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Playing as the Princess: Nintendo, Gender Roles, and Echoes of Wisdom

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REPRESENTATIONS

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On June 18, 2024, during a 45-minute Nintendo Direct presentation, fans were shocked to see an announcement trailer for the newest installment in the long-running and beloved *The Legend of Zelda* (LoZ) franchise. Nintendo often announces new games in the series many years ahead of their release dates. Therefore, a new LoZ game only a few months later was a huge surprise.[1] However, the announcement created waves among fans for a different reason: *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom* would finally feature the titular Princess Zelda as the playable protagonist for the first time[2] in the nearly 40-year history of the franchise—something Nintendo claimed they would *never* do.

Nintendo has been "shaking up" the conventions of the LoZ series for a while now, with recent installments attempting (and arguably succeeding) to broaden the audience appeal of these fantasy action-adventure games. While the LoZ series certainly broke free from long-standing patterns of gameplay and world design, it did not break away from traditional gender conventions.[3] Specifically, it adhered to the tired dynamic between the series' male playable protagonist and hero, Link, and Princess Zelda, the perennially disempowered and victimized damsel in distress.

Echoes of Wisdom (EoW), therefore, appears to be the perfect opportunity to turn these longstanding gendered tropes on their head. With its complex and innovative gameplay and level design, EoW seamlessly merges mechanics from the 2D and 3D installments. Yet, despite being a story in which you play *as* Zelda, EoW is not a story *about* Zelda. What we (both as fans and academics studying games and representation) wanted more than anything out of EoW was to experience what it was like to *be* Zelda, to finally have her front and center and learn more about her thoughts, feelings, and motivations. Instead,

Zelda takes on Link's role as the silent protagonist; she dons Link's cloak and is no longer recognizable to the people of Hyrule—even the king's guards, who are actively searching for her and plastering wanted posters with a drawing of her face around Hyrule, fail to identify her.

> *Zelda is by far the most interesting and well-developed character in the LoZ series, but all that seems to fade away when playing EoW. It is easy to forget that you are not, in fact, playing as Link.*

As the player works their way through the world of EoW as Zelda, they save residents and repair Hyrule while being constantly confronted with characters thinking Zelda is Link, and talking about Link and his heroics. Any personality or character Zelda has in EoW is externally projected by the player, as the game gives the audience very little. While this makes perfect sense for Link (who is often described as a "blank slate") and would have been completely logical if the EoW protagonist was a female reincarnation of Link—something fans have been requesting for years—it feels wrong for Zelda to be the silent protagonist, the blank slate. From her gender-bending role as Sheik in *Ocarina of Time* (1998) to her time-travelling adventures in *Tears of the Kingdom* (2023), Zelda is by far the most interesting and well-developed character in the LoZ series, but all that seems to fade away when playing EoW. It is easy to forget that you are not, in fact, playing as Link. This leads us to question the impact EoW is having and will have on the ongoing discourse around the fraught relationship between games and gender representation.

Why Did It Take So Long for Zelda to Get Her Own Game?

Women have always been severely underrepresented in video games, especially as playable characters. When girls and women are present, they are often nonplayable characters (NPCs) portrayed in stereotypical and/or sexualized roles. The stereotypical damsel-in-distress role that Zelda usually finds herself in as an NPC has been especially prevalent in video games, because it provides a simple and clear gameplay goal for the player (save the princess, or daughter, or wife, etc.). While the number of playable women characters in games has improved in recent years,[4] these characters still generally fail to portray a range of diverse experiences, subject positions, and bodies. Representation in video games is particularly impactful on players' identities because gameplay encourages identification and empathy through the virtual embodiment of playable characters. Although women make up half the audience for video games,[5] they do not, as Shira Chess has noted, "have a strong sense of ownership over the medium."[6] Games culture is rife with toxicity and exclusionary practices toward anyone who deviates from the socially accepted idea of a "gamer,"[7] and the problematic representational trends in games are undoubtedly tied to the fact that the diversity of the audience is not reflected in games industry employee demographics.[8]

Nintendo is a key player in the video game industry—it is the oldest game company and the fourth largest

(in terms of revenue) as of this writing—therefore their choices regarding female representation have deep and lasting impacts on video games as a medium as well as the industry and culture surrounding it. While there are games with playable female protagonists made by other companies, Nintendo has preferred to stay away from anything that could be considered controversial instead focusing on their beloved and lucrative established formats, which feature their star (male) characters; Mario alone has over 200 games to his name. Therefore, Nintendo's deviation from this formula in EoW is a significant moment in the history of games.

