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The Secret to Miyamoto's success: An analysis of his early achievements and setbacks

With reference to videogames, most people consider Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of Nintendo's Mario, Zelda and Donkey Kong series, a "genius".<sup>i</sup> Firstly, his designs have achieved unparalleled commercial success. The Guinness Book of World Records proclaims his 1985 creation, Super Mario Brothers, to be the greatest selling game in history. As of 1999, over 40 million copies had been sold, and of the 26 games in the Mario series, 152 million had been sold.<sup>ii</sup> Secondly, Miyamoto's unique imagination has made astounding cultural impacts. Mario has been the focus of a comic book, three popular cartoon shows, and a major motion picture.<sup>iii</sup> Its music has been performed in symphony.<sup>iv</sup> It has appeared on every kid's item from t-shirts to lunchboxes.<sup>v</sup> Miyamoto's ability to create mass appeal has been equated to that of The Beatles and Steven Spielberg.<sup>vi</sup> Fittingly, both Paul McCartney and Spielberg have made pilgrimages to visit the videogame icon in Japan. McCartney even stated that he "wanted to see Miyamoto, not Mount Fuji."<sup>vii</sup> Finally, in the gaming industry his work has provided immeasurable inspiration. Recognizable figures in the videogame arena, such as accomplished designer Jason Rubin, international game company (BPS) head Henk Rodgers, and Director of the 1999 Game Developers Conference Jennifer Pahika, have called Miyamoto a "hero", a "superhero", and a "god".<sup>viii</sup> He was the first person inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Hall of Fame.<sup>ix</sup> Appropriately, it was in an effort to emulate Miyamoto's Super Mario Brothers 3 that videogame legends John Carmack and John Romero made the breakthrough of 'adaptive

tile refreshing' that allowed them to begin their own PC revolution.<sup>x</sup> Thus, Shigeru Miyamoto presents an indispensable element of videogame history, and he has undoubtedly earned the title, genius.

As with any genius, the secrets behind Miyamoto's unmatched achievement merit great attention. These secrets direct companies to search for those certain qualities in future designers, and it drives would-be designers to strengthen these qualities in themselves. Most writers have emphasized Miyamoto's spectacular imagination, developed from early childhood, as the one driving force to his success. This emphasis is justified; Miyamoto's ability to create intricate stories and fantastic worlds laid the foundation for his accomplishments. However, Miyamoto's meticulous attention to details and his sensible tendency to preserve what works also present essential qualities to his success. They perfectly complement his vivid imagination, and have allowed him to produce hit after hit for twenty years. This report chronicles Miyamoto's life, and it specifically focuses on the first and second chapters of the Mario and Zelda sagas to illustrate how the above qualities have each accounted for Miyamoto's successes and setbacks.

David Sheff, author of Game Over: How Nintendo Zapped an American Industry, Captured Your Dollars, and Enslaved Your Children, in his book and in his Rolling Stone article "Mario's Big Brother", records Shigeru's Miyamoto's incredible life. Miyamoto grew up in the small rural town of Sonebe outside Kyoto. In this environment he developed his world-renowned imagination. As a child he spent his time, "fishing in a nearby river, walking on the banks of a sodden rice field, and rolling down hillsides." The household did not own a television. To this day Miyamoto recalls the sliding Shoji

screens of his tiny home and the seemingly “medieval castle’s supply of hidden rooms.” In his youth, Miyamoto made “elaborate puppets, with which he presented in his own fanciful shows”, and later he became obsessed with cartoons, drawing a figure and then inventing its life and personality. In 1970 he entered the Kanazawa Municipal College of Industrial Arts and Crafts. Although he took five years to graduate because he spent much of his time sketching in his notebook, listening to records and playing guitar, Miyamoto learned valuable pragmatic skills that would prove vital in his future success. In 1977, by means of a family connection, Miyamoto met with Nintendo chairman Hiroshi Yamauchi, where Miyamoto showed him designs for children’s coat hangers shaped like animals. Yamauchi liked the boy and hired him as the company’s first staff artist.<sup>xi</sup> In 1980, Yamauchi called on Miyamoto to fix a disastrous coin-operated game called Raderscope. Miyamoto cast aside not only the game’s specific premise of shooting down planes, but also the entire industry’s predilection for ‘shoot-em-up’ games. Instead he created a whimsical story in which a squat, mustachioed carpenter had to climb ramps and ladders to save his girlfriend from an angry ape. Donkey Kong was Nintendo’s first big hit, and it brought the company \$200 million. On his first attempt, Miyamoto had already earned himself a place in the history books.<sup>xii</sup>

In 1984, Yamauchi called on him to do it again for the Famicom. Miyamoto used the same main character from Donkey Kong, who had evolved into a plumber named Mario, to brave the fantastic adventure of Super Mario Bros (1985). Mario must brave various odd creatures through eight levels of differing environments to rescue the Princess from the evil Bowser. It went on to sell more copies than any other game in history.<sup>xiii</sup> Not long afterwards, Miyamoto displayed his magic touch again, dreaming up

the wonderful world of Hyrule, in ‘The Legend of Zelda’ (1987). In it an elf-like boy named Link must explore an enormous map, collect items, fight monsters, receive advice, and eventually conquer nine dungeons to restore the Triforce and rescue the princess Zelda. The series would go on to sell more than 30 million copies.<sup>xiv</sup> Miyamoto’s place in the history books had just expanded from an entry to an entire chapter.

