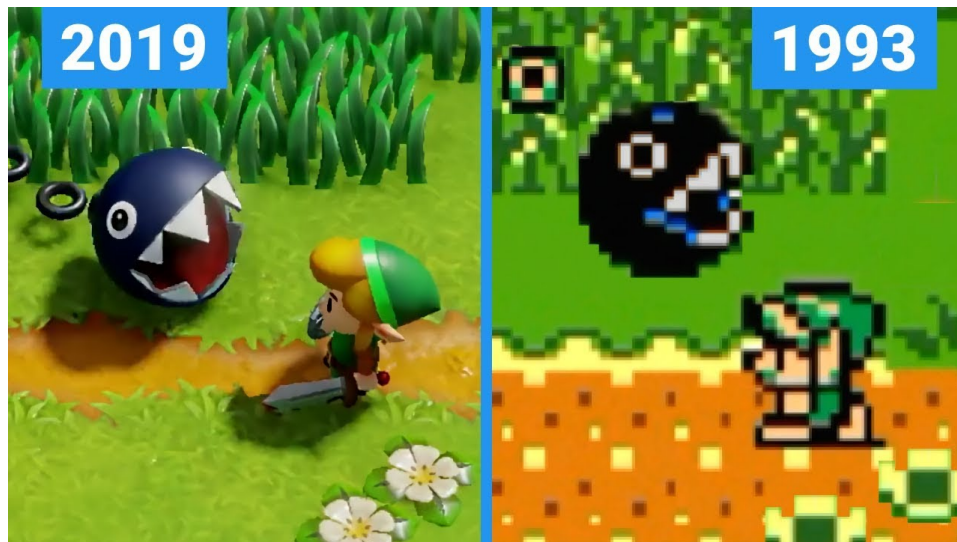


## The Power of Ambiguity

By: Vittorio Corbo

When the remake of *Link's Awakening* was announced there was a sizeable amount of backlash towards the artstyle employed by the remake. The game was criticized for being too childish and cartoony thanks to its toybox-like artstyle. Fans backlashed as the game walked away from what the original was going for. But what was the original game going for?



*Link to the past comparison*

The problem is that due to the nature of a pixelated artstyle, there will never be enough resolution to accurately represent what the artists wanted to create. However, this opens the door for the player to fill in the blank and create their own version of the game. Alike reading a book, each person will imagine the settings and characters very differently. Which is why some are against seeing movie adaptations of books, as the movies are not “as they imagined”.

The key here is that leaving information inconclusive is the essence of what creates art. In Roland Barthes *Death of the Author*, Barthes explains that art requires personal interpretation, as the Author must step away from his piece. Leaving it for the world to then appreciate, and make their own version of the art. As it is through this level of personal interpretation that the reader can reflect on the art, assimilate them to their own struggles, reflecting on them and feeling catharsis. Which if the author had imposed their own view, this layer of reflection, even if it is outside of what the Author wanted, is what makes the art become art in the first place.

The takeaway here is that ambiguity then becomes a tool, not a limitation of the medium, which the author can deliberately alter to either enhance or limit this personal interpretation. A modern example of this is Indie darling platformer: *Celeste*.



*Celeste artwork*

In Celeste, Madeline is tasked on climbing a physical mountain, all while climbing her own metaphorical mountain, as she battles her own: anxiety, depression and gender identity. However, this is not true, the game is not about fighting any of these. The only reason why people believe this is because this was the consensus reviewers and then the general gaming public came to. The game never explicitly states this, leaving the actual issues Madeline is fighting ambiguous. Madeline could be fighting her: escapism, past relationship (romantic or otherwise), insecurity, the mass murdering of a village of puppies, or it could actually also be about anxiety, depression and gender identity. It is all up to the players interpretation.

As someone who has ADHD, Madelines struggle became about fighting my own personal demons of extreme energy and lack of concentration. There is a point in the game in which Madeline presumably has a panic attack. In which she is helped by a character who tells her to focus on her own breathing. She then pictures a feather that rises and falls in match with her breaths. Then the player must use their inputs to steady the feathers movement, calming Maddie down.



*Celeste feather breathing*

This is of course a panic attack. But for me it genuinely was about controlling my ADHD. To control all the random thoughts and hyperactivity and focus on what truly matters. The interesting thing here is that by leaving the problems that Madeline has ambiguous. The player can insert their own problems within the game. Hence, this kind of ambiguity works as a reflective piece of glass. This reflection helps the player reflect upon their own struggles or whatever the designer decides to bounce back towards the player.

On the other side of the spectrum, lies Undertale. Where the player character is a complete blank slate. To the point where the characters: gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and neurodiversity is completely unknown.



*Undertale player character*

The important thing is that these attributes do not matter whatsoever in the telling of the game. The game's story about Humans vs Monsters, the power of determination against all odds, and choosing to solve confrontations peacefully or by murder is completely separate to the player character's identity. Thus by allowing this player character to represent any identity (gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and neurodiversity) the player themselves can more easily put themselves in the character's shoes, in contrast, if they were an otherwise established character. Furthermore, connecting this back to the glass analogy, we see that the glass is transparent. Thus, allowing the player to more easily engage with game, its themes, etc, by seeing past any personal identity that could get in the way.

In the end, we can see that this ambiguity can have two distinct roles when it comes to personal identity. It can help reflect questions about personal identity directly onto the player like in the case of Celeste. Or otherwise, like in Undertale, the player can more easily connect with the game by breaking down any personal identity boundaries that might have existed beforehand.

**Where to go next:**

This reading could be connected to Huizinga's Magic Circle concept. (do more research)