Link is by no means a hypermasculine, macho kind of hero. Inspired by Peter Pan with his green tunic and cap, Link is generally portrayed as an elf-like, petite, feminine, blonde-haired, blue-eyed young boy or man who was purposely designed to seem "gender-neutral." Fans have also long noted a queer-coding of Link, and in both BOTW and TOTK Link can cross-dress and wear feminine-coded clothing.

However, Link has always been "definitely a male," according to Nintendo, despite his perceived gender neutrality. Many fans have long called for either a female version of Link or for Nintendo to finally let them play as Zelda. It is *her* legend after all. Yet in every installment (other than *Majora's Mask*, where she does not appear), Zelda has been disempowered and victimized, usually by the series' recurring villain, Ganon/Ganondorf, or his henchmen.

According to the series' lore, Zelda is incredibly powerful, but that doesn't stop her from being kidnapped, turned to stone, imprisoned in a crystal, put to sleep, turned into a painting, possessed, or, in *Breath of the Wild*, sacrificing herself again and again, only appearing as either a disembodied voice or in optional cinematic flashbacks for the majority of the narrative. Notable exceptions include her disguise as the masculine Sheik from the 1998 *Ocarina of Time* (who is always one step ahead of Link),[9] or her tomboyish incarnation as pirate captain Tetra 2003's *The Wind Waker*.

The "male hero rescues victimized female damsel" formula is a tried-and-true heroic power fantasy, common in all media,[10] but fans, critics, and scholars have been asking for years why women always have to be the victims instead of the heroes. This is especially important because Nintendo has always marketed *The Legend of Zelda* toward boys—sometimes aggressively and offensively so, with original advertisements for *Ocarina of Time* asking "Willst thou get the girl? Or play like one?" Girls and women have always played these games and have always seen themselves as the hero (or wanted to!)[11] and yet they have not been included as part of the presumed audience.

For many years, every LoZ trailer has resulted in fan speculation, excitement, and hope that maybe this time Princess Zelda would be along for the adventure. Teaser trailers for the two most recent mainline games in the series, *Breath of the Wild* (BOTW) and *Tears of the Kingdom* (TOTK) raised hopes, only for them to be dashed once the full-length trailers made it clear that Link is still the (male) playable protagonist and emphasized Zelda's helplessness by showing her as nothing more than a disembodied voice or falling in a black pit and vanishing.

As disappointing as this trend has been, it's not shocking to fans who had been following these

discussions for a long time. In a 2016 interview, LoZ series producer Eiji Aonuma famously said, “The Triforce is made up of Princess Zelda, Ganon, and Link. Princess Zelda is obviously female. If we made Link a female, we thought that would mess with the balance of the Triforce. That’s why we decided not to do it.”[12] However, as Sarah Stang argues,[13] this statement is nonsensical,

> particularly because the Triforce, being three-fold, is already unbalanced, with two men and one woman. The Triforce, which is a sacred relic embodying the power of the three goddesses who created the realm of Hyrule, is made up of Courage (represented by Link), Wisdom (represented by Zelda), and Power (represented by Ganon). By claiming that making Link female would unbalance the Triforce, Aonuma is implying that courage cannot be represented by a woman.

The trailer for EoW demonstrated that Nintendo was aware of this discourse. Zelda is first shown trapped in crystal prison (a typical role for her)[14] with Link attempting to save her (his typical role). Link manages to destroy the crystal, but is then sucked into a “rift” of darkness, subverting audience expectations. Zelda has to run away from the growing rift until she finds herself standing on the edge of a cliff looking over Hyrule (just as Link has in previous trailers), making it clear that we will finally be exploring the world as Zelda.





Comparisons of Link (above) and Zelda (below) looking over Hyrule in their respective games. (Source: Nintendo, 2024).

The Sword and Shield Got in the Way

In another interview, Aonuma also addressed the idea of having a female protagonist in the series saying, "We thought about it and decided that, if we're going to have a female protagonist, it's simpler to have Princess Zelda as the main character."[15] However, the idea was rejected, because they thought, "If we have Princess Zelda as the main character who fights, then what is Link going to do?" As Stang observes, "The idea of letting the Princess rescue Link for once was completely dismissed for fear of leaving Link with nothing to do—or worse, being disempowered or imprisoned as Zelda is in every single game."[16] This perspective was so endemic to the conceptualization of the LoZ series that EoW *was* initially designed with Link as the protagonist.