Considering both his life and these initial masterpieces, one recognizes why writers have almost exclusively focused on Miyamoto’s sensational creativity. In his early years he represented the quintessential dreamer, who as a child loved to explore and create, and who as a student neglected his studies in favor of cartoon sketches and bluegrass music. The childhood adventures would serve to inspire the adult creations. Sheff tells a story in which the young Miyamoto caught a “bony, grotesque, little fish with snapping jaws.” He relates how this monstrous image that Miyamoto had perceived as a child would later appear in Mario’s adventures.<sup>xv</sup> Many people have also cited Miyamoto’s own claim that a mysterious cave that he encountered as a child, and the sliding Shoji screens of his tiny home, inspired elements of his works.<sup>xvi</sup> From these elements, one cannot help but imagine Miyamoto as a wide-eyed dreamer whose mind constantly occupies other, magnificent worlds.

Furthermore, Miyamoto’s initial creations particularly highlighted his extraordinary imagination over his other talents. As Sheff retells it, when Miyamoto was assigned to head the new division of Nintendo, R&D 4, he was given one mission, “to come up with the most imaginative video games ever.”<sup>xvii</sup> He did precisely that. Super Mario Bros. and ‘The Legend of Zelda’ presented universes whose wonder and complexity were unprecedented. They contained such bizarre creatures as flying turtles,

fire spewing plants, and multiplying blobs. They constantly stimulated the player with new and mysterious realms such as perilous dungeons, endless caverns and transporting sewer pipes. All together, they thrilled gamers, prompting them to have said since that Super Mario Bros. was the “the first true video game” or that ‘The Legend of Zelda’ was “like nothing we had ever seen before.”<sup>xviii</sup> Indeed, Super Mario Bros. and ‘The Legend of Zelda’ completely transformed the videogame picture, and Shigeru’s Miyamoto’s creativity deserved the credit.

Nevertheless, one should recognize Miyamoto’s other qualities that contributed to the titles’ enormous success. For one thing, despite his deviation from ‘shoot-em-up’ games, Miyamoto realized the importance of maintaining similarities with previous hits. He reused Mario from Donkey Kong, a sign to new players that some of the same rules would apply and definitely the same ingenuity would appear in Super Mario Bros. More significantly, he used the Donkey Kong’s same “platform” style, in which characters much smaller than the screen jump to and navigate different planes.<sup>xix</sup> In ‘The Legend of Zelda’, Miyamoto repeated the theme of entering and conquering dungeons, allowing one to quickly grasp the goal of the game. So although these two games offered exciting diversions from the gaming norms, Miyamoto was sure to include recognizable features that comforted players.

In addition, Miyamoto also demonstrated his uncanny knack for game details. In ‘The Legend of Zelda’, the placement and frequency of rewards in the form of items, heart containers, hidden caves, and Triforce pieces seemed perfect. In Super Mario Bros. the amount of pipes you could warp travel through, and the discovery of surprises like beanstalks illustrated similar attention to detail. Miyamoto seemed to have an instinctual

appreciation for elements such as “varying reinforcement” that psychologists like Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus have found to be essential to game success.<sup>xx</sup> This inclination for game details also emerged in the controls for the two titles. Many fans cite the controls of the original Super Mario Bros. as their favorite part of the game, labeling them as “ultra responsive” or “the epitome of simplicity and perfection.”<sup>xxi</sup> Equal enthusiasm has been shown toward the Zelda gameplay which allowed one to easily explore and slash enemies.<sup>xxii</sup> Additionally, users have shown appreciation for the graphics in both games, a testament to Miyamoto’s ability to work within his limitations as he did with Donkey Kong.<sup>xxiii</sup> Thus, Miyamoto’s game instincts and attention to detail played a vital role in maintaining players’ interests and allowing them to appreciate the magnificent overall picture.

