

The Princess and the Platformer:
The Evolving Heroine in Nintendo Adventure Games

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*Just remember that my being a woman doesn't make me any less
important!*

--Faris
Final Fantasy V

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Female characters, even as a token love interest, have been a mainstay in adventure games ever since Nintendo became a household name. One of the oldest and most famous is the princess of the Super Mario games, whose only role is to be kidnapped and rescued again and again, *ad infinitum*. Such a character is hardly emblematic of feminism and female empowerment. Yet much has changed in video games since the early 1980s, when Mario was born. Have female characters, too, changed fundamentally? How much has feminism and changing ideas of women in Japan and the US impacted their portrayal in console games? To address these questions, I will discuss three popular female characters in Nintendo adventure game series. By examining the changes in portrayal of these characters through time and new incarnations, I hope to find a kind of evolution of treatment of women and their gender roles.

With such a small sample of games, this study cannot be considered definitive of adventure gaming as a whole. But by selecting several long-lasting, iconic female figures, it becomes possible to show a pertinent and specific example of how some of the ideas of women in this medium have changed over time. A premise of this paper is the idea that focusing on characters that are all created within one company can show a clearer line of evolution in the portrayal of the characters, as each heroine had her starting point in the same basic place—within Nintendo. There are very few, if any, major female characters created by other companies of the early 80s that are still existent in modern games. I will make the argument that, at least within Nintendo, female characters, by and

large, have become active instead of passive, but they still tend to exist within a universe oriented toward the male viewer and participant. The importance of costume and dress to the nature of female characters is key to this argument.

I will be looking at three examples of adventure game heroines, each of which is the female protagonist of her own series of games: Zelda of *The Legend of Zelda*, Samus Aran from *Metroid*, and *Super Mario*'s Princess Peach. It is my hope that examining characters that have appeared in multiple games will help illuminate the changes in portrayals of women over time, as well as provide multiple narratives and evolutions of the female character within the same basic franchise, and, in at least one case, under the continuing guidance of the same director.

In analyzing these games, I will also look to other works that have examined the impact of feminism on ideas of women in the media to compare and inform my own conclusions. Since a number of the games I have chosen were originally produced in Japan, I also want to consider the possibility that the character decisions in these games have also been affected by Japanese ideas of womanhood. To that end I will take a brief look into the early history of women's roles in Japan, and the history of feminism in Japan in the last three decades of the twentieth century, examining how the evolution of Japanese ideas of womanhood may have impacted the evolution of the women in these games.

I should first state that what I mean by "feminism," "empowerment," and "women's liberation" in this paper is the concept of sexual equality in its most basic terms, both legally and socially. The feminist movement has gone in a number of different directions and has sometimes divided into splinter groups with differing views,

but these differences and according disputes are not the concern of this particular paper. To analyze the impact on these games of individual branches of the movement would take more space for analysis than I can afford, and I do not propose to do so. It would also not accord with many of the feminist ideas that have trickled down into the game industry, which tend to be much less complex. Video games are a pop culture form of entertainment, and pop culture all too often tends to lump various branches and sects together into a more simplistic, generalized ideology when it comes to describing social movements.

What I do offer here is an analysis of the impact of the most basic premise of the women's movement in the 1960's, and even before—that of total equality. In 1966, the National Organization for Women's Statement of Purpose declared that “the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes” (204-205). This is an idea of true equality, of women as able to do everything that a man can do, to wear what a man wears, to do the same job, to sometimes have similar personality traits as an individual, to have the same rights, and to own a strong voice and agency. I wish to discover the impact of this idea on women's roles in Nintendo adventure games, both in Japan and America.

The first game series is a fairly old franchise, the *Legend of Zelda*. The first game in the series was released in the US in 1987 and quite a few hugely popular games have been made subsequently. The first game, simply titled *The Legend of Zelda*, was made for the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES, under the direction of the now world-famous Shigeru Miyamoto. It became famous for introducing many concepts intrinsic to adventure games that are now commonplace, using challenging puzzles and non-linear

world exploration, as well as a unique combination of elements from action games, role-playing games, and older adventure and puzzle games. Although the title led many to assume that the hero was named Zelda, the game actually starred a man named Link.

Link's mission was to defeat Ganon, the "Prince of Darkness" who planned to conquer the peaceful kingdom of Hyrule. Ganon had stolen the mystical "Triforce of Power," a magical item that granted him untold strength. According to the manual,

"Zelda, the princess of this kingdom, split up the Triforce of Wisdom into eight fragments and hid them throughout the realm to save the last remaining Triforce from the clutches of the evil Ganon. At the same time, she commanded her most trustworthy nursemaid, Impa, to secretly escape into the land and go find a man with enough courage to destroy the evil Ganon. Upon hearing this, Ganon grew angry, imprisoned the princess, and sent out a party in search of Impa" (Instruction booklet, 3).

Impa, however, managed to find a suitable young man and charged him to find the scattered pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom and bring them together, thus gaining the power to defeat Ganon.

