into account the socio-cultural dimensions of being offered food as somebody’s guest). However, in the world of *BOTW*, those decisions can be made much more rigidly. In other words, now I am the protagonist in my own game and I establish veganism as the new standard to live by. Something that is largely impossible in the actual world where veganism is considered to be far outside of the norm and I am often ridiculed or demanded to explain myself (Westerlaken, 2017).

Since I am bringing feminist theory together with veganism (or Critical Animal Studies as one specific scholarly understanding of vegan practices and ideologies that are rooted within critical theory) it is important to briefly clarify the relationship between feminism and veganism. As Carol J. Adams (as well as many other Critical Animal Studies scholars) wrote: veganism and meat eating are gendered (Adams, 1990). Throughout her book she argues that what we eat is determined by the patriarchal politics of our culture, where meat eating is masculine and vegetable consumption is feminine (ibid). Furthermore, the vast majority of farm animals are female and their media representations are often sexualized and objectified just like those of women (ibid). Also on a more abstract level, the structures of oppression among marginalized groups in terms of gender, race, sexuality, species, and others are intersectional and therefore intertwined and inevitably related to one another (ibid). Therefore, feminist Foucauldian theories and practices of self-fashioning in relation to women’s struggles with power in society are highly relevant and applicable to this discussion of vegan gameplay.

As feminist theorist Margaret A. McLaren wrote, critical practices such as self-writing and autobiography are empowering and political forms of liberating self-care – Foucauldian technologies of the self – specifically for marginalized individuals (2002). I argue that engaging with decision making in fictional

worlds (such as by playing videogames or writing fan-fiction) might add an intense dimension to self-fashioning that provides an empowering safe-space of negotiating political decisions that are perhaps impossible to negotiate with in real life. So empowering, in fact, that it becomes tempting to stay within this self-made safe zone for extended periods of time.

“In the morning, I head out to explore Kakariko town. I try to talk to some of the inhabitants about speciesism, but they all seem busy or uninterested. Then I pass by a small chicken farm. An older man with a tall hat and a white beard is standing in front of the fence. He is covering his face with both hands. He seems upset. I decide to approach him.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I ask.

“My precious Cuccos. They escaped! What do I doooo... AAAARRRRGH!! Please, help me find them and put them back behind the fence”, he says, gasping for air in between words.

“Your chickens escaped? How?” I reply.

“THEY MADE A HOLE IN THE FENCE. I already covered it up again. But 10 of them are gone.”

“Hmm, interesting”, is all I can come up with for now, and I walk away.

I find several of the escaped chickens roam around the village that day, picking up grains from the ground and sleeping peacefully on top of the signposts. Later, when it gets dark, I head back over to the farm. It seems like nobody is around. Quietly, I climb over the fence, carefully pick up each of the chickens that remained in the enclosure and release them in the field behind the farm. This feels so good. I finally feel like I accomplished something. I sleep wonderfully that night.”



Figure 4: The Cucco Quest

Empowerment with and within Virtual Worlds

It is precisely this idea of political empowerment described by McLaren that is, I believe, overlooked by *POCG* scholars that have studied Foucauldian self-liberation. For example, Gualeni talks about how playing and designing virtual worlds are transformational activities that allow for changes in terms of social criticism, training and teaching, ethics, interpersonal relationships, creative thinking, and philosophical inquiry (2014), but remains uncritical of how those changes relate to one's subjectification to power in the real world, once the game is over.

On the other hand, Parker is skeptical about the effectiveness or productiveness of games functioning as practices of self-fashioning, because virtual worlds are too different from real life (2011). He instead proposes that expansive gameplay offers a smaller-scale simulation in which self-fashioning might help to problematize real-world rules and systems and to cultivate the inward and outward-looking critical stance necessary for self-fashioning in real life, or even to provide the illusion of liberty (Parker, 2011).

However, from playing *BOTW* in a vegan run, I experienced an almost opposite (but still related) idea that could add to this discussion: rather than a small-scale simulation of real life, the gameplay offered me an *extra* imaginary space that shapes my relation to power in real life. A space where a vegan utopia or a firm political response towards certain vegan ideologies can be imagined, materialized, strategized, and played out. A space where a marginalized voice can embody a protagonist. And a space where the ability

to negotiate the rules allows for the development of the self-confidence, courage, firmness, experimental attitude, and certainty involved in making in-game decisions, that would be needed to feel empowered in the real world. Is this form of virtual self-fashioning then only an illusion or small-scale playground because it takes place inside a world of fiction? Or can those empowering virtual spaces instead offer the effectiveness and productiveness that is needed to reimagine and negotiate power, but are not (yet) available or granted to those that could use it in real life?

Just how far do you think you would get in Hyrule as a Vegan?

