



Who needs Mario?



In a weird way, it's almost unfortunate that Shigeru Miyamoto, often credited as the genius in the field of game design, is the designer of The Legend of Zelda. As talented as he is, his other games often over-shadow Zelda and its sequels. Zelda games have set sales records on multiple different console systems, yet it is for his other works, particularly those set in the Mario Bros. universe, that he is best known. Despite the fact that many game critics consider one of more recent Zelda offerings, *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* to be the best game ever created, even more consider it merely the second best--second to Mario 64 of course.



How can the legend that is The Legend of Zelda compete with the juggernaut that is the mustachioed Italian plumber? Why is it that David Sheff gives his book *Game Over* the secondary title *The Maturing of Mario* and not *The Maturing of Link*? Why has Nintendo become so synonymous with Mario Bros., but not nearly to the same degree with The Legend of Zelda?

Yes, Zelda is nonetheless still very popular, and has of late become even more so, but it still has not reached the cultural icon status of Mario.

I argue that Zelda's comparatively lower popularity in the video game culture stems directly from its perpetually revolutionizing gaming in the areas of game-play, technology, and story. The fact of the matter is that Zelda is cutting edge; it is avant-garde and therefore not as readily accepted into the mainstream. People can always expect certain things from Mario, namely that there will be a short, red-and-blue-clothed, plumber who will be running and jumping a lot (with the notable exception of Super Mario Bros. 2, which had radically different game-play). With Zelda it is much more wide-open; sure there will be a guy in a green suit, probably holding a sword, but after that, who knows?

I think that this aspect is most apparent in the first game of the series, the original The Legend of Zelda, and therefore that is the game on which I will be focusing my discussion.



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Introduction

Innovation

Organic World

Conclusion

If one looks at the majority of games created for the Nintendo Entertainment System both before and after 1988, the year of the release of *The Legend of Zelda*, one sees a humongous trend in the style of game-play, particularly in the games from Nintendo itself, namely that the vast majority of the games were in the platform genre. Most of the games now described as "classics" fall under this category (e.g. *Kid Icarus*, *Metroid*, and, of course, *Super Mario Bros.*). In this era of video game history, people expected a certain sort of game-play from a console game. This is analogous to the present day, when everyone expects games to be 3D. The NES was well-designed to handle this sort of game-play, having a controller that only supported four-way movement and had only two buttons (four if you count the start and select buttons) that were used during the game, thus requiring a very simple control scheme. Platform games were well suited to this sort of restriction, for they did not have the depth to warrant more sophisticated control. These games hardly even deserve to be called 2D, for all they offer the player is a fairly linear path from the start of the level to the end; those areas already "explored" by the player are lost for the remainder of the game.

In a delightful turn of self referential humor, Miyamoto added sub-levels to the labyrinths in *Zelda: Link's Awakening* that mimicked the platform play of *Mario Bros.* It even included goombas!

The Legend of Zelda changed this. In a game that could be loosely be called an RPG, yet really contains none of the character stats-building generally associated with that genre, and moreover shared more in terms of actual game-play action with its platform peers, the game world finally saw a so-called "adventure game," where the player actually felt like he was adventuring somewhere. The *Zelda* universe was fully 2D with its top-down perspective on the game action-the player had complete freedom to roam over an extensive map, often having to return to the same areas more than once. At last, a game

world was coherent, not just a collection of separate levels thrown together to make a game. Actions taken late in the game would have direct consequence on locations passed through earlier in the game. For example, an item such as the ladder would make areas, such as the location of a heart container, which before had been visible but not accessible, finally reachable. This is the secret of Zelda: not a single part of the game is unimportant; absolutely everything serves a purpose. An indication of this is the following line from the Zelda manual, "Legend has it that there are caves in every possible place above ground. Link is bound to find them as long as he has enough power." The Zelda player is encouraged to explore every nook and cranny, and is rewarded by a richer game experience, if he does so.



Damn!