The player assumed the role of Link and fought her way through successive dungeons full of monsters, gaining a new piece of the Triforce with each victory. Despite being the title character, Zelda barely appeared in the actual game at all, and then only at the end, when Link rescued her and received her thanks. (Fig. 1) She proclaimed him the hero of Hyrule, and the game ended with the two holding up their respective Triforces.

Zelda was more visible in the third game in the series, *A Link to the Past*, which debuted on the Super Nintendo in 1992. (Fig. 2 and 3) The player character, once again a young man named Link, rescues her from a cell in the castle dungeon after her imprisonment by the king's treacherous servant Agahnim. She leads him to a secret passage in the throne room which leads to a sanctuary. There, however, her short role as

an active character ends for the most part, and she remains in hiding for the duration of the game, until her capture by the forces of Ganon. Although she actually speaks and helps the hero in a small way, Zelda's role still has not changed fundamentally in any way in this game. She is still a largely passive character in need of rescue, and her only action is to assist Link.

Ocarina of Time, released in 1998, represented a shift in the portrayal of the Princess Zelda. While the princess appeared and did little in previous games, the Zelda of *Ocarina* was active and helpful, and, perhaps more significantly, she broke gender norms with her clothing and physical appearance. Zelda is first introduced in the game as a little girl in a pink dress who meets the child Link when he sneaks into her father's castle. She expresses concern about the nature of the mysterious Ganondorf, and her fears turn out to be valid, as he attempts to kidnap her. Unbeknownst to the player, however, she is saved by her maidservant, named Impa like the maidservant from the first game. Unlike the original Impa, this iteration is both young and strong. (Fig. 6) She is the last of a fabled ninja-like race called the Sheikah. Here the player might note the appearance of a strong female character as a rescuer, a new occurrence in the series.

In the course of events, Link is locked inside the Temple of Time, to await his growth into a physical adult, that he might have a chance to equal Ganondorf in strength. He awakens seven years later to find that Ganondorf has taken over the land of Hyrule. He is greeted by a mysterious young man in form-fitting Sheikah garb, his face partially concealed by cloth and his arms and chest wrapped in shinobi bandages. (Fig. 5) The stranger introduces himself as Sheik, and teaches Link several magic songs to play on his ocarina. Sheik reappears a number of times, giving Link helpful advice and hints.

It is not until late in the game that Sheik unveils the biggest twist yet in the series—he is in fact a *she*, and not just any woman, but the Princess Zelda in disguise. She used her magical powers to disguise herself in order to hide from Ganondorf and evade capture. Revealing herself using the Triforce of Wisdom, she transforms back into her recognizable female identity, her hair growing long again and her clothing reverting to the pink dress. (Fig. 4) Following her transformation, however, she is almost immediately captured by Ganondorf, and the same old pattern resumes, Link taking up his sword to rescue the princess once more.

Sheik's strength and helpfulness was a new aspect of the Zelda character, separating her for the first time from generic captives like Princess Peach of *Mario* fame. Her physical strength and membership in a warrior race marked her as more empowered than previous Zeldas. She rescued instead of being rescued, at least in her guise as Sheik. That disguise, however, made her different than the ideal liberated woman. Rather than being strong in her female identity, she concealed her sexuality in order to be a free actor, taking on the role of the traditionally more powerful gender.

It is also important to note that Sheik, for the most part, acts as an aide to the hero, instead of working on her own agenda. She does sometimes accomplish tasks to help Link without his involvement, though. One important female character asks Link to thank Sheik for saving her previously. Still, although Zelda leaves behind her passivity, she only gains agency in identifying as male. This is a limitation that is not mediated until the appearance of the next incarnation of Zelda in *The Wind Waker*.

While *Ocarina* represented a shift in Zelda's character and sense of agency, it was not until a new director took the reins of the franchise that Zelda's personality and

independence really developed, making her a free yet flawed character—a princess with attitude. Developers and writers are often quite conscious of the history that these characters carry, as they must deal with the expectations and memories of gamers who know the characters quite well. Any major changes in these characters and how they and their world are portrayed are most likely very conscious ones, as these developers know that their new material and “take” on the franchise will be repeatedly compared with the older games. This may be why the new director of the Zelda franchise, Eiji Aonuma, chose to make such an original Zelda character for his debut in *The Wind Waker*, as he took over from the world-renowned and respected Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of the original Mario and Zelda games and many subsequent Nintendo successes.

The Wind Waker begins with the introduction of the main character, a young boy named Link. (Players can choose a different name if they like.) Link is spending his birthday quietly on the small island where he and his grandmother and sister live, when a huge bird drops out of the sky with an unconscious girl clutched in its talons. (Fig. 7) A ship offshore volleys a cannonball at the bird, causing it to reel and drop its prey into the forest of the island. Urged on by his worried sister, who witnessed the event, Link, being the heroic and chivalrous young man he is, goes off into the forest with his wooden sword to rescue the strange girl. Thus far, a player familiar with the Zelda series will recognize a familiar pattern—the girl is there to be rescued, and is inactive, as she is unconscious.