[165 comments](#) [share](#) [save](#) [hide](#) [give gold](#) [report](#)

all 165 comments
sorted by: best ▼

 [-]  **points** 6 months ago

 You could complete it, however how long could your friend go knowing that link is mute and unable to tell anyone he is a vegan?

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **151 points** 6 months ago

 Not sure as I dont think there is any point in being a vegan if you cant tell the world

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **1 point** 6 months ago

 I thought it was strange to learn in this thread that people actually have done "vegan runs", trying to apply their real-life morals to the game. I don't murder people in real life, but if I'm playing GTA you bet there's going to be a body count.

But you know what? That's fine. The best thing about this game is the ability to apply your own playstyle. Nobody's telling anyone else that you HAVE to play vegan. If people choose to, and if people actually enjoy it, more power to them.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [give gold](#)

Date Posted: Mar 12, 2017 #36

I'll be honest that I feel guilty whenever I kill an animal. It's a fucked up thing to do. Also, the way mass slaughtering of animals is handled in the US just pisses me off. Animals are treated like lifeless objects.

 [-]  **1 point** 6 months ago

 Is there a way to get up death mountain while being vegan?

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **2 points** 6 months ago

 just did it. Yup. I just packed a bunch of meals and ran my ass to goron city as fast as I could, then bought the armor with half a heart left. Still vegan.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **1 point** 6 months ago

 You remembered! Good work staying vegan in the hardest part of the game to do so

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Figure 5: Some of the contributions to the online discussions on the *BOTW* vegan run

Feminist Vegan Self-Fashioning

According to Foucault, self-cultivation and individualization happens through formats like care of the self (Foucault, 1986), speaking (confessions and truth-telling) (Foucault, 1988), and self-writing (note keeping and autobiographies) (Foucault, 1983). Similar to how *POCG* scholars (including myself) suggest that the practice of playing games might be looked upon as a contemporary additional form of self-fashioning, McLaren argues for the extension of Foucault's framework with feminist practices such as women's autobiography or consciousness-raising (explained in more detail in the next section), as they are able to connect individual experience with social transformation (McLaren, 2002). McWorther also suggests through her own experiences, that practices such as reading feminist writings and discussing those with others help to realize that, with time and effort, women's corporeal existence could be otherwise than initially handed to her through culture (McWorther, 2004). In other words, these sharing practices connect our alternative (virtual or actual) relations to power with the real world, outside of our imaginations. The online comments on *BOTW* vegan-run strategies seem to exemplify this community value of sharing experiences with like-minded or opposing players, as many commentators share their own individual stances, each of them, commenting on the meanings and implications of this expansive possibility and its relation to the real world (see figure 5). I therefore suggest that this is a crucial part in vegan-feminist practice of expansive gameplay that connects the individual experience of players to the larger socio-cultural dimensions of vegan ideologies in our society.

However, of course this sharing practice also immediately brings back existing power dynamics. Given the gendered social constructs around veganism, it was therefore not surprising to be confronted with the results of the fact that most vegan *BOTW* players seem to identify as women (based on people's names, comments, and statuses such as 'my fiancé', 'my wife', 'my girlfriend') or were regarded upon as 'weak men'. As visible in the online comments in vegan-run discussions, the words that were used to oppose vegan playthroughs are gendered (see figure 6).



We're definitely in the weak men phase.


[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **4 points** 6 months ago

 What about this is "weak"?

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **0 points** 6 months ago

 Everything.


[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-]  **4 points** 6 months ago

 Ok, I'll be more specific. What about being vegan makes someone weak?

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

  **2 points** 7 months ago

 Your wife needs to grow up and start eating dog like the rest of us.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [give gold](#)

Figure 6: Some of the opposing thoughts in the online discussions on the *BOTW* vegan run



From Consciousness-Raising towards Social Change



Looking at all these different types of comments, it seems like this form of self-writing can be considered as “either an exercise in subjection, if it produces the required truth about oneself, or it can be a process of subjectification, if one critically examines how one came to be as one is with reference to normalizing discourses.” (McLaren, 2002, p. 152). In other words, there is no guarantee that expansive gameplay or writing about those experiences could indeed be considered as an exercise of freedom. Nonetheless, they still contribute to individualization and self-constitution of the subject (McLaren, 2002). Next to that, I found that expansive playing and sharing those experiences also allow us to use the practice of self-fashioning as a unique tool to discuss ethical stances with others, either like-minded or opposing people.

McLaren describes the feminist practice of consciousness-raising, meaning creating a space for women to share their individual experiences with one another, as a forum that involves not only self-transformation, but also engages with social and political transformation: a crucial praxis for both feminism and Foucault (McLaren, 2002). Consciousness-raising fosters the self-confidence and empowerment that is needed for action (ibid). However, the aim of consciousness-raising groups as proposed by feminists in the 60s was perhaps much more political and organized than could be assigned to the *BOTW* vegan-run player communities. Originally intended as a way to analyze women’s experiences, to generalize from it, and to develop strategies for political action, consciousness-raising practices generated new non-normalizing and non-institutionalizing ways of living with and relating to one another (McLaren, 2002).

