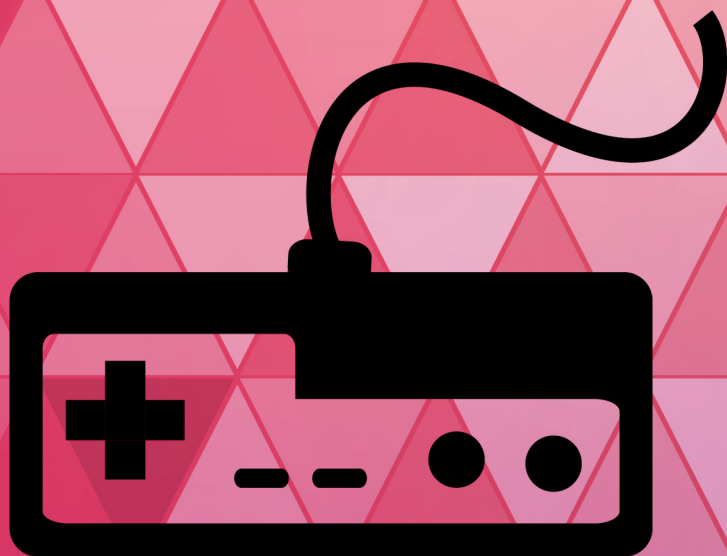# 100

GREATEST

VIDEO GAME

FRANCHISES

**Edited by Robert Mejia,
Jaime Banks, and Aubrie Adams**

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Video Game Franchises

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Contents

audience necessary to propel *LoL* to the forefront of professional eSports. The popularity of Riot's structured competitive leagues and worldwide competitions contributed to the growing acceptance of eSports in general as well as among traditional sporting outlets. For all of these reasons, *League of Legends* clearly established itself as being in a league of its own.

Similar Franchises: *Counterstrike* (1999), *Defense of the Ancients* (2002), *Heroes of Newerth* (2010)

—Joseph A. Fordham, Alex P. Leith, and Rabindra A. Ratan

THE LEGEND OF SWORD AND FAIRY

(est. 1995)
Platform: DOS
Developer: Softstar

Digital gaming in China remained a relatively peripheral activity for the technologically enlightened only until the early 1990s because personal computers were relatively rare. Apart from a Chinese replica of the Nintendo Entertainment System, Xiaobawang, released in 1993, which introduced pirated, classic Nintendo games to a general audience, the PC quickly became the dominant gaming platform from the mid-1990s onward. As one of the earliest indigenous Chinese PC games, *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (1995), published by the Taiwanese company *Softstar* and created by Yao Zhuangxian and his team, is often celebrated as the most classic role-playing game in the Chinese-speaking world. The historical reason why the game enjoys such an unsurpassed status is that it was published during a brief period of surging creativity and experimental game design in the Taiwanese gaming industry. The initial popularity of *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (*TLSF*) and a few other Chinese franchises such as *Heroes of Jin Yong* was followed by a drastic decline in the development of single-player games and a mass exodus to massively multiplayer online (MMO) game development in the 2000s, likely due to rampant pirating and huge profit margins. In the words of the lead developer of *TLSF*, Yao Zhuangxian, "The golden age for single-player games never came [in China]." In other words, with the industry-wide withdrawal from making single-player and narrative-driven games in China and rise of the predominantly free-to-play massively multiplayer online games, *TLSF* serves as a historical reminder of the short-lived prosperity of Chinese-made single-player video games.

The story of *TLSF* is based on Chinese mythology and revolves around the ambiguous relationships between the protagonist sword-master Li Xiaoyao and his two female betrothed companions. This setting seems to appeal to a stereotypical Chinese teenage-male fantasy: the coming of age of a confused adolescent in a triangle relationship between two archetypal, idealized women. The first woman, Ling'er, is an innocent, submissive, and adorable girl who turns out to be an heiress of the ancient clan of Nüwa (a mythological goddess who patched the sky and

created humanity). The second woman, Yueru, seems to be an arrogant and pampered girl from a prestigious family until she decides to sacrifice her life to rescue Ling'er after realizing Ling'er is pregnant with Xiaoyao's child. This represents a significant departure from traditional Chinese narratives: despite her first appearance as a representation of traditional femininity, Ling'er actually prioritizes her role as protector of the realm instead of her role as a wife or a companion. In other words, female characters in *TLSF* are not simply objectified support characters for a male protagonist as in most modern Chinese fantasy novels.[7] *TLSF* invented a narrative genre and characters that many woman gamers could identify with, and it was consequently one of the few games that was successful at bringing women into digital gaming in China.