Upon entering the forest, the hero sees the girl hanging by her jacket from a tree limb. He proceeds to defeat the monsters surrounding the tree. The girl falls to the ground and wakes up. This, however, is where things become a little different.

Upon waking, the girl gets up, rubbing her head, and opens her eyes, seeing Link in his familiar green tunic and tights.

“Ooowwwcchh! Wow. What's with that get-up? Well, whatever. So, where am I...? Oh, that's right! That giant bird came and...”

At this point, a large, hairy-chested pirate appears, calling for “Miss Tetra.” He is relieved to find her safe. He expresses his relief that she survived the fall to the peak of the island. “So that bird dropped me on the top of a mountain? Well, wasn't that nice of it! Well, don't just stand there! Let's go! Time to repay our debt to that bird in full!”

“But, Miss... What about this boy?”

“Don't worry about him. Come on!”

Aside from questioning his taste in clothing, Tetra pays little attention to the hero. Even more surprising, she does not thank him for his efforts. Unlike the original Zelda and Princess Toadstool from *Super Mario Bros.*, who rewarded their rescuers with a kiss or a thank you, she thoroughly ignores him—and goes off on her own business.

Here Tetra breaks from the tradition of the inactive Zelda heroine, or even the helpful aide of Sheik. This is the first of a number of times that Tetra will call the male hero's importance and strength into question, putting her own agenda ahead of his. Her selfishness only goes so far, though, as she almost immediately returns Link's favor by rescuing him in turn. As Link exits the forest and steps out onto a cliff, he sees his younger sister, Aryll, standing across the bridge. As she starts to cross, the huge bird reappears and seizes her. She cries out to him, but this time, he is unable to help, and the helpless girl is carried off. Link panics and runs after her—straight off the cliff.

Luckily, Tetra has been watching, and she catches his hand in hers as he falls. Pulling him back up, she lectures him against his foolishness. “Stupid kid! Get ahold of yourself! She’s gone! There’s nothing you can do.” Later, when she is finally convinced to take him on her pirate ship so he can find his sister, Tetra questions his emotional strength again. “I don’t want you getting all weepy-eyed and homesick on me!” Upon boarding the ship, Link waves a tearful goodbye to his grandmother as emotional music plays in the background. Tetra cuts this off with a roll of her eyes and a sigh.

“Ugh... How much longer is this going to go on, do you think? Do you have an estimate? Are you sure you shouldn’t just quit right now? Seriously, think about it. I can tell you’re just going to get more sentimental from here on out. There’s still time, you know... Are you sure we shouldn’t just turn around and take you back to your island?”

As the story progresses, Tetra proves to be kinder than she first appears, coming to respect Link as he proves his strength and purity of character. (Her initial response to his unflinching willingness to fight is surprisingly pragmatic: “You can’t possibly mean to go there with nothing but that cheap little sword! That’s not brave! It’s stupid!”) She continues to admonish Link for his foolish behavior, reversing the sexist stereotype of women as emotional and impulsive. “There you go....Acting before you think, as usual....” She also continues to play a heroic role parallel to Link’s own, notably in Aryll’s rescue.

When Link finally reaches his sister, he finds her accompanied by several other captive girls. We later learn that this is because the evil Ganon has risen again, and is searching out girls in the hopes of capturing the Princess Zelda. It is Tetra and her crew who save them and take them home, stating the monetary reward their parents will pay as

their real reason for the otherwise heroic act. We quickly see through this excuse to Tetra's kind heart, as she also saves Aryll, despite the complete lack of any reward upon her return. That Tetra rescues others instead of being rescued herself is arguably significant—this is a role reversal that indicates the cognizance of the director of the history of the Zelda figure. Turning her from a helpless figure into a helpful and heroic figure gives her a power that even Sheik did not hold. She does not just assist, she acts on her own, saving the day in a way unknown in previous games.

The unusual strength of character that Tetra holds makes her subsequent transformation all the more strange. By now, the average gamer will probably have guessed that Tetra, like Sheik, is another princess in disguise. This is affirmed when Link's talking boat reveals itself to be the transformed ancient king of Hyrule, presenting Tetra with a piece of the Triforce and revealing her identity. Tetra is astonished to learn that she is the descendant of the legendary princess and that the necklace her mother gave her was part of the Triforce of wisdom, and even more astonished when the unification of the two Triforce pieces brings about a cosmetic transformation.

Tetra suddenly finds herself in the pink dress of the Zelda of *Ocarina*, her formerly tied up hair now loose at her shoulders, her tan complexion magically pale and heightened by rouge tinted cheeks and blue eye shadow. (Fig. 8) Her expressions change suddenly, too, a look of dazed uncertainty and softness coming over her features, her posture less imposing and slumped. Her sudden lack of assertiveness could be almost disturbing, the only explanation being the discovery of her ancestry. Link leaves to gather the power to fight Ganon, while Tetra, now Zelda, is told, "It is far too dangerous

for you to join us in this task.” She is left behind in a hidden chamber, where she is almost immediately discovered and kidnapped by Ganon.