Even though the *BOTW* vegan-run discussions seem much more ad-hoc and tentative, they open up a certain kind of unstructured and non-authoritarian space in which players discuss their experiences and perspectives. I argue that there are some crucial and valuable similarities with feminist consciousness-raising that could contribute to initiating social awareness and transformations from those personal experiences. As exemplified in figure 7, discussing vegan-run experiences and strategies led to different conversations on the topic of what veganism entails and how this form of playing relates to our interactions with animals in real life.

These conversations help to situate one's own vegan practices in relation to other people (both vegan and non-vegan). Furthermore, I argue that they could even function as a nuanced form of animal activism by promoting and detailing a vegan agenda that is emerged within the fictional or hypothetical context of the game, but also includes concepts that extend into the real world. But above anything, these forms of playing and discussing give vegans a personal and active voice that is heard by others and allows them a space for self-individualization and exploration that is not usually granted to vegans in society. Suddenly, regular *BOTW* players want to know the details of my in-game diet, why I avoid horse riding, how I managed to accomplish specific quests, and whether I consider mechanical monsters as sentient or not.

 [-] **4 points** 6 months ago
 Can I just ask about the no riding horses thing? I've just not heard that one before.
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)

 [-] **2 points** 6 months ago
 Sure! Bite Size Vegan has an amazingly informational video on horseback riding (among many other things) if you'd like an in-depth explanation. The short(ish) answer is horses don't consent to being ridden. Consent as in, they don't say, "here human, sit on my back and let's go for a run." It takes time to train them to accept a human on their back, and when horse lovers say they love being ridden, what it usually means is they get excited because they know being ridden means they get to explore new places and run somewhat free. Aside from a consent thing, there is the fact that horses aren't meant to be ridden or to pull heavy objects. It's very, very hard on their bodies. It's standard practice to wait until a horse is 3, I believe, before humans begin riding them, but the truth is that their bones don't fully fuse until they're closer to 7. There are plenty of vegan horse lovers, but they focus more on their horses having as large a pen as possible, have more enrichment toys, etc and take horses on walks the same way you take a dog- with a leash attached to their halter. And we're not against having pet horses, because it's our responsibility to care for domesticated animals, especially the unwanted ones in rescues. Veganism is about minimizing harm toward animals, and not using them for our own enjoyment. Not eating animal products is part of it, but it's really only a side effect of avoiding animal exploitation.
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)



 [-] **2 points** 6 months ago
 That makes a lot of sense. Thanks for the explanation. This comment isn't nearly as long or thought out as yours, though. Haha. I'd never really thought about it that way. Cheers.
[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [give gold](#)



Figure 7: Some of the contributions on the meanings and interpretations of veganism in the online discussions on the *BOTW* vegan run

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to extend the discussion within the *POCG* community on the topic of Foucauldian self-fashioning with a focus on a specific kind of expansive gameplay (a vegan-run) in a specific game (*BOTW*). Building on Foucault, as well as several scholars that were mentioned in this paper, I argue that further inquiry into different forms of self-fashioning (such as playing with and within virtual worlds and generating new narratives from those worlds) constitutes an important step towards social and political transformation. More specifically, I made use of vegan-feminist theory to argue how the practice of expansive gameplay and sharing those experiences could be regarded as self-fashioning tools and offer both empowerment and political action to marginalized individuals. Even though, vegan-run *BOTW* players shift their attention between real life and their fictional character, the examples I provided in this

paper seem to show that their in-game decisions and reflections on those do extend into the real world and even promote awareness and consideration of vegan ways of living.

Nonetheless, we should remain critical towards assigning too much political importance to these playful practices and continue to evaluate how they fit into existing power structures and potential resistance to those. What happens to an individual that receives hateful comments after sharing her experiences? Do fictional spaces that resemble safe zones for marginalized people risk becoming addictive forms of escapism? What is the role of the technologies themselves that are involved with this self-fashioning and transformation (such as the game or online medium that largely determines how (inter)actions are shaped)? How is the practice of feminist consciousness-raising influenced by the textual mediation of online fora that involve anonymity and indirect discussion between community members?

To investigate these questions within the field of practically engaged philosophy, I suggest that, following feminist Foucauldian theory, there is much knowledge to be gained from looking at individual experiences, procedures, and techniques of the self (rather than solely focusing on universal statements or general theory). Coming back to the first part of this paper, I emphasize that philosophy can be seen as an inherently individual and self-forming exercise (McWorther, 2004), whose formats and ways of becoming should not and cannot be dictated or prescribed by others.

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Games

The Legend of Zelda – Breath of the Wild. Nintendo, Nintendo Switch, 2017. (screenshots taken by the author)