This bombshell was dropped as part of a four-part "Ask the Developer" interview with Aonuma, Tomomi Sano (the game's director from the Nintendo side), and Satoshi Terada (the game's director from coproduction company Grezzo).[17] In early iterations of EoW, Link would walk around the game environment with the ability to "copy" certain game assets and "paste" them into different scenarios.[18] This "copying and pasting" mechanic eventually became the "echoes" mechanic that allows players to conjure over 100 in-game objects and enemies in different scenarios to access areas, solve puzzles, complete quests, and defeat monsters.

It was only later in the development process (unclear how much later but more than a year) that they found that the echo mechanic was incompatible with Link's character. As Aonuma explains, when using echoes, Link's "sword and shield got in the way. If you have a sword and a shield, you can just fight using

those. There's no need to rely on the monsters' power, right?" Therefore, the addition of Zelda as the protagonist did not come about because she deserves her own game, but as the solution to a game design problem. While disappointing to hear, it was not surprising. In the end, this might be why the gameplay works so well—instead of being limited by ideas of what Zelda can and cannot do as a protagonist, we now know that the developers were putting the same care into the game as they would if Link had been the protagonist.

However, as a result, the game feels like Zelda is simply a stand-in for Link. She wears his cloak to hide her identity, and other characters often mistake her for Link, who has already established himself as a hero in Hyrule. Their responses to learning that they are not speaking to Link betray their sense of disappointment and their longing to be rescued by a "real" hero.



Screenshot from The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom (Source: Nintendo, 2024).



Screenshot from The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom (Source: Nintendo, 2024).

Throughout EoW Zelda wields a magical staff called a "Tri Rod" that she uses to create "echoes" of objects or monsters to help her solve puzzles, fight enemies, and proceed through the game. Following the game's release, critics were quick to voice their disappointment with this choice,[19] wondering why Zelda couldn't have fought in a more active way as Link does, though others saw it as a positive gameplay choice.[20]

It is worth noting that Zelda also uses Link's weapons (sword, shield, bow, etc.) by transforming into a "swordfighter form." This power can only be used for seconds at a time before it runs out. The magic needed to replenish the swordfighter form meter is difficult to find in some areas of the game and plentiful in others, making it clear when and where you are intended to use this special sword fighting power.

While we are enjoying the unique and challenging gameplay in EoW, we acknowledge that it can be frustrating to take on the role of a magic user who deploys echoes and waits for them to kill enemies, when you are so accustomed to playing a LoZ game as Link who hacks and slashes many enemies very quickly, no waiting required. One critic went as far as to say that when using the Tri Rod, as opposed to a sword, they felt disempowered, hoping that "the next time we play as Zelda, it feels more empowering."[21] While we would not say that we felt disempowered, Zelda's adoption of the "copy-paste" echoes mechanic is symbolically resonant: In some ways, it feels like she is simply a copy-pasted version of the series' iconic silent hero.

Aonuma has admitted that he is well aware of how long fans of the series have been begging to play as Zelda:[22]

> Over the years we've been working on The Legend of Zelda series, many people have often asked us, "Will Princess Zelda ever be the protagonist?' and "I'd like to play as Princess Zelda." When asked this question, I've always thought, "Of course, as long as it makes sense for the game and does justice to her as a character to be the protagonist," and answered that way. I had been trying in vain to figure out what would really do justice to her. But when I saw the team struggling to identify the ideal protagonist for this game, I thought, this is exactly the game for her!

But, knowing that this game was designed with Link, and not Zelda, in mind, and she was simply swapped in for the male hero, it becomes doubtful that EoW is doing "justice" to her character. We find it rather telling that when the interviewer asks Aonuma about having the "courage" to make Zelda the protagonist, he replies that they "had a lot of trouble deciding on Princess Zelda's outfit," because she could not wear her recognizable princess dress on the adventure, at least for the first part of the game. To disguise herself, Zelda wears Link's hooded cloak, an almost symbolic reversal of how she is simply a reskinned Link. Has Zelda, as the silent protagonist, lost her personality, appearance, and voice and become a Link stand-in?

In EoW, Zelda is no longer an NPC, but she is primarily identified by her relationship to Link…, Link's visual properties…, as well as narrative connection and promotional materials.