The conscious changes in the character of Zelda, particularly in *Wind Waker*, are mediated changes, incorporating new character traits in the person of Tetra while maintaining a conscious connection to previous Zeldas through similarities in setting and references to previous costumes and legends such as that of the Triforce. In her book Prime-Time Feminism, Bonnie J. Dow emphasizes the importance of connection with previous texts that often affects new texts that seek to change the way women are shown. Although *Mary Tyler Moore*, for example, “clearly drew much of its power as a representation of the ‘new woman’ from its temporal relationship to women’s liberation discourse, it also drew meaning from its relationship to previous television representations of women” (33). Aonuma’s re-envisioning of Zelda is in part a result of his knowledge of the previous texts of Zelda games. As Dow points out, “this kind of intertextual reading enables recognition of difference” (ibid), a fact that strongly affects Tetra’s character as she is inevitably juxtaposed with previous portrayals of Zelda. Such juxtaposition makes the changes in character more obvious. Intertextual relationships like this are a part of the gradual change in the representation of women in games, as developers work to create new games with knowledge of the historical context of those that have come before.

In strong contrast to previous Zeldas, *Wind Waker*’s Zelda does not identify as a princess, and does not dress as such. She is a leader of men, and a fierce, strong pirate. It is only when she realizes her identity as the Princess Zelda and assumes the traditional dress that she also takes on the gentler, more passive aspects of previous Zeldas. Once

she does so, she is no longer a free actor—although she has proven herself at least as competent as the hero, she is told to stay behind, hidden away for her own safety. Her subsequent capture underlines this change in her role. She does not act, but is acted upon. Instead of rescuing others, she is in need of rescue. This change seems to reflect Aonuma's cognizance of the historical context of the game, as it transfers older character traits and story elements into the new *Zelda* game, creating a clash between old and new representations of the character, using older dress to differentiate the two. Tetra's change into her pirate garb after Ganon's defeat indicates her return to her former, more powerful role, the role which is uniquely Aonuma's vision, as she becomes a brave ship captain once again. As in *Ocarina*, the use of clothing is a key symbol and element of identity, changing not just the appearance, but the personality and larger role of the wearer.

Names, too, are important in the defining of the character. Both Tetra and Sheik must take on new monikers in order to become something different than the traditional Zelda. Tetra is only referred to as Zelda from the point of her transformation, but her name returns to that of Tetra when she changes back at the game's ending. It is inevitable that naming should be linked with identity, and the name of Zelda seems to be indelibly marked with the aspects of the original Zelda.

Sheik and Tetra seem to point to a mixed change in female game characters. The games are not conventionally feminist, but they have become less chauvinist than past iterations. The gendered nature of a character's appearance matters, but it can be empowering or have the opposite effect. In each of these games there is a direct correlation between the clothing chosen by Zelda and her role in the world. The princess in the first game is always in "conventional" dress, and she plays an entirely passive role,

existing to be kidnapped and subsequently rescued. In *Ocarina of Time*, the princess crossdresses and advises the player character, Link, in disguise. Only when she adopts her female dress once more is she kidnapped and imprisoned. The Zelda of *Wind Waker* also wears masculine clothing, dressing like a pirate and presiding over her own ship and crew. She, too, is rendered helpless and captured at the very moment of donning her pink dress. These games may be evidence of a paradigm that has shifted from showing women as weak and passive, to allowing them strength and agency, as long as they adopt masculine conventions. “Feminine” women, in dress and person, are still largely passive and powerless.

Samus Aran, the heroine and player character of the *Metroid* series, is also defined by her clothing, though in different ways. Samus is a strong science fiction heroine, a noble bounty hunter who fights the threats to peaceful planets throughout the galaxy. Her first game was *Metroid*, released in the US in 1987. Samus presents an interesting case of a female protagonist, as she has never been portrayed as obviously female—in fact, her gender identity was a surprise that players of the first game would only discover upon completing the game within a certain time frame. Her costume in each game is a spacesuit resembling a suit of armor, with her entire body covered in bulky metal. (Fig.9) Even her face is hidden behind a dark visor. Because of this, her actual body shape is impossible to discern, thus her sexuality is disguised, not masked, like Sheik, in a masculine façade, but entirely obscured.

The manual of the first game describes Samus as follows:

“He is the greatest of all the space hunters and has successfully completed numerous missions that everybody thought were absolutely impossible. He is a cyborg: his entire body has been surgically strengthened with robotics, giving him

superpowers. Even the space pirates fear his spacesuit, which can absorb any enemy's power. But his true form is shrouded in mystery" (7).

