THE NINTENDO 64: NINTENDO'S ADULT PLATFORM? THE DICHOTOMY OF NINTENDO AND

CHILDREN'S VIDEO GAMES


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# Contents

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**Introduction**

When the Nintendo 64 was released in 1996, *TIME Magazine* gave it the distinction of "Machine of the Year," arguing that Nintendo had revitalized the somewhat stagnant video game console market of the 1990s, which had offered little more than incremental hardware upgrades and mostly unsuccessful add-on devices. In his enthusiastic end-of-year review of the console, *TIME*'s Michael Krantz contended that "Nintendo's marquee product will be the machine that most fully influences our children's introduction to the mind-boggling potential of digital technology," and that the platform represented "the first glimpse of [the] future" of video game hardware (73).

TIME's prognostication was not fulfilled: by the time the Nintendo 64 was discontinued in 2001, it had sold 33 million units worldwide—less than either of its predecessors (Nintendo Co., Ltd). Sony's rival PlayStation console (in its lengthier shelf life from 1995 to 2005) would top 100 million units (Sony Computer Entertainment), a figure which must have been particularly galling for Nintendo, given their tumultuous history with Sony.[1] Despite *TIME's* positive reception of the Nintendo 64 as the "new standard in electronic entertainment," the console was only approximately a third as successful as the PlayStation on the global market, suggesting that Nintendo had not succeeded in ushering in a new future for video games. Simply put, the overall gaming community saw the PlayStation console as a more worthwhile purchase.

Of course, *TIME's* review of the Nintendo 64 can be interrogated from more than a simple sales perspective. The console was certainly not lacking in innovation, as was clear to contemporary reviewers of the Nintendo 64 like Krantz. The console—known frequently by both players and Nintendo's marketing teams as the "N64"—represented a shift in the commercial video game industry toward the development of a rapidly increasing number of games in three-dimensional space: a graphical revolution compared to the more rudimentary pixel-based games released on most previous consoles. Perhaps most importantly, the N64 controller's analog control stick—which was long, sturdy, and featured a perforated plastic grip—allowed for 360-degree movement in these 3D worlds and was key to the success of the platform's 3D gamespaces. In fact, almost every major home console controller designed after the N64 has featured at least one similar control stick, making the N64 controller an important development in the creation and growth of 3D games. An illustration of the N64's controller, including its control stick, can be see in Figure 1 in the appendix.

Krantz's review of the system was more perceptive in its discussion of the N64 as a gaming device for children, and it is here where this paper finds its topic. To what degree did the N64 (and Nintendo more broadly) succeed in being a conduit for the introduction of

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[1] Nintendo and Sony had teamed up to develop a "Nintendo PlayStation" multimedia console in the early 1990s, but Nintendo's last minute departure from the deal resulted in Sony developing its PlayStation console as a direct competitor to Nintendo's.

children to digital technology? How effective, and how consistent, was Nintendo's child-focussed strategy with the N64 platform? These are but two of the key questions that this paper takes up approximately 21 years after the N64's release. Specifically, I intend to argue that Nintendo, as they had done with their previous home consoles, initially focussed their efforts with the N64 on child players in an attempt to maintain the successes they reaped with their earlier home console platforms. Although some aspects of these early games may have appealed to adult players, they were recognizably children's media first and foremost. However, a shift occurred in 1998, when Nintendo attempted to diversify their child-centered marketing strategy, as several games were released in this period that appeared to be appropriate for children, but in reality began to experiment with adult themes (including humour and violence) in order to appeal to both children and adults simultaneously. A final push, from approximately 2000 to the console's discontinuation in the next year, saw the release of even more mature games, with Rare's exclusive N64 title *Conker's Bad Fur Day* in particular contradicting nearly all of the principles previously established by the N64's earliest software offerings, which had been consciously and carefully developed for children. Although Nintendo continued to release child-friendly spin-off games from franchises like *Mario* and *Pokémon* throughout the console's lifecycle (therefore not abandoning their child audience entirely), the platform's most significant releases began targeting a broader audience, and subsequently became more mature in tone, making the console's overall software library rather ambivalent in its general age designation. The timing of these increasingly mature software releases ultimately suggests that Nintendo was aware that their previously faithful child audience began abandoning the N64 due in large part to these players' own maturation (and therefore their desires for new, adult-oriented content). Nintendo's initial response, which was to cater to these players mainly via the incorporation of shadow games within the company's existing children's franchises, eventually gave way to the development of software that actually excluded the child market, either in age rating or through in-game themes.