Aonuma claims that "Princess Zelda is on her own adventure, so the story takes on a different perspective than before" yet very little in the game feels particular to Zelda's experience. In fact, in some ways it feels like EoW falls into the trap of what Anita Sarkeesian has called the "Ms. Male Character" trope—i.e., "a female version of an already established or default male character. Ms. Male Characters are defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection or occasionally through promotional materials."[23] In EoW, Zelda is no longer an NPC, but she is primarily identified by her relationship to Link (i.e., that she is the one saving everyone instead of him), Link's visual properties (cloak and weapons), as well as narrative connection and promotional materials.

It is important to note that this was not the case in other Zelda games. Even when Zelda took on an active and masculine role as Sheik in *Ocarina of Time* or Tetra in *Wind Waker*, there was no way to argue that she was simply a female version of Link, as she had her own clear design, personality, and abilities. While being a copy-paste of Link is better than being a sexualized version of Link (as we saw with *Hyrule Warrior*'s Linkle) or a character whose hyperfemininity is her only character trait, it's still a far cry from the Zelda we know and love, and the playable and empowered Zelda we were hoping for.

A New Beginning for Zelda?

Since its release on September 26, 2024, EoW has proven to be a critical success, with a Metacritic score

of 86.[24] However, despite the palpable excitement for EoW and the ability to finally play as the princess, we cannot help but wonder if this is the game that a complex, rich, and fascinating character like Zelda deserves. Is this enough to answer fans' cries for an empowered playable female character in a LoZ game?

Regardless of how fans feel about Zelda's in-game abilities or the history of her as a stand-in for Link, it's clear that Nintendo and other companies have finally started listening to criticisms of the damsel-in-distress trope[25] and fans' demands for playable female characters and protagonists who are more than tokens, stereotypes, or sex symbols. Earlier this year, Nintendo released *Princess Peach Showtime*, which similarly lets players take on the role of a more dynamic, empowered Princess Peach from their long-standing Mario series.

We can show our support by buying, playing, celebrating, and talking about these games and by continuing to advocate for more inclusive games and the games industry. However, we should also call for Nintendo to do more, to do better. Will Zelda be the playable protagonist in the next "main" big-budget installment in the series, rather than a smaller-scale game like EoW? Will that hypothetical future game be designed for her from the ground up?

The questions do not stop at in-game content and representation. Nintendo, like many game companies, should also take a look at their own sexist hiring practices and policies,[26] the accusations of sexual harassment and misconduct levied against them, and address the huge gender pay gap between their employees leading to only 4.2 percent of managers at Nintendo Japan being women.[27]

Although this is only one game in one series, it speaks to the ongoing and underlying inequality at the heart of the game industry. While letting us play as Zelda—even if she is just a reskinned Link inserted for the sake of the game's main mechanic—is certainly a step in the right direction, there is still a lot of work to be done in the ongoing (and seemingly endless) fight against sexism, misogyny, misrepresentation, and erasure in games.

Footnotes

1 This left only three months for marketing EoW, an incredibly short window for any modern video game, let alone one as historic as this. Leading up to the release, it appeared that Nintendo was not promoting EoW as much as they have past games. For example, the game launched without a collector's edition, strategy guide, or unique Amiibo, which has become standard with new Zelda games. While these items may still be coming, we can't help but wonder if there would have been more fanfare, more promotion, and more merchandise if Link was the star of EoW.

2 This is the first time Zelda has been the playable protagonist in a mainline LoZ game. Zelda has technically been playable previously in noncanon entries, spin-offs, or as one of many avatars in Nintendo games with a large cast of characters. These include *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (1993) and *Zelda's Adventure* (1996) for the Philips CD-I; *Super Smash Bros. Melee* for the GameCube (2001), *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for the Nintendo Wii (2008); *Super Smash Bros.* for Nintendo 3DS and Wii U (2014); *Hyrule Warriors* (2014) for the Wii U; and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018), *Cadence of Hyrule* (2019), and *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity* (2020) for the Switch.

3 Sarah M. Stang, "(Re-)balancing the Triforce: Gender Representation and Androgynous Masculinity in the Legend of Zelda Series," *Human Technology* 15, no. 3 (2019): 367–389, https://ht.csr-pub.eu/index.php/ht/article/view/276.

4 Carolyn Petit, "More Video Games Featured Women This Year. Will It Last?" *Wired*, October 5, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/women-video-games-representation-e3/.

5 Entertainment Software Association (ESA), *2024 Essential Facts About the US Video Game Industry* (Washington, DC: ESA, 2024); Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC), *Bringing Canadians Together through Gaming: Essential Facts 2022* (Ajax, ON: ESAC, 2022).

