The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time – Timely Flagship for the N64.

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Imagine the year is 1997. You are a (worried) marketing director at Nintendo of America. Why are you worried? You have little market share and system sales are plummeting. Your initial strides into the next generation gaming market were well met (with the help of Mario 64 you sold as many Nintendo 64's in the opening week as Sony sold Playstations in first 13 months). However, software support is currently severely lacking. Sony now has over 100 games for their console. You have a measly 25. Granted, your games are of a higher caliber, but none of them are strong enough to sell a platform by themselves. The Nintendo giant, which is accustomed to commanding the market from above, not begging at its feet, is a sinking ship. There is, however, one small glimmer of hope. You get one chance to save this system – and the name of Nintendo – from disgrace. You need to make a game so engrossing, so revolutionary, so magical that people will buy your entire system just to be able to play it. You are going to make the game of the Millennium, because you have to. You are going to make the fifth game in the second most popular series alive. You are going to make The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

The release of this game (Zelda 64) was not only timely, it was crucial. A below-par game that tried to ride on the shoulders of an icon was not going to solve the Nintendo's problem. The game had to be a winner, and head game designer, Shigeru Miyamoto, knew it. For decades he has been designing smash-hit games (all the Marios and all the Zeldas). Each time Nintendo releases a new system they rely heavily on Miyamoto to produce a new Mario and a new Zelda in order to give the customers the security that there will be at least two phenomenal games for their new system. This pattern has repeated itself for the NES, SNES and N64. Nintendo boxes the system with the newest Mario Bros. and then a little further down the track releases a spectacular Zelda. It worked with the NES, it worked with the SNES (even though Zelda's presence was not vital for the survival of the SNES) and hopefully it would work again with the N64. Mario 64 started the system off to a record-breaking sales pace and now, two years later, Zelda would have to put in a repeat performance.

Not many things were going Nintendo's way at this point in time (1997). They knew they had released a superior system that was capable of handling flashy graphics and high quality games. But their software support was lacking. Nintendo has never been a company that produces mass quantities of average games. Their competition, however, did. The Playstation had almost four times as many games as their N64 which means they catered to a wider audience of gamers. Compound this problem with the devastating blow that Square was leaving Nintendo and would not be producing any more best selling Final Fantasy games for them, but would produce them for the Playstation instead. Square had produced several brilliant Role Playing Games (RPG's) for the SNES including ChronoTrigger, Secret of Mana and Final Fantasy III. Now, however, they claimed that since their games were using more and more full motion video (FMV) they couldn't fit their game onto a cartridge – they needed a CD format, the Playstation. When gamers heard this argument we all nodded our heads, fair enough, they needed the storage space, and RPG fans went out and bought a Playstation in anticipation of Final Fantasy VII (released mid-1997). Square's departure from Nintendo hurt Nintendo's fan base. As gamers we lost a little confidence. The N64 probably wasn't going to have great RPG's, we thought, because it's in cartridge format and the system just isn't good enough to produce great games for.

We were wrong. How were we to know what a 3-D exploration/RPG game was going to be like? And that using programming tricks Miyamoto's team could put it all into a cartridge format? We'd seen 3-D Mario but as Miyamoto says, that game didn't use all of the N64's potential. In contrast: "I think Zelda 64 is utilizing about 90 percent of the N64 potential," says Miyamoto. "When we made Mario 64 we were simply utilizing 60 to 70 percent."[1] The Zelda cartridge is the biggest cartridge ever made at 256-megabits (most games compare at 100-megabits). A quote from an article on project reality addresses the storage problem "Storage will be based on a revolutionary Mega-memory silicon-based cartridge format which will allow the system to access a minimum of 100 megabits of data for each game, which is five to six times the memory of the current 16-bit games. The silicon-based cartridge format will have an access time two million times faster than that of current CD-ROM technology, providing a speed video users have so far only been able to dream about."[2] The N64 may not have been right for Final Fantasy, but it was perfect for a new Zelda.

