

The Legend of Feminism

By Joyce C. Havstad & Iris M. Jahng

It would be easy to direct many of the usual feminist criticisms at the series of video games that form *The Legend of Zelda* franchise. For instance, most of the series relegates the character of Zelda to a bleak and boring existence as basically a plot object. And, very little is done to develop the character of Zelda, despite the fact that she is frequently the chief motivating force for the adventures of the main character, Link. Then, of course, there are the circumstances of her existence as a motivator for Link's adventures. Predictably, she is a princess. Even more predictably, she usually needs to be rescued. And to compound all the insults and injuries, the series features what might be interpreted as one of the earliest forms of video game prostitution: Link's ability to 'replenish his life' by vanishing into cottages with frocked characters who seem to exist solely to lure him into their, uh, homes. (This was a feature of *The Adventures of Link*).

But this picture paints only one side of Zelda's story. Throughout the series of games, Zelda exhibits real strength of character. In particular, she is often associated with the Triforce of Wisdom, and usually acts as a sort of moral compass to guide Link, motivating but also directing his adventures to the appropriate targets. If Link's perpetual enemy, Ganon(dorf), represents evil, then it is certainly fair to say that Zelda represents good. All this makes Zelda a very consistent character, and one with a lot of integrity. And besides, there are other female characters whose roles, although more peripheral than Zelda's, still go beyond those of simple villagers or idealized prostitutes. There are the occasional disguised versions of Zelda, as well as other, more distinct female characters. As is the case in many actual mythologies, the creators of

Hyrule are usually depicted as three Goddesses: Din, Nayru, and Farore.¹ And the Twinrova sisters, who appear in several games in the series, demonstrate a sort of malicious intent as well as some arcane spell casting that is often associated with witches in traditional story forms. But all of these portrayals are very typological.

There is a long tradition, one that began with oral histories, proceeds through literature, and now continues on in video games and other modern digital media, of placing women in certain stereotypical roles: as maidens, mothers, or crones. This phenomenon of portraying women as iconic characters in certain roles is worth noticing, as well as exploring a little further. What unites these depictions is that they are all figures with spectral but rather passive roles in their society. The chief example of this in the *Zelda* games is *Zelda* herself. There are also examples of the other typologies in characters from *The Legend of Zelda* series, the mothers (like the goddesses of Hyrule) and the crones (like the Twinrova sisters). Why are women so consistently portrayed according to these types, in this series of video games but also in other story forms? Examining the work of one very famous and influential feminist philosopher, Simon de Beauvoir, will help provide an answer to such questions. Furthermore, since the mythology of *Zelda* is the product of male imaginations, examining the world they have created may say something about the way these men imagine women in the world that is not merely played in, but actually inhabited.

The Women of Zelda

Examining *Zelda* requires quite a bit of work, for three main reasons. The first is that there are so many games in the series. The second is that the character of *Zelda* is, like *Link*, not

¹ This mythology is first revealed in *Ocarina of Time*. However, this version of the creation story does contradict another legend described in the earlier game *A Link to the Past*. According to the English manual of that game, Hyrule was created by three gods, not goddesses. But given the adoption of the goddess mythology and the continuing role of the goddesses, especially *Nayru*, throughout further installments in the *Zelda* franchise, it seems fair to characterize the feminine version as the dominant mythology.

necessarily the same person in each game. But in every one there is at least mention of a female character named Zelda, and she often has a particular set of characteristics that creates continuity among all of the versions of Zelda. Without getting into the inextricably complicated issue of the Zelda timelines, this reappearance of the name and personality of Zelda in different characters is not usually a result of her being the same actual person.

This phenomenon is somewhat explained in the English manual of *The Adventure of Link*, according to which it is a tradition of Hyrule's monarchy for each princess in the royal family to be named Zelda.² So each princess of Hyrule is a Zelda, and their similarities in role, personality, and name are explained by this pattern of common inheritance. Third, there are the occasional appearance of disguised Zeldas. The two chief examples of this phenomenon are Sheik, in *Ocarina of Time*, and Tetra, who appears in both *The Wind Waker* and *Phantom Hourglass*, as well as briefly in *Four Swords Adventures*. In these cases each character is actually another version of Zelda.