This chronological argument is the outcome of a detailed analysis of the N64's software library and its marketing, as well as an examination of hardware design elements that supported or even targeted child players. This paper's analysis takes place at the intersection (and draws on the insights and methodologies) of Platform Studies, which has developed largely through MIT Press's monograph series of that name, and Childhood and Youth Studies. As this paper will argue, the N64's games often featured or emphasized elements also found in children's toys and children's literature, and Childhood and Youth Studies provide ample existing theories which, especially in the case of literature, require only slight modification in order to be applicable to video games as well. One claim that this paper therefore takes up is that the study of children's media is of critical importance to game studies, and that more academic work on children's video games will extend our understanding of the operations and effects of children's media. The expressive and imaginative possibilities afforded by video

games provide children with unique opportunities for self-expression and exploration, and the social and cultural dimensions of these possibilities and opportunities urgently require study.

Although no general introduction to the children's video game medium exists as of this writing, Valerie Walkerdine's book *Children, Gender, Video Games* is probably the most accessible text in the field. It argues that "video games are an important cultural, social and economic phenomenon," and focuses its analyses on gender, violence, and issues of globalism found in N64 and PlayStation games released in Australia between approximately 1999 and 2003 (2, 3). I agree with Walkerdine regarding the importance of video games for the reasons she outlines; I also agree with her claim that many games "are one site for the production of contemporary masculinity" (4). But her most important claim as it relates to this project is that children "can use [media experiences] as raw material to create something new" (8). In fact, I would push this argument further and contend that video games—themselves reliant on the staging of free choice options in digital worlds—are an extremely powerful means of engaging the creative capacity of child players. The creation of new experiences becomes central to the experience of a children's video game then, since the ways that video games promote personal expression offer players of all ages various routes through the particular experience of that game.

Many non-gamers already associate video games, and especially Nintendo games, with children: this child-friendly association is no doubt the result of Nintendo's plethora of intellectual properties that appeal to younger players, such as *Super Mario*—its titular character a cultural icon. The influence of Nintendo's franchises on children in the late 1990s was profound, and even more so when one considers that these series are all intellectual properties (IPs) published on, and exclusive to, Nintendo platforms, giving the company extraordinary control over the direction of these games. This paper therefore focuses on games exclusive to the N64, and especially those developed in-house or published by Nintendo, since these games provide the clearest insight into the company's target audiences as the N64 platform evolved. Because the N64 has an infamously small number of third-party titles published on the platform, Nintendo's available software were usually the N64's best sellers, therefore compounding their importance to both the console's popular reception and to this paper.

Finally, a note on the N64 as a global product and the scope of this paper. Although Japan, North America, and Europe/Australia released the N64 and its games in their own launch windows, a single market focus is needed in order to keep a paper of this magnitude cohesive. Therefore, I attend specifically to the N64 in North America, and consequently reference release dates, software titles, and ESRB age ratings from that region, except in very few instances where Japanese or European contexts are required for analysis, which I note throughout. The console also sold its greatest number of units in North America (over 20 million of its total 33 million worldwide), further highlighting the importance of this region to Nintendo.

**Toys, Or Electronics?: A Brief History of Nintendo and Children's Entertainment**

Nintendo has long understood that one successful way to market home console video games, especially given their range of IPs, is to focus on the child player; something at which they have succeeded since the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the mid-1980s. To discuss children's video games then, distinctly those developed or published by Nintendo, is to enter into the complex history of commercial video games, including the difficulties that the industry faced in marketing early on, since Nintendo succeeded in this time chiefly by considering a child market. This section foregrounds the popular reception of home video game consoles as products for children, paying particular attention to Nintendo's early role in the development of home console hardware and video games in the 1980s and culminating with the release of the N64 in 1996, which furthered many of the child-focussed and toy-based design elements that Nintendo had employed up to its release.

As we will see, Nintendo has been aware of the commercial benefits of orienting their hardware toward the child consumer since at least as early as the release of the NES in 1985. With these early successes in mind, it is clear why later Nintendo consoles—especially the N64—continued or even expanded upon the company's trend of encouraging the production of children's games through the design and marketing of their own hardware and software. But to what degree was this a successful marketing strategy for Nintendo? These efforts were in contrast to Sony's design and marketing strategies with their line of PlayStation consoles, and especially with the original PlayStation upon its release in 1995. The contrast between the two companies' approaches—in terms of both software and hardware—is no doubt related to Sony's history not as a toy manufacturer (like Nintendo), but as an electronics manufacturer. Indeed, Sony's inclusion of CD playback in the PlayStation console gave that platform multimedia capabilities that the N64 lacked—an edge over Nintendo for consumers interested in non-dedicated gaming platforms. Further, Sony's willingness to accept software from an even wider range of second- and third-party developers provided the PlayStation not only with children's games (such as *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro the Dragon*), but with successful adult-oriented titles like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, a larger roster of available sports games, and more role-playing (RPG) titles. Given the PlayStation's larger library of more diverse games, Sony's first console unsurprisingly appealed to a broader range of players than Nintendo's child-focussed N64. But even if the N64 underperformed in comparison to the PlayStation, a critical evaluation of Nintendo's history with children's products is warranted in order to better understand the reasons for the company's continued focus on that particular demographic upon the N64's launch in 1996.