6 Shira Chess, *Play like a Feminist* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 4.

7 Amanda C. Cote, *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

8 Shruti Kumar et al., *Developer Satisfaction Survey 2021: Diversity in the Game Industry Report* (Sacramento, CA: International Game Developers Association (IGDA), 2022).

9 Chris Lawrence, "What If Zelda Wasn't a Girl? Problematizing *Ocarina of Time*'s Great Gender Debate," in *Queerness in Play*, eds. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 97–113.

10 Emma Vossen, "There and Back Again: Tolkien, Gamers, and the Remediation of Exclusion through Fantasy Media," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 37–65, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2020.6.1.37.

11 Emma Vossen, "On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse" (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018), http://hdl.handle.net/10012/13649.

12 Stephen Totilo, "*Zelda* Producer Explains Why, Despite Speculation, The New Link Is a Guy," *Kotaku*, June 14, 2016, https://kotaku.com/zelda-producer-explains-why-despite-speculation-the-n-1781973528.

13 Stang, "(Re-)balancing the Triforce," 382.

14 The crystal prison is a very common trope in anime and video games. Zelda has found herself in a crystal prison in *Ocarina of Time*, *Four Swords Adventures*, and *Skyward Sword*. Other female or female-coded characters find themselves in crystal prisons in *A Link to the Past* and *Oracle of Seasons*. There was also a choose your own adventure book called *The Crystal Trap* released in 1992 that features Link trapped in a crystal both in the story and on the cover, and Zelda as the main character looking to free him. EoW does reverse this by briefly showing Link trapped in the crystal as well, later in the game.

15 Peter Brown, "Why Zelda: Breath of the Wild Won't Have a Female Hero," *GameSpot*, June 14, 2016, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/why-zelda-breath-of-the-wild-wont-have-a-female-he/1100-6440862/.

16 Stang, "(Re-)balancing the Triforce," 382.

17 The interview was featured on Nintendo's website a few days before EoW's September 26, 2024, release date. Sano was the first female director of a LoZ game, having previously worked on the remakes of *Ocarina of Time 3D* (2011), *Majora's Mask 3D* (2015), *Twilight Princess HD* (2016), and *Link's Awakening* (2019). Grezzo has partnered with Nintendo to produce several LoZ remakes, but EoW was the first time that they worked on a new installment in the series.

18 "Ask the Developer Vol. 13, The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom – Chapter 1," Nintendo, September 23, 2024, https://www.nintendo.com/en-gb/News/2024/September/Ask-the-Developer-Vol-13-The-Legend-of-Zelda-Echoes-of-Wisdom-Chapter-1-2659909.html.

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20 Zoë Hannah, "Echoes of Wisdom's Swordless Zelda Is Not about What's Canon — It's about Good Gameplay," *Polygon*, June 18, 2024, https://www.polygon.com/24181059/legend-of-zelda-echoes-wisdom-why-no-sword-gameplay-nintendo-link.

21 Keza MacDonald, "The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom Review – A Lot to Learn," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/games/2024/sep/25/the-legend-of-zelda-echoes-of-wisdom-review-a-lot-to-learn.

22 "Ask the Developer Vol. 13, The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom – Chapter 3," Nintendo, September 24, 2024, https://www.nintendo.com/en-gb/News/2024/September/Ask-the-Developer-Vol-13-The-Legend-of-Zelda-Echoes-of-Wisdom-Chapter-3-2659712.html.

23 "Ms. Male Character – Tropes vs Women in Video Games," directed by Anita Sarkeesian, posted November 18, 2013, by Feminist Frequency, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYqYLfm1rWA&t=2s.

24 In contrast the remake of *Link's Awakening* also made in a collaboration between Nintendo and Grezzo has a Metacritic score of 87, and the last LoZ game released, *Tears of the Kingdom*, has a score of 96.

25 "Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games," directed by Anita Sarkeesian, posted March 7, 2013, by Feminist Frequency, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6p5AZp7r_Q.

26 Sisi Jiang, "Nintendo of America's Testers Say They Faced Years of Sexual Harassment," *Kotaku*, August 16, 2022, https://kotaku.com/nintendo-of-america-sexual-harassment-sexism-aerotek-1849414921.

27 Jim Norman, "Percentage of Female Managers at Nintendo Hasn't Improved, Despite Pledges," *NintendoLife*, July 7, 2023, https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2023/07/percentage-of-female-managers-at-nintendo-hasnt-improved-despite-pledges.