Although this is the only game in which Samus' identity is obscured through the use of masculine pronouns, that "shroud" of mystery remains. (One must assume that this particular description is written from the perspective of the average observer, who might assume that the mysterious hero is male.) Despite the potential of surprise and novelty in the concept of a female warrior heroine, Samus' feminine identity was not what was emphasized. As mentioned above, only extremely skilled players who could finish the game within one hour were treated to what might nowadays be called "fan service": a small picture of Ms Aran in a two piece bathing suit. (Fig.10) Though one could blame the lack of fan-garnering sex appeal on the limited graphics, Samus' concealing suit has become an integral aspect of her character, even in her most recent incarnations on the graphically advanced Gamecube and Wii consoles.

The series experienced a revival in 2002 when the fourth game was released for the Gamecube. Titled *Metroid Prime*, it placed Samus for the first time in a three-dimensional, first-person environment. (Fig. 11) The game was applauded for its effective use of the explorative aspects that had made previous *Metroid* games so successful. For the first time, players could see a good portion of her face in detail, but only when a bright light made her reflection more visible in the visor. A telling aspect of Samus' appeal was indicated by the hype created over the "secret" ending of the game, wherein Samus removed her helmet to reveal her entire head. (Fig. 12)

Over the years, Samus has developed a sort of mystique among many male fans. Her allure is obviously not due to seductive or revealing clothing, but perhaps rather to her impressive strength, and to the mystery inherent in her dress. A woman completely

covered, not just to the neck, but even over the eyes, might arouse a certain interest simply because of her inscrutability. Unlike many heroines who have been dressed in sexually-charged or revealing outfits, revealing any part of her physical person is apparently considered reward enough for the players.¹ Her appeal in this respect is evident in the above-mentioned special ending in *Metroid Prime*, in which the player, having done exceptionally well in completing the game, is treated to a movie in which Samus takes off her helmet, showing her face and hair.

In more recent games, male players have been catered to with more glimpses of her face, and, in the latest game, her entire person, fully clothed in normal fabrics. Interestingly, her face has changed throughout the *Prime* trilogy. In the first game, she had a conventionally beautiful but realistic, sharper face shape and eyes. The second game, *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, gave her much larger, doe-like eyes and a weaker chin that lent her face a kind of vulnerability. It is anyone's guess whether the developers judged this image to be too weak and young, but whatever the reason, the third game, *Corruption*, mixed the styles of the first two games, giving Samus a more realistic adult face than the second game, while maintaining some of the Japanese anime stylings of the second. This decision might point to a realization on the part of the developers of the importance of a balance between Samus' appeal as a traditionally feminine woman and as a grittier, stronger heroine. While there is no incontrovertible evidence for such an analysis, it certainly seems to fit Samus' evolution in the *Prime* games.

Other aspects of the *Metroid* series point to a stronger portrayal of women in general. It is interesting to note that most of the warriors described in records that Samus

¹ Exceptions to this rule occur in some of the more recent handheld games, particularly *Metroid Fusion*, which rewarded players who finished quickly with images of Samus in a skin-tight suit.

discovers in *Echoes* are female. Similarly, in *Corruption* there seem to be a more or less equal number of male and female soldiers on the Galactic Federation ship. This may indicate a conscious effort on the part of the game developers to show a certain amount of feminism and defiance of the “rescue the princess” cliché.

Samus seems to provide a unique example of how protective and non-sexed clothing can separate and protect a character from gendered expectations and stereotypes, and how a male-centered perspective can still permeate a game with a fairly empowered female lead. Despite her covering clothing, Samus is still sexualized in special segments, but it important to realize that such segments are seldom if ever degrading or objectifying.

As a contrasting example, the princess of the *Mario* franchise is given little respect or strength in her portrayal. Princess Peach, also known as Princess Toadstool, has not changed much at all over the years. The Princess first appeared in *Super Mario Bros.* in 1985 as a damsel in distress. (Fig. 13) Any exploration of her character will be necessarily more brief than that of more complex and evolved characters like Zelda, as not much has changed for Peach over the years. She still wears her trademark pink dress and is kidnapped in almost every Mario game to date. Despite her seemingly uninteresting character, her importance should not be underestimated—*Super Mario Bros.* is still the best selling video game of all time.²

The princess was originally was identified as Princess Toadstool, though her name was changed in 1996’s *Super Mario 64* to Princess Peach. (Fig. 15) All games thereafter called her by that name. In her first appearance, she existed solely to be rescued by Mario, much like Zelda in the first *Legend of Zelda* game. As a side note, in

² See [Guinness World Records](#).

comparison to the *Zelda* series, which was overseen by one main creative director for over ten years, Mario games have been under less continuous direction, although they have often been guided by Miyamoto of *Zelda* fame. This may or may not have influenced some of the oddity and lack of change in her character.

