

## Cultural Transcendence with The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

For two weeks it had me. During the day, it consumed all my attention and inhibited any superfluous activity. Food was of no concern in the land of Hyrule and never once did Link heed to the call of nature, thus, neither did I. At night, just as my Hylian friend, I dreamed of the future perils that lay on my journey to save the land I had come to love. Thus, for 2 weeks I lived the life of a legend; I lived The Legend of Zelda.

Between the time of its American release in November of 1998 and September of 1999, 7.17 million people in Japan and America grabbed The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time off the shelves.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, despite dissimilar market tastes, Ocarina of Time conquered both sides of the Pacific Ocean with sales of 1.45 million in Japan and 5.72 million in America.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of Western game development and its increasing attentive to the wants Western culture, Japanese developers have slowly fallen out of the top ten lists in the West. However, the international success of the Japanese developed Ocarina of Time is rooted in its intercultural appeal to both Japanese and Western thoughts through its fundamental offering: the ability to play as both young and adult Link in your efforts to rid Hyrule of the forces of evil.

### **Dissimilar Markets**

Console games sales have been historically dominated by Japanese developers. In 1999, 13 of the 27 games nominated for the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences' console specific Interactive Achievement Awards were of Japanese origin.<sup>3</sup> However, since then, the tides have shifted towards Western dominance. In 2004, only 16 of the 68 games nominated for Interactive Achievement Awards were Japanese.<sup>4</sup> The jury is still

out on exactly what plagues the Japanese game development community, but many have pointed to a lack of collaboration between developers, an disjoint development community, and Japan's sluggish economy. But even with the Western development community growing to fill in the gaps left by the Japanese industry, a glaring problem remains: the asynchronous sales of western titles in Japan and vice versa.

Since 1996, less than 20 western games have broken into the annual bestsellers lists in Japan (three of which are in the Crash Bandicoot Series).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Japanese titles have gone from near dominance in the West during the Nintendo era, to seven of the top ten bestsellers in 1999<sup>6</sup>, and to 4 games among the top ten bestsellers in 2003.<sup>7</sup> Hence, while the inroads into the Western market continue to slim for Japanese developers, Western developers have still yet to succeed in the Japanese market. For example, of the critically acclaimed Grand Theft Auto: III's 10.5 million copies sold, only 300 thousand of these were in Japan (making it the 32<sup>nd</sup> best seller in Japan in 2003).<sup>8</sup> While software sales have slumped in Japan for a number of reasons, the general lack of Western penetration into the Japanese market combined can at least be partially attributed to the differences across the bestsellers lists in both markets: American games have become dominated by realistic visuals and mature content while Japanese games largely reside in the realm of fantasy and fiction. However, cross-market success is attainable as Nintendo, a successful publisher in both markets, has managed to span these differences with their own seemingly childish mix of fantasy, fiction, and fun.

## **The Common Market Denominator**

Nintendo has existed for over 100 years in Japan with its hands in everything from toys and videogames, to playing cards and prostitution.<sup>9</sup> However, its namesake in the Western market has been restricted to the domains of children's play. And, since the early '90s and the maturation of the video games industry and its audiences, Nintendo has garnered the negative connotations of the immaturity and naivety of child's play.

Sega of America's first attempts in the early '90s with its Sega Genesis heralded a system that "does what Nintendon't." Its main character, Sonic, was the fast, bad ass hedgehog that didn't wait for anybody.<sup>10</sup> And, the aggressive "SE-GA!!!" scream punctuated the play of kids across America.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, with the aid of Nintendo's cartoony graphics and its sanitation guidelines for games like Mortal Kombat and, later, Duke Nukem3D, Sega has, seemingly, forever solidified Nintendo's position as the console for kiddies

Despite Nintendo's efforts through aggressive advertising, and larger a number of mature titles, the truth is that Nintendo still puts a preponderance of children's imagery and motifs in its games; their graphics, sounds, and themes fall inline directly with America's preconceived notions of child's play. However, many of these games are still bestsellers (i.e. Ocarina of Time) in both the Japanese and American markets. And, their success is rooted in meeting the cultural mores of both.