Together, these complications mean that there are many different persons named Zelda as well as several not named Zelda, all of whom in some way represent the general character of Zelda. That these Zeldas have common characteristics is significant, capturing a sort of essence of Zelda-ness, which is representative of the consistent and coherent personality of the most important woman in *The Legend of Zelda* series. Discussing Zelda's role throughout the games of the franchise illuminates the remarkable consistencies in the different characterizations, and helps to develop a consistent understanding of this Zelda-ness.

The first Zelda, from the original *The Legend of Zelda*, displays few personality traits, since she is not actually seen until the end of the game. But she does play an important role in

² Once, an early prince of Hyrule wanted to inherit the Triforce. He and a corrupt magician questioned his sister, the princess Zelda, about its whereabouts, but when she refused to disclose anything, the magician cast her into an impenetrable sleep. In despair, the prince decreed that all the princesses of Hyrule be called Zelda.

that her actions set the stage for Link's first adventure, and these actions can tell us something about her character. The plot of the first game revolves around Link's mission to collect the eight pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom that Princess Zelda hid from Ganon, an invading Prince of Darkness who has taken over Hyrule. Once Link has united all eight pieces, he must fight Ganon, who possesses the Triforce of Power, in order to defeat him and rescue Zelda, whom Ganon has imprisoned.

So at the start of the *Zelda* franchise, Zelda herself already displays several of what will become her key characteristics: royalty, wisdom, resolve, and foresight. Throughout the series, Zelda is associated with royalty, usually as a princess, a daughter of the king of Hyrule. Making Zelda the possessor of the Triforce of Wisdom implies that Zelda herself is very wise. And this wisdom is linked to a kind of foresight: Zelda knows that she must hide the Triforce of Wisdom from Gannon, and is able to do so before he captures her. She also sends her nursemaid Impa to find a hero to unite the Triforce and defeat Ganon. This hero turns out, of course, to be Link. Finally, Zelda exhibits characteristic resolve in her refusal to betray the location of the pieces of the Triforce to Ganon, as well as in her stoic acceptance of her role in the story: to be captured and imprisoned by Ganon, waiting in hope that someone else can complete the task of defeating him.

The next *Zelda*, from the second game *The Adventure of Link*, certainly displays the characteristics of royalty and resolve. It turns out that, according to legend at least, this *Zelda* is actually the first *Zelda*, who was put into an eternal sleep by a magician long ago. She too was a princess, and it is after her whom all the following Princess *Zeldas* are named. And it was her resolve, in the form of a similar refusal to betray the location of the Triforce, which resulted in

her being cast forever into sleep. Similarly to the first game, the player does not directly interact with the character of Zelda until she is awoken by a victorious Link at the end of the game.

The next game in the series, *A Link to the Past*, presents a slightly different Zelda. In this game, Zelda is the princess of Hyrule as well as one of seven maidens, each descended from the Seven Wise Men. These sages long ago sealed the evil thief Ganon in the Golden Realm after he had stumbled upon it and obtained the Triforce of Power. The Golden Realm became the Dark World, and at the time Link's third adventure begins, Ganon's alter ego (Agahrim) in Hyrule strives to capture the seven maidens and imprison them in the Dark World in order to release Ganon. In this game, Zelda's foresight is more literal, in the sense that Zelda actually has telepathic powers. This is how she alerts Link to her plight, so once again she provides the motivation for Link's heroics by calling for help while otherwise awaiting rescue. This behavior exhibits her usual resolve, foresight, and wisdom.