The second Mario Bros game did feature her as a playable character, but nothing about her role changed noticeably. *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* was the first Mario game to include large amounts of dialogue and a continuous storyline. The role playing game, released in the U.S. in 1996 on the Super Nintendo, began with the kidnapping of the princess, although it later gave her a role in battles, as she joined Mario and his friends in fighting to save their world. The names of her attacks in this game were stereotypically feminine, highlighting her emotional and nurturing aspects with names like “Group Hug” and “Therapy.” Her main weapons were a frying pan (a symbol of women’s traditional role in the kitchen) and her white gloved hands, which she used to slap her enemies in a reproachful fashion, echoing the stereotype of women as slapping harmlessly rather than using their fists. The recurring villain of the Mario games, the spiky-shelled turtle called Bowser, also made an appearance in the game, kidnapping Princess Toadstool twice and attempting to force her into marrying him.

The role-playing game *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door* gave Peach a larger role. (Fig. 14) Between chapters of the game played as Mario, the player got a chance to play a short segment as the villainous Bowser and as the princess. Surprisingly, Peach’s role in this game was arguably more objectionable and chauvinist than in previous iterations. Kidnapped once again, Peach finds herself imprisoned a high-tech fortress. Her first action in her new quarters is to take a shower. The portrayal

of the scene is surprisingly racy for a little pink sprite³—she steps behind the curtain and her dress is flung over the side, as we hear the sounds of water above her humming. The real surprise, however, is her discovery that she is being watched. A super computer in the fortress has cameras everywhere, and it has been monitoring her—what’s more, it tells her that watching her shower led it to a curious fascination with her. In subsequent segments, the princess teaches the computer how to dance and tells him the meaning of love. Throughout, she is enduringly cheerful, helpful and never objects to the disturbing behavior of her robotic observer. Each segment ends with her “success” in convincing the computer to allow her to send a letter to Mario, often so that she can help him in his quest. Her role as a woman is jokingly emphasized in further segments emphasizing nudity, as in the scene where the princess finds it necessary to remove her clothing after using an invisibility potion—it only works on skin. In these ways, the game trivializes her and emphasizes her gender and physical body as integral to her character, while continuing the trend in earlier games of making her captive and inactive.

The objectification of Princess Peach is obvious, not only in the fascination that the computer displays with her physical beauty. A townspeople in one village considers himself her biggest fan—his walls are decorated with her picture. A little girl in *Mario RPG* expresses her hopes to someday be as beautiful as the princess. The later *Super Paper Mario* continues the emphasis on her appearance and attractiveness, using a nerdy villain who falls for the princess and obsesses creepily over her, hyper-ventilating when he meets her face-to-face. Sadly, her most active moments are those in which she uses her charms and beauty to achieve her goals—usually to help Mario and the gang.

³ A sprite is a two-dimensional image pre-rendered image that is integrated into a larger scene.

Besides gaining the active role of a player character in a few games, Peach remains surprisingly backward in a feminist sense, generally helpless and always being rescued. Her role as a traditional woman is emphasized over and over again, and ridiculed just as often. Princess Peach is a good example of how women in games, in some ways, still have a long way to go.

Peach aside, the portrayal of female characters has changed significantly in all forms of media throughout the twentieth century. The impact of feminism and revolutions in gender roles has been explored in a number of studies on film, books, television and advertising. In her book, Dow takes a similar approach to my own, examining the impact that feminism and related trends have had on the media by following the changing roles of women in selected popular television shows from 1970 to the present. In doing so, she finds that television often reflects changes in cultural ideas, but it takes time to do so, and often, when it does, it is in a subtle or mediated manner. Change in the games I have explored seems to follow a similar path, judging from the fact that notable feminist influence is fairly absent in most of the games as late as the late 1980s.

The changes that do occur are more than the result of directly applied feminism or cognizance of intertextuality, as they also include the unique interpretations of and responses to feminist images and ideas on the part of developers and game companies. Such choices on the part of developers may not be dissimilar to “the way that advertisers responded to feminist anger at always being addressed in terms of idealized, perfect images of unattainable femininity, and developed new advertising strategies that partly appropriated the cultural power of feminism, while often emptying it of its radical

critique” (Gill 74). It may seem odd to think that such feminist critique would reach the ears of game developers in the first place, but changes in fields like advertising and filmmaking can trickle down into other media industries, and the game industry is no exception.

There is certain evidence of appropriation of feminist ideas in the powerful and assertive nature of Samus and Tetra, but in some ways they seem similar to the creations of advertisers, “emptied of the radical critique” that accompanies the feminist movement. Samus and Tetra are examples of the image of strong women that has entered the cultural consciousness because of the feminist movement, but nowhere is the sociological cause of their empowerment explained. Unlike in traditional feminist texts, there is no explanation of the societal problems and inequalities that could prevent such empowerment. Of course, few people would expect a game to make such an explanation.

This is part of the problem of entertainment as a vehicle of change: its first priority is to entertain. Thus most would never expect a video game to consist of a clear political or sociological critique. Video games, like television shows, make money, and writers are often willing to ignore or soften new ideas in order to ensure that profits do not drop. Video games in particular are trivialized (often rightly so) as only fit for entertainment, and thus even more unlikely to work as a vehicle of social change. I would argue that the medium has unique advantages as such a vehicle, as games must include the player as participant in action, deeply involving them in the issues of the

game. A number of games have experimented with the potential of deeper player involvement,⁴ but for most games, that power, as a tool of change, remains untapped.