## **Dissimilar Cultures**

The different demands of the Japanese and American markets are products of their differing cultural histories, attitudes, and memes. A comprehensive comparison on

how the different aspects of each culture influence the manners and modes of Japanese and American gaming communities is far out of the scope of a paper such as this.

However, as gaming demographics in America show that 78% of consoles gamers are 35 years old or younger<sup>12</sup>, youth culture is the subset of national culture that most directly shapes the attitudes of gamers.

The first exports of Japanese culture in America came in the emotionless technological wave in the 80's. However, since that time, other, more telling, cultural indicators have leaked over in the Japanization of America.<sup>13</sup> Of particular note, is anime. More specifically, the preponderance of anime and its mix of animation—both child-like and sophisticated—with often times complex and mature narratives in Japanese popular culture suggests a breaking of the shackles that tie theme and presentation in America. Aside from the successes of *The Simpsons* and other such cartoon sitcoms, animation, especially soft children's animation, is tied with simple, childish themes in American culture; even the cinematic versions of comic books are often live action. However, the unfettered relationship of theme and presentation, particularly childlike presentation, in Japan lies deeper within a cultural movement of the 1970s, '80s and '90s.

The *kawaii*, or cute, style was a return to childlike fantasies; “it [celebrated] sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances.”<sup>14</sup> In the 1970s, the cute culture initially expressed itself in a style of kanji writing that incorporated English words like “friend” and “love” along with random cartoon illustrations (i.e. hearts and faces). As the culture gained momentum, children and teenagers alike infantilized the pronunciations of words. Manufacturers crafted new “cute” characters and plastered

them on everything from pink toasters to school stationery that exclaimed, “OK! You're in (sic) my team. Let's have fun together!”<sup>15</sup> These characters, with Hello Kitty! as the most renown, were “small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (arms), without bodily orifices (mouths), non-sexual, mute, insecure, helpless or bewildered.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, fashion designers and magazines pushed new products that “were designed to make the wearer appear childlike and demure. Original cute clothes were simple white, pink and pastel shades for women and more sort of bright and rainbow coloured for men.”<sup>17</sup> Yes, that’s right, men were participants in this cute craze. While this behavior is historically inconceivable in America with its given notions of gender conduct, in Japan

“Young men do not represent freedom in the same way, and in their role as subservient company employees neither do they embody any of the characteristics of the powerful, antagonistic, macho individualism of the male in Western societies and their youth cultures....There is no strong pattern of thought which links adulthood with individual emancipation in Japan. Maturity, which in the West has been linked to the authority and rights of the individual, still tends to be thought of according to the Confucian model in modern Japan. That is maturity is commonly thought of as the ability to cooperate well in a group, accept compromises, fulfill obligations to parents, employers etc., and carry out social responsibilities... For many young men cute fashion [represented] freedom and an escape from the pressure of social expectations and regulations.”<sup>18</sup>

As a result, the culture of cute embodies both the inherent differences in thoughts on maturity and, hence, the contextualization of children’s imagery in both Japanese and Western cultures. Thus, in Japanese culture, “cute” or the lack of maturity and exaggeration of childish memes was/is an equal, if not preferred way of presentation. For many who grew up with this popular notion and now play or even develop games, children’s imagery represents the same freedom and empowerment that masculine and mature adult themes represent in Western culture. Hence, the abundance of childlike,

fantasy games and gritty, realistic titles in the Japanese and American markets, respectively, is at least in part a reflection of these cultural dichotomies. And, hence, the perceived childishness of Nintendo in Western markets along with habitual the placement of such imagery by the Japanese company is expected. However, for Nintendo to succeed in both territories, it must bridge the gap between Japan's "children" and America's "adults."