However, Zelda is not always an important character in a Zelda game. In some, such as *Majora's Mask* and *Link's Awakening*, she is only mentioned in the set-up. But there is plenty of Zelda in *Ocarina of Time*, which tells the tale of Link's adventure as Zelda dreams of Ganondorf's evil and Link's arrival at Hyrule Castle, along with an account of how the Triforce was first obtained from the Golden or Sacred Realm. And Zelda, as usual, gets the Triforce of Wisdom. She also displays her trademark royalty, wisdom, and foresight (both literal and figurative). But she also has a different role than usual, one that is more active.

In *Ocarina of Time*, Link is led to temples throughout Hyrule by a guide named Sheik. Sheik, it turns out, is Zelda in disguise or transformed somehow.³ Sheik is a much more masculine character than the usual Zelda, so as Sheik Zelda plays a much more active role in

³ Whether Zelda is merely disguised as Sheik or has actually transformed into a man is the subject of some debate. It may be that in the Japanese version of the game she has actually transformed, whereas in the game released in the US, the implication is that she is simply disguised.

assisting Link. She accompanies him instead of merely directing his quest and then waiting for him to accomplish it. And as soon as she reveals herself as Zelda, a woman, she is captured by Ganondorf and must again wait for Link to rescue her. This has critical implications for Zelda's femininity and the resolve that is usually associated with it. When as Sheik she steps into a more masculine role, Zelda loses the passivity that so characteristically marks her with resolve or resignation. But as soon as she reveals herself as Zelda, and a woman, she gets captured as usual. This emphasizes the close association between Zelda's role as a woman and her resolve, typically associated with a sort of passive resignation with a fate that Link must rescue her from.

In *Oracle of Seasons* and *Oracle of Ages* Zelda is her typical self: royal, wise, and resolved. She also displays prophetic abilities, which inspire her to find Link. And she is, as usual, captured and in need of rescue, although this time from sacrifice by the Twinrova sisters. The Twinrova sisters, who were in *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*, reappear here in much more focal and malicious roles. Another recurring character from several previous games, Impa the attendant or nursemaid, presents an interesting contrast as a character to the Twinrova sisters. She obeys and assists Zelda in all of the games in which she appears in her capacity as Zelda's guardian, whereas the Twinrova sisters are at the very least mischievous and in these games, frankly evil.

Finally, we meet two other female characters, the oracle of seasons Din and the oracle of ages Nayru. These two women are characters whose type resembles Zelda's usual. They are young, beautiful maidens who occupy traditional female parts as, respectively, a dancer and a singer. The manuals describe Nayru as 'wise and serene' and Din as very beautiful. It turns out that they are oracles, possessed of important powers, yet they rely on Link to help them. They are kidnapped, as Zelda so often is, and must be rescued by Link.

In *The Minish Cap*, *Four Swords*, and *Four Swords Adventures*, both Zelda and Link are very young characters described as friends. This results in a somewhat simplified portrayal of both, although it is also consistent with the later, more developed characters. In *The Minish Cap*, Zelda is the daughter of the King of Hyrule and a childhood friend of Link, grandson of the Master Smith. He, with the help of the Picori, must rescue Zelda after she is turned to stone by Vaati. In *Four Swords* and *Four Swords Adventures*, Zelda is, as usual, a princess and in both games her foresight initiates the adventure when she senses trouble with the seal imprisoning the evil Wind Mage, Vaati. She brings Link with her to check on the evil magician and in both games ends up needing to be rescued by him. In *Four Swords Adventures*, she travels and fights with Link, but Link is required to defend her in order to prevent her four-part heart meter from being depleted completely, which would kill her and all the versions of Link. So once again, even when she accompanies Link, she is particularly vulnerable and relies on Link to protect her.