The console video game industry, young as it was, faced an early demise in 1983; a stagnation which gamers aptly termed the "video game crash of 1983." Early console and software manufacturers faced a crisis in that year when consumer interest in video games

sharply dropped, spiraling the industry into a massive recession. In *I AM ERROR,* Nathan Altice's Platform Studies book on the NES, he describes how a "complex series of economic, industrial, and cultural factors coalesced into the systematic collapse of the industry's major players" (83). Atari, with its monopoly on console video game hardware pre-1983, contributed perhaps unknowingly to the crash by exercising "little control over the quality of the software that reached its console[s]. The flood of mediocre games surged so steadily that it became difficult for consumers to differentiate quality from shovelware" (83). In other words, Atari's failure to control the quality of the software that reached their platforms eventually caused players to overwhelmingly turn their back on the console video game medium, and instead adopt all-purpose PCs, which could play simple games, but more importantly, would complete a more diverse set of computations for the entire family. Part of Nintendo's eventual success stemmed from their "family-friendly" marketing strategies, promoting the NES (and later, the N64) as consoles well-suited to a nuclear family audience, which, as we know from the picture of the stereotypical North American nuclear family, emphasizes the importance of children both in and to that family unit.

Keeping the family dynamic in mind, there were clear advantages for Nintendo in marketing their early consoles as family- or child-friendly machines. Given the rise of both personal computers and home video game consoles in the 1980s and 1990s, parents often found themselves concerned as to the content that their children consumed on these devices—especially if the parent was less-than-proficient with the given technology. Mizuko Ito claims in *Engineering Play* that millennial children have at times been seen as "having a natural affinity to computers, as 'digital natives' growing up in a world already saturated with computational media." And, as Ito goes on, "this affinity [of the relationship between children and computers] becomes a source of fear and suspicion" in the adult world (1). By marketing themselves as the safest or best console for child players, Nintendo therefore capitalized on the real fears of parents concerned both with the appropriateness of the software their children were consuming in arcades or on home consoles, and these same parents' anxieties that they did not have the technological competence to determine the appropriateness of video game software for their children. With their multitude of "E"-rated IPs well-established by the launch of the N64, Nintendo's name was practically synonymous with children's video games, and especially of series like *Super Mario* and *Donkey Kong.*

The relationship between children and video games is well-considered academically, although few scholars contemporary to the 1980s made the case for the video game console as a toy—thus explicitly linking it to children. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith was one writer who connected video games and toys in his book *Toys as Culture*, which was released only a year after the NES. Sutton-Smith states simply that a video game "is also a toy, because it is a play object and not a human being"; he then explores some early psychological and social theories of the medium (66). One of Sutton-Smith's interests in *Toys as Culture* was to explore "the

modern era of toy supermarkets and billion-dollar industries" (2), and although his book's brief section on video games largely forgoes a discussion of that specific topic, his text's 1986 publication is no doubt the reason that the book focusses more on arcade and pre-1983 consoles than it does on Nintendo's rising power as a toy company and video game company in one.

Indeed, Nintendo's insistence on re-branding and releasing their Japanese Famicom video game console as the NES in 1985 was a questionable business maneuver as it carried extreme risk, given the industry crash only two years earlier. The inclusion of a Nintendo "Seal of Approval" on the NES box and on software specifically approved for the console by Nintendo solved the console industry's shovelware problem from the Atari days, and is a practice that Nintendo continues with games for their hardware (and even merchandise) today. But it was because of their ability to leverage elements from their time as a toy manufacturer in Japan that Nintendo wisely released NES units that bundled the console with the NES Zapper accessory—a light gun that was compatible with software like *Duck Hunt*—and, more importantly, the Robotic Operating Buddy (R.O.B.)[2], which was a small toy robot that was compatible with only a couple NES games, but which played these games alongside the player via on-screen flashes. These toy guns and robots were traditionally young male forms of entertainment, and were instantly recognizable as such, providing Nintendo with a clear entry point into the new gaming market in 1985 North America.[3] Even more importantly, Nintendo mitigated much of the risk of entering the home console industry in 1985 by focussing on a clear, niche audience: children. Altice accordingly declares that "The robotic toy was the bait that finally caught the industry's attention. When Nintendo introduced R.O.B. to the NES family, the toy industry saw a glimmer of potential" (95).