The next generation console was designed in part through a partnership with Silicon Graphics. It had 64-bit, fast-access graphics, CD-quality sound, and was capable of real-time rendering and awesome anti-aliased graphics at a 'blistering' 93.75 MHz[3]. What this means is that the system was designed for processing polygon-graphics at high speeds, exactly what is necessary to have a real-time interactive 3-D world. But Nintendo had already shown they could give their gamers a 3-D world. How were they going to build on this and show us all what the N64 could really do? They inserted combat. Fighting in three dimensions can be quite a nerve-wracking experience. You have a limited field of view, and an enemy could sneak up from behind you or climb on the roof and drop on you. In 2-D there aren't any surprises – you can see the whole screen. The extra realism of 3-D added so much to the game. The sense of fear and excitement is heightened and freedom for action is simultaneously increased. In general you as a player are tested more thoroughly – how well can you keep track of targets in a 360° field of view? How fast can you turn and aim? Run and jump?

Because of this extra freedom your success in the game better reflects you as a player. And since the vast majority of gamers play games for the challenge, you have a winner in Zelda. Not only does Ocarina of Time make full use of the N64, it uses the entire control pad as well. With the new analog control stick comes better handling and hence better feel. If you need to tip-toe to lean over a ledge you can. If you need to spin and run, you can. With better feel comes finer challenge and more freedom. The Z-button is there for quick access in the heat of battle, the analog stick helps you control direction and speed and the extra C-buttons are used for multiple items. When Nintendo made this Zelda it offered unprecedented character development and room for skill improvement. And while you need to achieve a certain skill level to complete the game, if you want to go beyond the basics and become an expert, you can. The mini-quests in particular are fun ways to test your skill (try shooting an arrow sideways from the back of a galloping horse!).

So what were the game designers thinking when they came up with the game?

In order to understand what was going through the minds of the development team we need to take more than just the pressure situation into account. Pressure wasn't something new to Nintendo staff – in the 16-bit market (SNES/Mega-Drive) they were coming from behind as well, and they knew that with superior game design and careful attention to detail, they could surpass their competitors. So what did they want from Zelda this time? Certainly they wanted the revenues it would bring in, but upon asking Miyamoto it was discovered that they wouldn't be satisfied simply with sales, they wanted the game to be revolutionary. Miyamoto: "While video games have always provided an interactive experience, they have never been truly immersive - until now. New technology creates new opportunities. We can feel the danger and excitement of a main character while he battles an enemy. But with more life-like animations and complete 3-D worlds, for the first time we can also begin to feel the hero's fear, his frustration, his confusion and his elation as he journeys through a 360-degree world in service of his princess." Miyamoto continues: "What I set out to create is an entirely new emotional experience for video game players."[4] And he did.

Right from the beginning of the game we are drawn in by the strong story-line, and awed at the magical world we now have at our fingertips, just waiting to be explored. So we run out the door of our little shack, negotiate a ladder (or we don't see it and fall off instead!) and meet the first non-player character in the game, Saria – a Kokiri Elf. As we soon find out we are in an Elven village where each elf has his or her own personality (like people in a real village would) and their own advice to offer to our brand new gamer. Why am I spending so much time on the opening minutes of the game? Because first impressions last. The minute you start this game your jaw drops as you realize just how special this adventure is going

to be. When you hear water splashing, birds chirping, wolves howling out on the plains, when you feel a rumble in your controller as you are dealt a blow, when you see the sun go down and the moon come up and the color of the sky and your shadow change accordingly you can't help but feel a sense of wonder. Miyamoto: "when we went from 2-D to 3-D it was really exciting … it had a lot of appeal for the customers too, to be able to experience these brand new lush worlds."[5] Hyrule is a world so detailed you feel in a strange way that the game designers care about you. They took the extra time to put all these details in so that you could experience something magical, and as a result you can't help but become (emotionally) drawn into the game.