Like *Ocarina of Time*, *The Wind Waker* features a disguised version of Zelda. In this game, Hyrule has long been under water, and Link is a young boy who rescues a girl named Tetra, leads a band of pirates. When Link's sister is kidnapped, Tetra sails with Link to rescue her from the Forsaken Fortress. Ganon is behind the mischief, and he eventually recognizes that Tetra is yet another Princess Zelda, when he notices a piece of the Triforce of Wisdom worn as a pendant around her neck. Once the Triforce becomes whole again, Tetra is transformed into the traditional Zelda, but she still participates more actively in this adventure than Zelda usually does by wielding the crucial Light Arrows. Like Sheik, Tetra is somewhat different from the usual Zeldas, but unlike Sheik, she is initially unaware that she is in fact, Princess Zelda. She is associated with the Triforce of Wisdom, and as the leader of the pirate band displays some of

Zelda's usual status as a leader. Her royal blood eventually cements this characteristic. And like Sheik, her character is somewhat freed from Zelda's usual passivity.

Finally, *Twilight Princess* presents a very intriguing version of Zelda. Once again, she is royal and wise. In this game she is more than just a princess of Hyrule, she is the leader. She also possesses the Triforce of Wisdom, and has as much resolve as ever. She must wait, imprisoned, as Ganon turns her land into the Dark World and its people into spirits. She gives up her body to aid Midna, another instantiation of female royalty, and once again assists Link with the Light Arrows. Perhaps this continual association of Zelda and archery emphasizes her metaphorical distance from combat. By limiting her contribution in battle to firing arrows, which is typically done slightly removed from the actual fight, Zelda is allowed to help while still retaining something of her feminine isolation. Midna herself is a critical part of *Twilight Princess*, and like the oracles, her character is incredibly reminiscent of Zelda's. She too is a princess, royal and resolute.

All told, this exploration of the maidens throughout *The Legend of Zelda* series, Zelda incarnations and otherwise, displays a remarkable consistency. They are beautiful, wise, and remote. They are figurative leaders of their people but tend to plan for and assist with the inevitable struggle against evil rather than engage directly in the heroics of adventuring and fighting it. These maidens are consistently portrayed, as well as markedly distinct from the other kinds of female roles occasionally depicted in the Zelda games, but which also frequently match up with other typologies. So the question arises as to why it might be that the women of Zelda are so typological. What sort of conception of women underlies the formation and mythologizing of these sorts of icons: of maidens, mothers, and crones? One female philosopher

in particular, Simone de Beauvoir, said some incredibly insightful things about the common conception of woman that help explain the standardization of these characterizations.

The Mythology of Woman

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir acknowledges that there are very real differences between the sexes, but this is not to say that one is necessarily better or worse than the other.⁴ Beauvoir argues that differences in situational factors, which began with biological differences, account for the historical subordination of women that persists to this day. Women can get pregnant and are physiologically equipped to care for their young. Infants need much attention and care because they cannot survive independently. A woman that is tending to a newborn's needs is less likely to take care of her own, so this became the responsibility of the man in her life. This explains the origin of women's dependence on men. This dynamic has been reinforced through women's demotion to second-class citizen status and their institutional disadvantages in capitalist economies. Women are left with few means for adequately taking care of themselves and are therefore stuck in an unbreakable cycle of dependence upon men, which is subsequently taken as evidence of allegedly inherent inferiority.

Because women have been historically subordinated to men, this places men in a position of advantage and privilege over women. One consequence of this is that history is most often described from a male point-of-view, even though this represents only around half of the entire species. So, the definitions that have been established and accepted come from the male perspective, even those pertaining only to the female portion of the population. This may explain the discrepancy between the definitions for 'woman' and 'female.' Beauvoir points out that it is not enough to be a female to be a woman. Women are not born, but made, and they are both female and *feminine*. The notion of femininity is slippery and mysterious while at the same

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. Edited and translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

time pervasive and sought after: some men desire it, some women want to embody it, and other women reject it. This concept of femininity is integral to understanding what Beauvoir calls ‘the myth of woman.’