Compounding this complexity is the fact that many of these games were originally produced in Japan. Japanese cultural influence and ideas of femininity differ from those in the United States, and although developers, especially in recent years, may have considered the impact their games would have in the United States while designing them, the portrayal of female characters often bears the mark of Japanese ideals of womanhood.

Since the occupation of Japan after World War II, American ideas and trends have had a continued influence on the Japanese nation. Some of the more well-known influences in this regard have been in the economic and political fronts, in music and film, and in American ideologies of individualism. One trend that is often overlooked, however, is that of feminism. Western stereotypes of Japanese womanhood tend to portray the average *onna*⁵ as timid, polite, cheerful, and submissive to the needs of community, family, and the patriarchy. It must be admitted that some of these images have some basis in traditional Japanese culture, as a number of them have continued in the Japanese imagination as well, at least to some extent. Characters like the original Zelda and her successor in *Link to the Past* do take on some of these characteristics, putting the needs of their kingdom and the male hero ahead of their own. Along with Princess Peach, they exhibit a cheerfulness and helplessness that typifies the American

⁴ Tri-Crescendo's *Baten Kaitos*, in particular, uses the involvement of the player as a person to draw them into the specific plot of the game, making the player herself into a character. If nothing else, this functions as an example of potential emotional and mental involvement in plot and character relationships in games.

⁵ Japanese for "woman"

idea of the traditional Japanese woman. However, as we have seen, the portrayal of women in Nintendo games is more complex than the simple “save the princess” motif.

Metroid is evidence that things are not so simple in Japanese cultural ideas of women. The game was made in the same year as *Legend of Zelda*, and yet Samus shows a very different set of characteristics from the princess of Hyrule.⁶ Her assertive and independent nature may be indicative of the influence of Western feminism in Japan, but feminist Japan also has its own history of strong female characters, like the *miko* priestess of Japanese legend, who was said to single-handedly fight and banish demons and spirits. The idea of women fighters is an old one. Noble women were traditionally trained in the use of *naginata*, a kind of glaive, and women of the Kamakura Period “were trained for self-defense and received daggers as wedding presents” (Beard 76). Cross-dressers like Sheik also hold a precedent in Japanese history in the original form of *kabuki* theatre, which, in its beginning in the 1600s, employed only women actors to play all roles.⁷ Like *kabuki* actresses, and actresses in the newer all-female theatre of *Takarazuka*, Tetra and Sheik both wear masculine clothing to take on a stronger role, but when they put them away, they become traditional women again.

But this is not the Japanese women’s history that most of the world is familiar with. The rights and expected roles of women have changed over time. Sociologist Fumie Kumagai notes that “in ancient and medieval times, women enjoyed a position of relative equality, if not authority and power, vis-à-vis men in Japanese society” (93). Where, then did the patriarchal image of submissive women come from? According to

⁶ It is, however, worth noting that while the original *Metroid* game was developed in Japan by Nintendo, the *Metroid Prime* trilogy was developed by an American company, Retro Studios.

⁷ See Toshio’s chapter on the *hanamichi* for background on *Okuni Kabuki*, the early women’s form of the art.

Kumagai, “the gradual subordination of Japanese women occurred over the centuries and is most directly related to the establishment of the traditional family system, which is based on patriarchal authority...” (94). Women’s role in the family changed as men were delineated as sole heads of households, and with their loss of family authority came loss of legal rights and respect. A woman was expected to obey her husband, to “look to her husband as her lord” (Ekiken 3), to do everything possible for his well-being, and, eventually, to constrain herself to the domestic sphere. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these ideals of womanhood were firmly established. Happily, much of the early history of strong women in Japan was recovered and celebrated by feminists in the latter half of the century.

It is interesting to note the timeline of feminism in Japan in relation to the dates these games were released. Movements concerned with women’s freedom in Japan have existed, in some form, since at least as early as the Meiji Era (1868-1912), but the issue of women’s rights became more visible in the 1960s, when women raised their own concerns alongside radical protestors of the Japan-US Security Treaty of 1960. According to Vera Mackie, “issues of sexuality and reproductive control were also re-examined in this period, often with a background of theoretical works translated into Japanese from European languages” (8). Their protests only became louder as the century progressed. Women were becoming more visible in the public sphere, as well, as more and more entered the workforce. Kumagai writes, “Throughout the process of Japanese modernization,” (referring here to the time since World War II), “women have constituted more than one third of the labor force” (107). Women were not staying in the domestic sphere, and they were beginning to seem more independent.

The oldest three games I look into here were all released, in Japan and the United States, in the early to mid 1980's. Feminism as a larger, nationwide organized movement in its own right, independent of the more general concerns of the student left, really took root in the 1970s, and it was not until 1986 (the year of *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid*'s release in Japan) that the Equal Employment Opportunity Act became effective. This act was meant to ensure equal payment, retirement opportunities, and welfare for both genders. *Zelda*'s character design does not show influence from these contemporary developments, but the developers of *Metroid* seem to have been aware of the new image of a strong, independent woman who functioned outside the domestic realm. It is arguable that *Zelda*'s placement in the genre of fantasy suited it for more traditional, backward-looking gender roles, while *Metroid*, as a science-fiction game, naturally looked to the possible future.