How else does Miyamoto create the emotional experience he desired? Non-player characters, cinematics and 'old school' sound effects all contribute to drawing us in. The depth of personality and sheer number of NPC's makes the world seem almost real. Through your interactions with the NPC's you begin to care about their fate, and the fate of Hyrule. Furthermore, the world changes directly based on your actions, which gives you a sense of both importance and duty. The music is atmospheric and the sounds effects are also worth noting – many of them are identical to the original Zelda. This rekindles a warm feeling of nostalgia in us. We remember playing the original game and how much pleasure we derived from it (and on the other hand we marvel anew at the game we are now playing and instantly appreciate how much more advanced this version is). Many of the side quests (i.e. finding quarter hearts) have also been retained and they give not only a consistency to the land of Hyrule, but an optional extra level of difficulty or interest, that keeps players hooked on the game long after they have completed it. Re-playability has always been a fundamental tenet of Miyamoto's games and this game was no exception.

Discussing the effect of cinematics warrants its own paragraph. Traditionally Zelda's rival RPG has been the Final Fantasy series (FF). Both games are roughly in the same genre but have some key differences – the main two are combat style and movie sequences. Zelda always had a 'fight for yourself' type interface, whereas FF was more abstract. The way that FF made up for this level of abstraction and drew you into the game was through the high level of realism in its cinematics. Final Fantasy VII was released a year before Ocarina of Time and contained several hours of full-motion video. A cartridge cannot hold this much information. This left Miyamoto with a considerable challenge. How do you create realistic characters without realistic cinematic sequences? In general FMV is used for advancing the plot and giving us insight into the nature of, and the relationships between, characters. Zelda does in fact contain just under an hour of cinematics, but they are not 'realistic' as they are in FF. This lack of realism means that we aren't as emotionally drawn in to what happens – it is easier to say 'that's not real, it never happened'. To counter this effect Miyamoto gives the non-player characters a more in-depth personality during the gameplay. And through the strong story-line and plot, he creates a sense of duty towards saving the characters and defeating the evil Ganondorf.

When Miyamoto was asked about what he hoped Ocarina of Time would achieve, he replied: "We wanted to make a virtual, three-dimensional world that would be a very dynamic place where Link could "live." The story was more of a supplemental element we incorporated into the latter part of the design"[6]. When asked what shaped his vision of what the game should be he responded: "Throughout the Zelda series I've always tried to make players feel like they are in a

kind of miniature garden. So, this time also, my challenge was how to make people feel comfortable and sometimes very scared at the same time."[7] His inspiration? According to an official Zelda website "His inspiration came from the fields, woods, and caves outside Kyoto that he had explored as a boy, and he has always tried to impart this sense of exploration and limitless wonder to players through his Zelda titles."[8]

As a result of this desire the concept of a fully-explorable world which fascinates us and presents us with minute details is carefully incorporated into all the Zelda games. Like a garden, too, the games always contain any number of secrets: hidden treasure, hidden objects, hidden entrances etc. Almost every time we venture into the garden there is something new (and exciting) for us to discover. For many people these extras are what make the game so worthwhile. Once they finish the main quest they can go back and spend hours trying to find all the secrets, and then tell their peers how much they've found. "it's my job to surprise people. [laughs]"[9] says Miyamoto. The sheer depth of world development in this game is what awes everyone who plays, and the players then go and tell their friends what a fabulous game it is. The initial marketing of the game only is responsible for getting a critical mass of games out there. The quality of the game is relied upon to spread the word after its release.

In order to ensure that there would be enough interest in the game on its release date Nintendo did more advertising than it ever had before. TV ads, magazine articles, promotional tours, inside scoops – the lot. You name it and Nintendo did it. Fortunately for them they also got a lot of free advertising via the World Wide Web. The Zelda series has been so exceptionally good that over the years it has built up a terrific fan-base. Thousands of Zelda fans with time on their hands and access to web pages began making predictions on how good the game would be, and speculating on what it might contain. These speculations were augmented by screen shots and information 'leaked' from Nintendo and shown at game expos, and people's imagination of what a 3-D Zelda world could be like, based on their experience with Mario 64. All this extra hype was coming from people very passionate about the game, and coming for free via the web. A good deal for Nintendo.