Beauvoir’s account of the myth of woman has three components: woman as Mother, woman as Wife, and woman as Idea. In referring to the myth of woman, Beauvoir is speaking of the view of woman as feminine, as voiced by man to serve his own interests and purposes. Describing femininity as a myth emphasizes the difficulty in comprehending what femininity is, since myths are ideas that transcend the mind and cannot be grasped in their entirety. The lack of ostensive description of femininity is attributed to the difficulties associated with comprehension of myths. And just as the typological female characters in the Zelda games correlate to different stereotypical female roles, the three parts of the myth of woman also represent different features of female life, isolating them so that they stand opposed to each other. This demarcation, both within the myth of woman and in the typologies, is not necessary, as the different parts of each are not mutually exclusive. But although it is plausible for one character to occupy space outside these characterizations, this possibility is seldom explored.

Stories and the female characters depicted in them are one channel through which ideas regarding femininity proliferate. The maiden, and Zelda as the paradigmatic maiden, appears to be what Beauvoir was describing with the third component of the mythology of woman, woman as Idea. There exist striking similarities between woman as Idea and the maiden typology. The phrase ‘woman as Idea’ is derived from the Platonic world in which Forms exist in their perfect state. Eternal and immutable, they are then instantiated in less-than-ideal versions in our world. Within this Platonic framework, different essences are possessed by man and by woman, and this explains the differences between the two. Beauvoir’s account of woman as Idea refers to an

ideal of femininity that individual women try to emulate. Though she personally rejected this view, this is why the myth of woman can be interpreted as the myth of femininity. While no permanent feminine ideal exists, many women and men act as if it does, and the ideal of femininity, or the Platonic woman, can be roughly sketched from Beauvoir's thoughts and comments on the Idea of woman that she disperses throughout her exploration of myths.

Cultural variations regarding standards of beauty are one source of difficulty in describing the feminine ideal. But even so, Beauvoir is committed to the necessity of the ideal's beauty, which can be determined by cultural norms. In addition to beautiful, she is also to be youthful and in good health. These traits appear in all known accounts of femininity. When virginity is added to the list, the result is that men find this combination constituting the feminine ideal erotically attractive. Zelda is young and beautiful, and she also seems healthy, or at least healthy enough to hold or hide the Triforce of Wisdom, defy Ganon, and survive imprisonment. While Zelda's virginity or lack thereof is never addressed, it seems reasonable to think of her as a virgin. Zelda is essentially virtuous, acting as the bodily representation of good throughout the Zelda games. In legends, these are generally attributes of the characters that are pure and virtuous, and virginity has long been associated with the notion of the pure and virtuous female.

The final feature Beauvoir discusses is that of the feminine body's possession of qualities of inertness and passivity. In contrast, masculinity is marked by fitness, strength, and action. Masculinity and femininity share an oppositional relation with one another, in that what one has, the other lacks. Hence, the man is active, and the woman is passive. Yet again, this is observable in Zelda. There are few ways to make a character more passive than by having her locked up in a distant castle, waiting for her hero to rescue her.

Given the dominance of the male perspective in historical and fictional accounts, it is unsurprising that stories from all epochs reflect this relation between man and woman. As the active figure, man is the hero of the story, and woman is the special prize that awaits him after he emerges as the victor. Her significance cannot be denied, since it is through her that the hero is allowed to succeed, and she serves as the driving force of his actions. But within the ideal of femininity, woman accepts man's dominance and submits to him. Consequently, victory involves woman's recognition of man as her destiny. This ideal is also reflected in Zelda, since she has been established as wise and with great foresight, yet passively and patiently waiting for Link to defeat Ganon and rescue her, and fulfilling her destiny.