The first active female character I have listed here aside from Samus, the Zelda of *Ocarina*, appeared in Japan and the U.S. more than ten years later, in 1998. Mackie writes that "by the end of the 1990s, (feminist) efforts had culminated in the creation of the Office of Gender Equality,...the drafting of a Plan for Gender Equality, and the inclusion of issues of gender equality in the activities of all the arms of government" (196). These significant developments appeared alongside an increasing consciousness in Japanese culture about the "woman question," consciousness that was raised in part by Japanese media.

In her essay *Feminism and Media in the Late Twentieth Century*, Setsu Shigematsu explains that "feminist discourses have been incorporated into a discourse that promotes individual consumerism" (556) by the Japanese media industry and

government. Magazines and advertisements in Japan, like those in the United States, appropriated ideas of female liberation, creating a mediated message that upheld their commercial purposes. Despite the distortion of feminist ideas, the general concept of women's liberation was disseminated through media in this way. *Ocarina of Time* was looking to a generation that had grown up with the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, and Zelda may have gained from the Act as well, as she certainly became a more independent person in her new evolution.

New generations, some of whom are young enough to have grown up playing adventure games, have entered the game industry since the days of the NES. Many of these new developers and producers have grown up in a Japan where traditional ideas of women were changing and feminist voices were being heard. Eiji Aonuma himself is eleven years younger than Miyamoto, having been born in 1963, although it is an open question as to whether the age gap has influenced the differences in their individual visions for the Zelda characters. With younger developers entering the scene, we cannot discount the possibility that the changes in women's roles in video games may be due to their generational perspective on gender.

The game industry, like the technology that fuels it, is constantly changing. It now takes in more revenue than Hollywood,⁸ with developers and consumers across the globe. The business is still expanding, as is the field of target consumers. More women are playing games now than ever before. And, in the best of all worlds, that may be the biggest impact on female characters yet. As companies seek a more gender-balanced audience, women can give feedback as players, and female characters can become less like objects and more like people. Of course, this is only one possible path for the

⁸ According to the San Francisco Chronicle, as of December, 2004, it was a \$10 billion industry.

successors of Zelda and Samus. Perhaps the most telling method of prognostication would be to look to our ideas about gender in our own culture. Mainstream ideologies are the thoughts that make their way into video games and take form in new characters and stories. As always, it is our choices that dictate where the future may lead.

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Figure 1. Zelda in the original *Legend of Zelda*

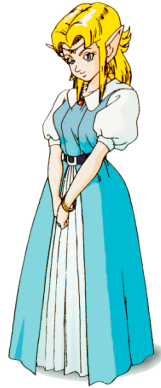


Figure 2. Official art of Zelda in *A Link to the Past*



Figure 3. Zelda's in-game sprite in *A Link to the Past*



Figure 4. Adult Zelda in her princess costume in official art from *Ocarina of Time*



Figure 5. Zelda disguised as Sheik in official art from *Ocarina of Time*



Figure 6. Impa in official art from *Ocarina of Time*



Figure 7. Tetra in official art from *The Wind Waker*



Figure 8. Tetra, transformed into the Princess Zelda, in *The Wind Waker*



Figure 9. Samus Aran in the ending of the original *Metroid*



Figure 10. Samus' gender revealed in the "secret" ending seen when beating the game in under five hours.



Figure 11. Samus in official art from *Metroid Prime*



Figure 12. Two pictures of Samus in the “secret” ending in *Metroid Prime*



Figure 13. Princess Toadstool in the manual from *Super Mario Bros.*



Figure 14. Princess Peach’s in-game sprite in *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*



Figure 15. Peach in art from *Super Mario 64*

U.S. Release Dates

1985

- *Super Mario Bros.* for NES

1987

- *The Legend of Zelda* for NES
- *Metroid* for NES

1988

- *Super Mario Bros. 2* for NES
- *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* for NES

1990

- *Super Mario Bros. 3* for NES

1991

- *Super Mario World* for SNES
- *Metroid II: Return of Samus* for GameBoy

1992

- *A Link to the Past* for SNES

1994

- *Super Metroid* for SNES

1996

- *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars* for SNES
- *Super Mario 64* for Nintendo 64

1998

- *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* for Nintendo 64

2000

- *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* for Nintendo 64

2001

- *Paper Mario* for Nintendo 64

2002

- *Metroid Prime*

2003

- *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*

2004

- *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* for GameCube
- *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*

2007

- *Super Paper Mario* for Wii
- *Super Mario Galaxy* for Wii
- *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* for Wii

Don't these things end with the princess kissing the frog?

--Lucca
Chrono Trigger