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Such rewards are most often manifested in the game as collectable items that enhance the player's abilities in various ways. Whereas games such as Super Mario Bros. had a few such power-ups (e.g. Starman and the Fire Flower), these items were merely sugar-coating and not necessary to play the game. Other games feature items that are used once and then thrown away. Conversely, nearly every item in Zelda is required to be used to complete the game and many of those items are used repeatedly. This adds a level of complexity not seen in its contemporary games. For example, whereas Mario had a very shallow view of in-game economics (get 100 coins to earn a life),

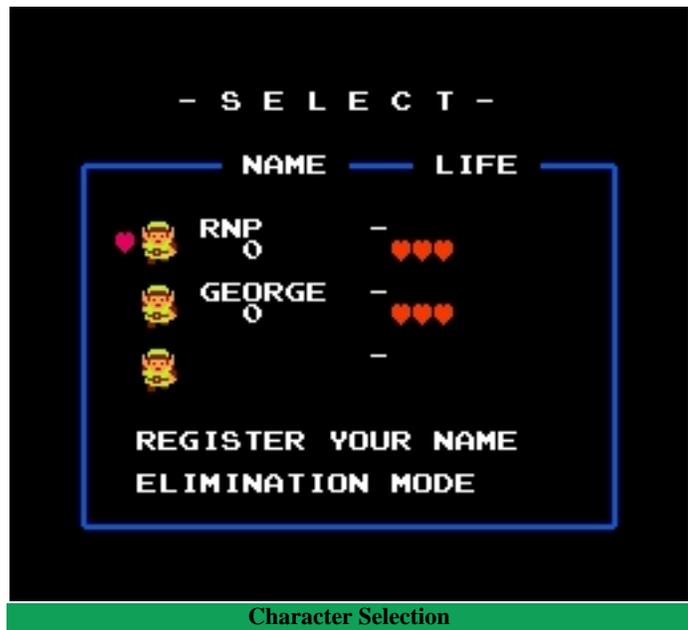
Zelda had a complete monetary system in the form of "Rupees" that could be collected upon vanquishing enemies, won during gambling games, or received as gifts. These Rupees could then be exchanged for goods in various stores, or in some situations, even be extorted from the player.

To handle this level of complexity and still use the same simple setup as all the other games made for the NES, Zelda contained several interface features not seen in its peers. One example of this is the "sub-screen," which was activated when the player pressed the start button, and contained information regarding the player's character not normally shown during regular game-play, thereby increasing the information available to the player at any

given time, while not adversely affecting the available screen real estate. This screen also allowed the player to select which item other than the sword was available during play, thereby providing an efficient means for the management of the many items needed for the quest at hand.

Also essential to giving Zelda more depth than any of its peers, was the ability to retain character information between two different playing periods. No one wants to take all the effort to earn all the wonderful items the game has to offer, if the moment they shut the console off, all the items will be gone, and their effort wasted. Zelda introduced a new invention from Nintendo: an internal battery that would save up to three different player's quests. Games like Mario could not be very extensive, as they had to be beatable in a single play period. Zelda, however, offered infinite chances to explore the same world, from within the context of a single iteration of the game.





Zelda's battery is guaranteed for five years. Mine is still functional twelve years later.



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The complexity of Zelda actually starts more simply, external to the actual game-play. What further separates The Legend of Zelda from games such as Super Mario Bros., and what also separates Zelda: A Link to the Past from other games on the SNES, Zelda: Link's Awakening from those on the Game Boy, and Zelda: Ocarina of Time from those on the Nintendo 64, is the strength of its story, and how it relates to the events within the game. Little documentation ever reveals why a certain princess might be imprisoned or why ingesting a mushroom would make anyone taller, let alone a plumber, yet from the start of Zelda, the player knows who he is and why he is there, and further what his relation is to the objects and creatures around him. This surpasses a simple save-the-princess plotline, although, in effect, that is what the player is doing.

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While the original Zelda's story is not up to the quality of its later sequels, it is nevertheless generally satisfying. A young man, known only as Link, sets out on an adventure in the magical realm of Hyrule to collect fragments of an artifact called the "Triforce." When he collects all eight fragments, he will be given the opportunity to rescue the Princess Zelda from the clutches of the evil Gannon. While this sounds nearly identical to the plots of other games from this period, it is the way in which the game

works within this framework that brings out the magnificence.