However, promoting the game was not as easy as I just made it seem. One source from Nintendo stated "The main problem that we've had is, basically, how do we get across simply how good a game it really is. It's so much more than a great looking game."[10] This may seem like a good position to be in, but Nintendo couldn't afford to take any risks and rest on anticipated demand. They had to keep working – this game would make or break their sojourn into the next generation of gaming machines. As a result they poured approximately $10 million into their advertising campaign (their largest campaign for a single title to date) with most of this money going to movie trailers, TV ads and magazine ads[11]. And it worked. They were flooded with pre-orders for the game up to their

maximum tolerance – 350,000 units. They sold out of the special Gold cartridges before the game was even released.

When Nintendo Executive Vice President Peter Main made a bold prediction in early November, 1998 about the "most anticipated videogame in history"[12] he wasn't blowing smoke. "We estimate that the best selling game for any dedicated platform or PC, for all of 1998, will be Zelda 64, by a comfortable margin," he said. "And it will only be on sale for the last 39 days of this year."[13]. Steven Kent, author and historian also commented on the phenomenon: "Based on sales of Zelda 64, I think it gives Nintendo the potential to outsell Sony in hardware for the first Christmas ever."[14] That Christmas Nintendo sold 7.5 million N64's. Sony sold fewer than 3 million Playstations[15].

Even more unbelievable than almost doubling their hardware base was the massive scope of their software sales. The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time sold 6 million copies worldwide by January 12, just 51 days on the shelves[16]. No other game in history has sold so fast (then or since) and the revenue from these sales during the last six weeks of 1998 totaled more than *any* box-office smash Hollywood feature film, a historic landmark in the history of video games. This was no ordinary game. Internationally, In Japan on the release day alone 500,000 copies of the game were sold (5.8 copies per second). As a by-product of the success of the game sales of the N64 system also increased. Holiday season 1997 Nintendo sold 6 million systems, and in 1998 that number increased to 7.5 million (despite the age of the system). Ocarina of Time was so good that people bought the system just to be able to play it.

An aspect of the video game phenomenon that I have not mentioned yet is that of franchise and merchandise. Some of the products Nintendo sold alongside the game include: action figures, coloring books, game-play manuals and strategy guides, t-shirts, hats and other such apparel. The income from these products totals easily over $200 million dollars. All told Ocarina of Time generated over a billion dollars. Not a bad return for a three year project[17].

Money, however, wasn't the sole by-product of Zelda's success. Arguably it wasn't even the most important by-product. The market penetration was the really valuable result of the Christmas season. Now that so many more people have an N64 in their home, Nintendo regains the prestige of its name, and new software developers come knocking on Nintendo's door. No one wants to make a game for the number two system in the console market, they want to make it for the dominant system. It was here that the full impact of Zelda is most evident. The way the game turned the tide of the next-generation console market and re-invigorated interest in the N64 brought in uncountable future interest and profit. Without Ocarina of Time we would probably have seen the end of the N64, almost certainly missed out on a lot of good games since Zelda. It is even possible that the Game Cube might never have been realized. Just as well Nintendo had a game-designing genius up their sleeve.

So where does Nintendo go from here? They have just released a new system – the Game Cube – that broke all the fast-selling records the N64 held. They released a version of Mario (with Luigi as the star) to help the initial launch, and a new and improved Zelda is imminent. However, reports from the Spaceworld 2001 show suggest that the gaming community is divided over the upcoming Zelda. Having caught a glimpse of the cartoony graphics, some gamers worry about

their ability to really get into the game and take it seriously (the whole reason most people play RPG's is for the immersion into another world). In almost every other genre (and especially Zelda's rival series, Final Fantasy) realism is on the increase as better technology makes it possible. Is Nintendo deliberately trying to go the other way to perhaps create a unique experience for gamers? Will the next Zelda be as revolutionary as Ocarina of Time was? Nobody but Shigeru Miyamoto knows. But have faith. He has produced the best before, perhaps he will do it again. We can only hope.

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