So woman is essential to the hero's journey insofar as she provides him with the vehicle to project his transcendence. At the same time, her passivity likens her to an object and she is little more than a mere thing. A result of this is that she ceases to be regarded as a living being, and instead resembles an ideal or glorification. This objectification can be seen in the Zelda games, both literally and metaphorically. Without the tasks of rescuing Zelda and piecing the Triforce of Wisdom back together, there would be no journey for Link to embark upon. Because of Zelda, Link can become a hero; and without Zelda, there would be no games at all. In *The Minish Cap* Zelda is literally an object, since her body has been turned to stone. In *The Adventure of Link*, Zelda spends the entire game in a deep slumber until awoken by Link. This objectification can be observed in other games as well in that Zelda is hidden away in a remote location, and her lack of physical presence lends itself to not thinking of her character as a real living and breathing person. Link is motivated to rescue her from the passive captivity forced upon her by Ganon, which denies her the ability to act for herself. This essential yet distant role of Zelda allows her to be glorified and objectified, personifying woman as Idea.

According to Beauvoir, the problem with this objectification or glorification of the feminine ideal is that it does not necessarily reflect reality. But it still impacts the reality of women in terms of how they see themselves. And since there is not necessarily a strong link between the Idea and reality, there are many instances when a particular individual is deemed as not living up to the feminine ideal. Unfortunately, instead of questioning the ideal itself, the woman tends to be criticized for her lack of compliance. The result of this is that a woman must either accept her passivity and be regarded as a 'true woman,' or she can assert herself, act independently, and cease to be attractive to man. Fortunately, this seems to be a dated attitude, and there are reasons to be optimistic regarding changes in the ideals of femininity and woman in both stories and reality.

Zelda and Reality

There are several reasons why the way women are portrayed, in *Zelda* and in other story forms, has an impact of the role of actual women in the real world. For one, how the creators of these video games portray women reveals something about how they view women. It also reveals something about what portrayals of women they think will be most persuasive and compelling to those who might buy and play their games. But most importantly, it reveals something about what feels realistic to the designers and to the players. This is because these video games strive to mimic reality. This mimicry is not the sort that tries to make something look precisely realistic, but rather to make it feel real.

This phenomenon is explained by a creator of several games in the *Zelda* series, Eiji Aonuma. He describes the philosophy of the inventor of *Zelda*, Shigeru Miyamoto, in the following passage: "Zelda is a game that values reality over realism. In the art world, realism is a movement which faithfully replicates the real world to whatever extent possible. Reality,

though, is not mimicking the real world. The big difference is that even using more exaggerated expression can be an effective means of making things feel more real.”⁵ So games in *The Legend of Zelda* series do not try to exactly replicate the real world. What they try and do is make a player feel like when they play a Zelda game, they are in a real world.

So although the characters in the Zelda games are not meant to look and act precisely like real people, they are meant to feel like real people. That presents an interesting question: what is it about these stereotypical accounts of women, particularly the maiden princess Zelda, which feel so real? Is it just that they are familiar figures from literature and other portrayals? Or is it that they represent how women are actually perceived, and what their roles are really thought to be? Perhaps it is something of both. And although the women of Zelda are often stereotypically and ideally feminine, they are not always so.

The Zelda games often portray Zelda as the epitome of the ideal of femininity, but they also contain occasional digressions from it, particularly in the two characters that are revealed as disguised versions of Zelda herself. Sheik and Tetra are far less passive than the other Zelda instantiations, and participate in the action more than the other women in the Zelda games. It may be significant that Zelda is represented as different characters with different names when she behaves in a manner that is more masculine than feminine, but it is still promising that she is allowed the opportunity to take action. If this is due to the importance creators of the Zelda games place on making the experience feel real, then perhaps this indicates a shift in the dominant attitudes toward and perceptions of femininity. Beauvoir saw a link between the way man defines and portrays woman, and the objective reality both inhabit. Her analysis offers an interesting explanation for why there is an ideal of femininity and what it constitutes. This idea

⁵ This quote is from an edited transcript of a speech made on March 24 by Eiji Aonuma at the 2004 Game Developers Conference in San Jose.

is often exhibited by the way women are portrayed in the *Zelda* games as well as many other sources, and changes in the portrayals may result from changes in the conceptions of woman and femininity.

Perhaps changes in the reality of *Zelda* reflect real changes, and if the definition of woman really changes, then perhaps changes in women's status, perceptions, and relationships will follow.