Even though *TLSF* is heavily influenced by the system design of turn-based Japanese role-playing games, it still remains an unsurpassed classic in China even twenty years after its successful release and is fondly remembered precisely because of its very emotional storytelling, which appeals to both Chinese men and women. For many players,[8] the game was their first affective experience in video games: ecstasy, anger, restlessness, and sorrow were poetically interwoven in the details of objects, dialogues, images, and even combat. Each object, except for generic consumables, had its own hidden story. For instance, one of the first items obtained in the game is a pair of cloth shoes handcrafted by a female non-player character who is secretly in love with Xiaoyao, and exploring this relationship is an optional side-quest independent of the main story line. Likewise, fan reaction to the death of Yueru was comparable to the sadness fans of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) felt at the death of Aerith Gainsborough. In the case of *TLSF*, this emotional response arose from the game's compelling re-creation of Chinese sceneries, the graduate buildup of Yueru and Xiaoyao's relationship during their search for Ling'er, and the final emotional moment when Yueru sacrificed her life to save Ling'er.

TLSF has been retold and remade into dramas and TV shows countless times over the past two decades, but the emotional intensity of each player's initial encounter with the game cannot be replicated—this speaks to the powerful impact of the original experience of the game. The cultural significance of *TLSF* comes from its very original introduction and adaptation of Chinese literary storytelling to the format of a video game, and as such *TLSF* established a very emotional bond with the first generation of both male and female Chinese gamers.

However, though the franchise has seen nine releases that attempted to replicate the initial success of *TLSF* by adding new stories and characters but with a similar game design and narrative style, the characters and stories in the following sequels were less memorable, as the novelty had already been exhausted. In the end, by setting the bar so high, *TLSF* became a point of comparison and set a limit for Chinese role-playing games that prevented the industry from continually innovating. After the rise of massively multiplayer online games in the 2000s, the game industry never diversified from this narrative model— Chinese-language games made exclusively for a native audience never actively sought out an international audience until recently with some massively multiplayer online games. As a result, the development of single-player games never escaped from the shadow of *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*'s success or the over-

whelming economic success of massively multiplayer online games, and hence this sector of the industry shrank to a marginal existence.

Similar Franchises: *Heroes of Jin Yong* (1996), *Legend of Swordman* (1997), *Xuan-Yuan Sword* (1990)

—Ge Zhang

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

(est. 1986)
Platform: Nintendo Entertainment System
Developer: Nintendo R&D4

It's a franchise that hardly needs introduction. Few gamers, if any, would have a hard time recalling Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka's *The Legend of Zelda*. Even non-gamers would likely recognize that sword and bow-and-arrow wielding, mostly mute hero and his eponymous princess. Time and time again, after shattering the powerful Triforce of Wisdom, Zelda is captured by the evil Ganon (aka, Ganondorf) and in need of saving by the elvish Link. Though it would be easy to look at the franchise as a static retelling of the same story over and over again, such a perspective would obscure the complex themes taken up in each entry as well as the substantial impact the franchise has had on video gaming culture.

Each iteration of the franchise provides a new narrative for the roaming lad in green. The details of each, while captivating, surpass easy review. And debate will certainly rage over which game in the franchise is the greatest. Yet looking back over the thirty years since *The Legend of Zelda* was released, particular elements of the game have been maintained over time. The gameplay of the *Zelda* franchise has been relatively consistent. Generally speaking, the *Zelda* series follows a format in which gaining access to weapons and abilities allows the player to progress to increasingly complex dungeons replete with puzzles, each hiding its own treasure (e.g., boomerang, bow, ice rod) that will often enable access to the next dungeon. As the Nintendo consoles improved in technology, gamers found new perspectives of the central hero, ranging from the traditional top-down view found in the original game to a more first- and third-person perspective as commonly found in role-playing games.

Within each game's narrative, gamers grapple with pseudo-religious themes of good versus evil, growing up, and self-sacrifice. Like many fantasy games, there is a special emphasis on larger issues of morality because Link and Zelda are portrayed as good and wise, while Ganon (or whatever villain the hero faces in each installment) is understood as evil. This simplistic positioning belies the remarkable complexity that exists between the games, especially viewing the overall narrative across seventeen games and over three decades. In the franchise as a whole, morality is touched with spiritual and theological notes (especially in *Majora's Mask*) that have been linked to other elements of religion, philosophy, and theology.[9] This complexity is also due, in part, to the use of the