### **The Game**

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time is one of Shigeru Miyamoto's many creations. Miyamoto has been the main creative force behind most of Nintendo's masterpieces for the past 20 years. His experience ranges from the original Donkey Kong in 1984, to The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker in 2004. And, within that time he has developed six of the top ten best-selling console games of all time.<sup>19</sup> But in his interviews, the humble Miyamoto doesn't put forth academic notions on game design philosophy. Rather his motivation has been to create games that are pure fun; his technique is to "exaggerate what [he experiences] and [sees];" and his inspiration has been the forests, lakes, fields and gardens of his childhood.<sup>20</sup>

The land of Hyrule (the setting of Ocarina of Time along with the other games in Legend of Zelda series) is the ultimate exaggerated manifestation of Miyamoto's childhood world. Hyrule has grassy fields, expansive deserts, villages, rivers, mountains, forests, and a castle. And our young pal, Link must set out on an epic adventure that spans not only space, but also time, to save Hyrule from Gannon's evil clutches. Hyrule's massive and interactive landscape bring this sense of spatial expansiveness to

the journey, while the Temple of Time allows Link to jump forward and back through seven years of his life from a child to an adult. With this added dimension of time, OoT transforms into narrative of Link's exploration and conquest of age and maturity that must satisfy the expectations of its Japanese and American players.

As a consequence of the computer game as a medium, our spatial and temporal narrative also progresses through at least three relevant veins: graphics, game play, theme. Graphically, Ocarina of Time provides a setting that looks much more realistic than other N64 games, such as Mario 64, but at the same it creates a virtual fantasy world. Since Hyrule has every geographical feature, from mountains to valleys, players aren't required to identify with particular landscapes: Hyrule could be anywhere. Moreover, the combination of Hyrule's general accessibility and its exaggerated features means one doesn't have to make cross-cultural leaps to dive into its fantasy.

With respect to characterization, technology, to some extent, limits the ability of developers to create dynamic characters.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Ocarina of Time's varied characterization is better defined in its official Nintendo Player's Guide, which was produced with the help of Miyamoto and his staff, than the game itself. Within its pages, Hyrule can exist without the limitations of polygons or fill rates. And, as a result, we see several varied illustrations of Link and his surroundings. One sequence of full page illustrations visually narrates Link's maturation and hints at a Western and Japanese confluence of design.

The first image draws a short, stubby, and rounded Link standing agape in front of the large Deku Tree who has called him to his first journey as a young boy<sup>22</sup>. The second image shows a still round and relatively young Link, as he heaves the Master Sword from

the Pedestal of Time, in the Temple of Time, at the instant before he becomes an adult. But, Link also looks noticeably older in his stature and, also, light engulfs the Pedestal in an anime-esque style.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, the final picture shows an adult Link, with sharp lines, dark colors and a rigid physique.<sup>24</sup> The darkening of tones and colors and the sharpening of lines and facial features, highlight the aging of Link over his journey. Doubly, the clear contrasts between the first and last illustrations of Link are symbolic of the contrasts in Japanese and Western tastes. As Stuart Roch illustrated in a case study on his company's localization of their game *Wild 9* to the Japanese market, the difference between Japanese and Western artistic preferences is a "cultural and historically conditioned affinity." In the American version of the game, the characters were depicted in the gritty, dark realism that abounds in American titles, while the Japanese version required a complete artistic change to a softer, rounder anime style characterization.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, it is through its dual time periods *OoT* can engage Japanese gamers with the hokey characterizations of young Link and Hyrule's other inhabitants along while captivating an American audience with a darkened mature presence in battle scenes and dungeons.

Game play seems like the single fundamental aspect of a game that would be standard across all markets. However, many developers have noted that Japanese gamers seek simpler and, oftentimes, easier game play than their American counterparts.<sup>26</sup> *Ocarina of Time* distributes the difficulty across time periods. Link's young period consists mainly of exploration and simple minded enemies. On the other end of the spectrum, adult Link faces enemies, like the Stalfos and the Gerudo Warriors, that have responsive A.I. and the later dungeons, such as the Water Temple, pose significantly more challenging puzzles.