As I mentioned earlier, the charm of *Zelda* is that everything is important. Everything in some fashion

serves the greater purpose, and the player feels this constantly; everything fits together perfectly, including the game and its story. Every aspect of the game seems incontrovertible: it seems obvious that the final battle would take place atop Death Mountain, that there are places such as the Lost Woods and the Lost Hills that disorient the player, and that there are deserts and oceans and forests, etc. Everything seems just right, because everything meshes together to form an organic, living world, which on one hand seems fantastical, yet on the other hand seems to have more verisimilitude than a world where some mushrooms have evil smiles and walk on two legs. Throw in some subtle eastern mysticism in the form of a Triforce and you have gaming beauty. Where the story fails technically, it makes up with its atmosphere.

The original *Zelda* actually had two triforces. The one Link was collecting represented Wisdom, and the other represented Power. *Zelda: The Adventure of Link* added a third, Courage.

So it is into this well-defined and complex world that the player is initially dropped. The main character, Link, starts off in a fairly barren locale with absolutely nothing but his trademark green tunic. However he sees right in front of him the entrance to a dark cave. He enters to find a solitary man-a hermit, really-who decides to be generous to Link, and gives him



his first possession in his quest: a fairly shabby brown sword. Link doesn't worry: he'll have opportunities later to upgrade his weapon. For now, he sets out north, possibly killing a few Octoroks or Tektites on his way. After a while, he comes to an ocean, and shortly thereafter a bridge that leads to an island. Link decides to cross the bridge and finds the island covered with dead trees and a single Octorok guard. In one of the trees, Link notices a hidden staircase descending into darkness. He decides to enter...

In a culture dominated by reflex-based twitch games, Zelda is ultimately cerebral.



Link's trusty sword



Inside the Labyrinth

And so we come at last to the first of nine labyrinths in the game; they represent the main challenge of the game. The first eight contain Triforce fragments, the last is the dwelling of Gannon. It is in these subterranean dungeons, called the "Underworld" by the game, that the reason why Zelda is a gaming classic manifests itself. In a culture dominated by reflex-based twitch games, Zelda is ultimately cerebral. In the original Zelda, when the player enters a labyrinth, he finds himself in a maze complex where he is forced to reason to survive. See a Moblin that says nothing but "Grumble, Grumble?" Toss him a stick of meat. See a wall that has a crack in it? Use a

bomb to create a door. Get hit by a red Bubble who disables your ability to use your sword? Find a blue Bubble to heal yourself. Find yourself face to face with Gannon? Well, there's little doubt that you're in for a struggle, but nonetheless with a little thought you will triumph. Sure, there is no shortage of action to be had, as there are, of course, plenty dungeon-dwelling monsters that the player can slash to pieces with his sword, but that is not the focus of the game. This sort of game-play is radically different from stomping on turtles to gain points.

When the player finally beats Gannon and saves the princess, they embark on a second quest, with even more complex labyrinths than the first. For example, some labyrinths require you to walk straight through walls, many of which exact a toll.



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Despite the fact that Link was never a cultural icon who sold millions of Nintendo Entertainment Systems, there has been no shortage of Zelda imitators. Some games, such as *Chrysalis*, took the experience even further, with more intricate plot lines, even more complexity, and of course, the battery back-up system. And, of course, there are also the many sequels that have followed on various console systems, all continuing the same beautiful game-play, tweaking it even closer to perfection. However, there is only one *The Legend of Zelda*; there is only one true original. It may not have been the biggest seller Nintendo ever had (*Super Mario Bros. 3*, holds that title), but I think that it was, for its time, by far the most original.

Unlike the Mario games that lead the pack by sheer numbers, *Zelda* has always lead by example. Nowadays, *Zelda*

There have actually been products such as *Zelda* comic books and toys. There was even a *Zelda* cartoon show that aired on Friday's in an animation slot of a live-action *Mario Bros.* TV show.

games sell about as well as any game, yet they still do not define the gaming experience in the way other games have. I have used *Mario Bros.* as my chief example in this review, yet the same remarks are also applicable to other games that have infiltrated our cultural psyche, such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* or *Tomb Raider*. Everyone agrees that *Zelda* is a good game, yet I have never seen a feature film being made out of it. It just hasn't reached that level yet. However, the fact that *Zelda* games consistently set the bar for gaming in general, even though they do not have the image advantage of those other games, proves that *Zelda* is a powerful force. The *Zelda* universe has always been about game innovation. It was true in the days of the NES, and it is true now.