Finally, a point should be made concerning Miyamoto’s revered creativity. Understandably, an aura has grown around it, and many perceive Miyamoto as a genius who pulls his fantastic ideas out of thin air. According to Sheff, another designer has even proposed that as a left-handed person, Miyamoto’s possesses a different sort of visionary mind.<sup>xxiv</sup> Miyamoto has promoted this dreamer image with comments like, “It is difficult for my mind not to wander to other worlds. It is only destiny.”<sup>xxv</sup> However, despite this picture, Miyamoto has adapted many of his ideas from popular influences. He derived the warp zones and mushrooms from Super Mario Bros. from Star Trek and Alice in Wonderland.<sup>xxvi</sup> Indeed, several internet sites claim that Miyamoto freely admitted to getting the storyline for ‘The Legend of Zelda’ from the 1985 movie ‘Legend’ starring Tom Cruise.<sup>xxvii</sup> Furthermore, these examples should not be considered as faults in Miyamoto’s creativity. This presence and awareness of reality, rather than an

absence in fantasy, has allowed Miyamoto to introduce features that players will enjoy. Like the features he holds over into new games, these popular images come with an existing understanding.

Thus, through a deeper look at Miyamoto's initial triumphs, *Super Mario Bros.* and 'The Legend of Zelda', one realizes that although his brilliant imagination may have played the biggest part in the games' success, his abilities to reuse successful elements, to perfect details, and to incorporate elements of popular culture also made important contributions.

However, the strongest argument for the importance of these elements in Miyamoto's designs emerges not from an analysis of these games' strengths but from their successors' weaknesses.

In 1988, Nintendo released in America the sequels to both of Miyamoto's masterpieces, *Super Mario Bros. 2* and *The Adventures of Link*.<sup>xxviii</sup> In *Super Mario Bros. 2*, Mario is trapped in Dream World, and he must travel across several levels to defeat the evil Wart and rescue the Subcons. The game contained several new features including the ability to pick up and throw enemies as opposed to stomping them, and the choice of four characters, each with distinct characteristics.<sup>xxix</sup> In *The Adventures of Link*, Link must once again rescue Zelda and Hyrule by restoring six statues and then obtaining the Triforce of Courage. The greatest variations appeared in the game format, which took on an RPG feel. Link travels across the map from a bird's eye view, but battles and dungeons are played from a side scrolling perspective. Furthermore he collects magic and experience points throughout his way.<sup>xxx</sup> Both of these titles represented disappointments after their acclaimed predecessors.

They sold well, but they did not sell compared to either their predecessors or successors, a sure sign of underachievement.<sup>xxxii</sup> More importantly, even huge fans of the sagas have shown real disdain for these installments. One fan wrote that it would have been better if Super Mario Bros. 2 had fallen into obscurity rather than be used as a launch title for Game Boy Advance.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Several fans have remarked on how much they disliked The Adventures of Link, leading the review on [www.gamerslogik.com](http://www.gamerslogik.com) to say that supporters of the title “are few and far between.” Of course websites also exist praising these titles. However, this simply demonstrates their loyalty, and it should be noted that they never seem to place it at the same level as other titles in the series. Basically, if devout fans are capable of voicing such disapproval, one should imagine what the average player may have thought. This leads one to wonder what aspects of these games caused them to fall short of expectations. In determining, this one might gain more insight into the essentials of Miyamoto’s designing prowess.

The disappointment of Super Mario Bros. 2 should be qualified. The original Super Mario Bros. 2 was not released in America. Instead Nintendo altered a game called ‘Dream Factor: Doki Doki Panic’ to be the replacement<sup>xxxiii</sup>. It is unclear how much they changed the game, but it does appear from Sheff’s narration and from [www.miyamotoshrine.com](http://www.miyamotoshrine.com) that Miyamoto played some role in the design and bears the title of producer. Nevertheless, his probable absence in the first development of the game presents a key point. Although he could implement some of his large, imaginative visions, he could not muddle with the base level elements that were already in place.

Super Mario Bros. 2 does not lack any creativity. The desert to arctic landscapes, coupled with the dinosaur, rat, and crab bosses exude imagination. Rather it appears to be the other elements of Miyamoto's design that are lacking.

For one thing, this game diverges too much from its predecessors. Miyamoto did not (or could not) include the elements from the original that were successful. Many fans complained about the change from stomping and smashing things to throwing them. They also complained about the change in game controls. As one critical fan simply wrote, "I never liked how [Mario] controlled in SMB2."<sup>xxxiv</sup> These changes in the game very well may have accounted for its underachievement. As author David Sheff wrote, the delight of 'Super Mario 3', came from the "many new lands and new tricks," along with the "comfort of not having to learn a game from scratch."<sup>xxxv</sup> Furthermore, few critical reviews cite the characters, the landscape or the storyline as a source of disappointment. And so it seems that it may have been Miyamoto's attention to details and feeling for what to keep, rather than his imagination, that played the largest role in this title's shortcomings.