The one vein within which Ocarina of Time succeeds universally, perhaps indicating the portability of the human experience, is theme. Our narrative is, at its heart the, story of Link's progression from a child to a man. In the beginning, we see references to the struggle of youth with identity as Link is the only child in the Kokiri Forest to be without a guardian fair (until he is given the Fairy Navi). Additionally, the bulk of the journey as young Link consists of mental, social and spatial exploration. In Kokiri Forest, several Kokiri children teach you the ways to navigate in Hyrule. Also, one Kokiri child, with king of the mountain playground bravado, can't believe that Link was summoned, over himself, by the Deku Tree to wield the Kokiri Sword. In the many lands that you explore outside of Kokiri Forest, the social interaction transforms into information gathering and social networking as some of people you befriend as a child return to your aid in your adult future.

As an adult, the themes and settings mature as the landscape of Hyrule darkens. Link must cope with the reality of death as all the towns around him have been overrun with the ReDead and the once colorful fields and forests have been invaded by monsters. This theme is even further continued with a small level in a graveyard. Beyond death, Ocarina of Time also deals with gender roles. While the stereotypical damsel in distress scenario does eventually happen towards the end of the game, OoT also incorporates an element of female empowerment and gender play. In Link's adult life, he encounters a young male warrior, Sheik, who aids Link by providing various knowledge. However, later it is revealed to be Princess Zelda

## **The End**

In the end, Ocarina of Time isn't alone in its cross-cultural success. In truth, many Nintendo games succeed in both the Japanese and Western markets just by the one element that unites them all: solid and fun game play. However, Ocarina of Time is unique in that it provides a clear mechanism by which it can appeal on multiple levels. But, with the growing divergence of the Japanese and Western markets, and each market's culturally ingrained content preferences, Ocarina of Time also shows that if a game simply can't appeal on multiple levels, it can still cater to the universal motifs of the human experience.

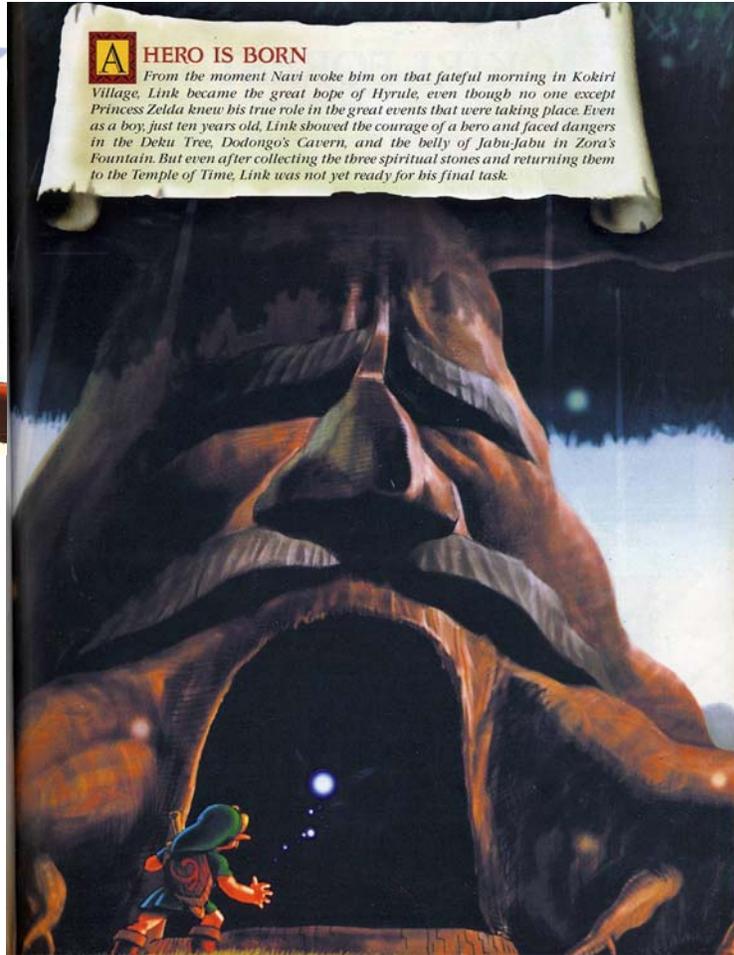


Figure 1

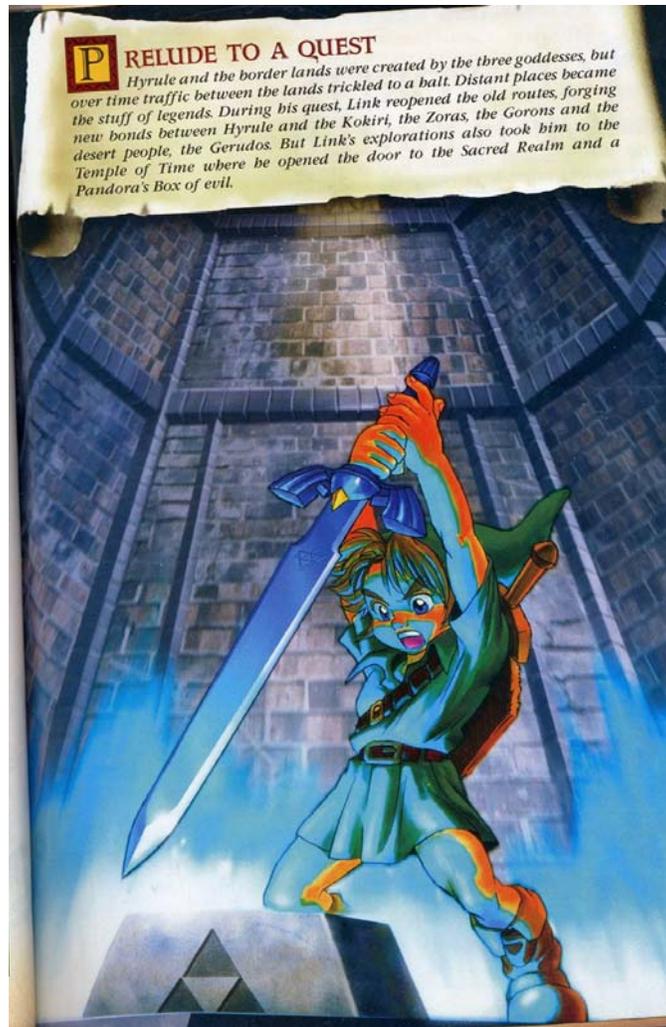


Figure 2

## **H**IDDEN IN HYRULE

*Although the defeat of Ganondorf was forever on Link's mind, his course took him down many paths. The land of Hyrule was full of mysteries, like the strange mask and trading games, or the Magic Beans that could be planted all over the kingdom. Of even greater importance was the location of the hidden Great Fairy's Fountains, the Heart Pieces and the cursed Skulltula. Link spent long hours searching for these treasures and completing these tasks. Many times he wished that he had a magical book that showed him exactly where to look.*



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

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<sup>1</sup> IGN. Japan vs. US sales.

<sup>2</sup> IGN. Japan vs. US sales.

<sup>3</sup> The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, The Interactive Achievement Awards.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> The-magicbox.com. Console Bestsellers lists from 1996-2003.

<sup>6</sup> IGN. Final Figures (Consoles sales for 1999)

<sup>7</sup> NPD Funworld. Annual 2003 Video Game Best-Selling Titles,.

<sup>8</sup> IGN. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas Announced. IGN.

<sup>9</sup> Sheff, 20

<sup>10</sup> Sonic was known cross his arms, grimace and impatiently tap his feet when a player paused for a given amount of time in a game.

<sup>11</sup> Eddy and Sheff, 460

<sup>12</sup> ESA, Demographic Information,.

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<sup>13</sup> Kinsella. Japanization of European Youth

<sup>14</sup> Kinsella. Cuties in Japan

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Borow

<sup>20</sup> Sheff, 44-51

<sup>21</sup> Jimenez

<sup>22</sup> Figure 1

<sup>23</sup> Figure 2

<sup>24</sup> Figure 3

<sup>25</sup> Figure 4

<sup>26</sup> Roch