The Adventures of Link seems to tell the same tale. The storyline is compelling, and Hyrule is just as big. One gamer who gave the story particularly harsh reviews even said "at least it kept the story going, and brought back some nostalgia."<sup>xxxvi</sup> There are also interesting additions to the enemies such as Lowders, beetles that crawl across the floor and Moa, which can only be seen after Link finds the Cross.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, it is the deviations from the original that seem to infuriate players. One fan said that he had "a fit when he saw how bad it was," and he "wondered how this game could be related to the game I played two years ago."<sup>xxxviii</sup> They note how the RPG style and the forced

interactions through the side scrolling screen limited the exploration that was part of the first. The other major complaints concerned the details. Almost unanimously, fans determined it to be too hard. They also criticized the graphics, and the “annoying sound” Link makes when he gets hurt.<sup>xxxix</sup> These faults imply a lack of perfected details that contributed greatly to the first title. Indeed, in this example, it also seems that disappointment did not derive from a fall in creativity but rather a lapse in the aspects of maintaining continuity with predecessors and perfection of game details.

Reasons for these lapses are not clear. In the case of Super Mario Bros. 2, Miyamoto simply may not have had the time or resources to change and perfect the details of the game that led to disappointment. In the case of The Adventures of Link, Miyamoto may have been sucked in by the success of other RPG titles such as the ‘Final Fantasy’ series. Regardless of why they occurred, the important point emerges from realizing that these aspects of detail and series-continuity could account for serious faults in Miyamoto’s designs. Analyzing Super Mario Bros. and ‘The Legend of Zelda’, one could see how these components perfectly complemented Miyamoto’s amazing creativity. Looking at the predecessors of these triumphs, one could see how their absence severely hindered the impact of his imagination. Thus, although Miyamoto should be hailed as a creative visionary, it is his meticulous attention and savvy reuse of proven elements that truly set him apart from other designers.

Bearing this in mind, one might make an interesting conclusion about Nintendo’s management of Miyamoto and the company’s failure to put out a great title since ‘Ocarina of Time’ (possibly ‘Mario Sunshine’). As Miyamoto has risen in Nintendo’s ranks, and has joined the Board of Directors, he has begun to oversee more and more

games have less time to dedicate to one.<sup>x1</sup> The result of this is that he is able to apply his extraordinary vision but not his uncanny feeling for game details. Perhaps Nintendo should narrow his responsibilities and dedicate him to one project. Allow the master to make a masterpiece.

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[www.ganonstower.com](http://www.ganonstower.com)

Page dedicated to Zelda series, copies sold, date released etc

[www.the-nintendo-nation.com](http://www.the-nintendo-nation.com)

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*Profile of Miyamoto [Jeton Grajqevci](#)*

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<sup>i</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 364

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> Gliatto 129, Leonard, 137 - there was also a Zelda cartoon show,

<sup>iv</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 55

<sup>v</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 192-193

<sup>vi</sup> Sheff Game Over, 50

<sup>vii</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 55, Jackson 53

<sup>viii</sup> Gaither G6, Gliatto 129, King 2

<sup>ix</sup> Kushner 294-295

<sup>x</sup> Kushner, 48-52

<sup>xi</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 46-47

<sup>xii</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 44-51, Sheff, “Mario’s Big Brother” 45-46 - all the facts in this paragraph

<sup>xiii</sup> [www.guinnessworldrecords.com](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com), [www.mobygames.com](http://www.mobygames.com)

<sup>xiv</sup> [www.the-nintendo-nation.com](http://www.the-nintendo-nation.com) and [www.ganonstower.com](http://www.ganonstower.com) agree on the numbers for each game.

<sup>xv</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 52

<sup>xvi</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 52, Sheff, King 2, <http://www.miyamotoshrine.com/theman/bio/>, [www.nintendoland.com](http://www.nintendoland.com) <http://www.z64planet.com/features.php?page=featureaboutzelda> – these all reference the cave story which seems to be quite popular

<sup>xvii</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 49

<sup>xviii</sup> [www.gamerslogik.com](http://www.gamerslogik.com), <http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/nes/review/R69815.html>

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<sup>xxiii</sup> [http://www.emucamp.com/jagsvgz/systems/nes/reviews/games/the\\_legend\\_of\\_zelda.html](http://www.emucamp.com/jagsvgz/systems/nes/reviews/games/the_legend_of_zelda.html), <http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/nes/review/R69815.html>. Both of these reviews complement the graphics of the two games. Sheff, 47-48 – Regarding Miyamoto’s pragmatic design of Mario in Donkey Kong

<sup>xxiv</sup> Sheff, “Mario’s Big Brother”, 46

<sup>xxv</sup> Sheff, “Mario’s Big Brother”, 46

<sup>xxvi</sup> Sheff, Game Over, 51

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