Nintendo's success in marketing the NES console, thinly veiled as a toy product with R.O.B., allowed the console back onto department store shelves in North America under the guise of a more familiar product for children. "It's not a video game system," one can practically hear Nintendo telling these stores' executives in 1985, "it's a toy"—or at least a fusion of video game and toy to which consumers would be attracted. Of course, by promoting the NES as a toy, the child consumer was placed at the center of Nintendo's marketing strategy, making this child player a key figure of importance for the company as time went on. Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. charts Nintendo's child-focussed marketing strategy in his 1991 book *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo*, noting that the company quickly developed a media and product line that included "Nintendo television programs, Nintendo books and magazines, Nintendo movies and video

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[2] See Figure 2 in the Appendix for an illustration of R.O.B.

[3] Sutton-Smith confirms the predominantly male interest in early video game consoles in *Toys as Culture.* He posits that "other kinds of games of physical skill, chance and strategy" have long been preferred by male children, and compares the automation of male-focussed gaming consoles with the traditionally female Chatty Cathy dolls from the 1980s (66-7).

tapes, Nintendo lunch boxes, even Nintendo cereal," and points out that as a result of this range of supplementary children's products, "Nintendo is overwhelmingly the single most popular video game system introduced in America in recent years" (ix, 8).

Although R.O.B. did not come to popularly define the NES for Nintendo (*Super Mario Bros.* ultimately did), the device taught Nintendo an important lesson about video games: that their potential in a child market was massive and was, in 1985, unexplored. It is no doubt the company's early success with R.O.B. "the toy" that influenced the creation of Nintendo's wide array of child-friendly IPs, which have driven the success of every major console that the company has released since the NES, and we can see this toy influence in several hardware features of the N64 as well. By the 1990s, Nintendo clearly understood that to successfully market a video game console was to cater at least partially to a child base with whom video games represent an accessible means of engaging with digital technology. Nonetheless, Nintendo's interest in marketing to children was solidified by earlier successes with a child audience through the NES, Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), and the portable Game Boy line, which made its primary audience clear by incorporating the child player (gendered male) in its very name.

By the time Nintendo released their third home console, the company had clearly established their dominance in the child gaming market. Indeed, the N64 reflected Nintendo's toy-driven approach even in its hardware design, incorporating recognizable toy-like elements into their platform in several interesting ways. For example, the N64's large controller looked much more like a toy product than earlier Nintendo controllers did; some of the N64 controller's toy-like qualities included its large, durable, and colourful appearance, with launch colours consisting of matte blue, red, green, and yellow—allowing for the purchase of an additional controller of the child's preferred colour. By comparison, the PlayStation's controller was most widely available in a flat grey and the Sega Saturn's controllers came standard in black. Every N64 controller featured bright, simple buttons such as the blue "A" button, the green "B" button, and the red "Start" button; the differentiated buttons were instantly recognizable as basic primary and secondary colours, with which children would be familiar. The translucent "Funtastic" N64 models that eventually released in 2000, which came in extravagant colours like "Fire Orange," "Grape Purple," and "Jungle Green," also stood out in contrast to the appearance of other typical electronic devices available for purchase in the early 2000s (often black, white/beige, or silver), making an additional appeal to child players ("Funtastic N64 Consoles"). Finally, the console's game cartridges, which were famously more expensive to produce (resulting in developers often opting to move their N64 projects to the PlayStation) but reduced the risk of software piracy on the console, were made out of a fairly strong plastic that also made them appear durably toy-like. The cartridges' durability prevented most potential damage from a child's use, whereas the more fragile disc formats of other contemporary consoles invited scratching, cracking, and breaking in the hands of these

consoles' youngest users. Damaging a N64 cartridge's connectors was not impossible, but the smaller area of risk on a cartridge still implied a safer use by child players.[4] Implication is a key term here; these design elements, like cartridge over disc, were more often implied as child-friendly to consumers than explicitly stated by Nintendo, but the combination of each, coupled with popular child-friendly games like *Super Mario 64*, positioned the console to parents as the ideal video game platform for children in 1996, continuing Nintendo's successes with this demographic.

Certainly, Nintendo's earlier history as a toy company, and the prompt successes they reaped with the release of R.O.B. alongside the NES, proved to the company that the video game market that they should specifically target was children, who responded to Nintendo platforms with great enthusiasm and subsequently drove up sales of consoles like the NES and SNES. Even as it became clear that the N64 would underperform compared to Nintendo's earlier platforms, Nintendo still developed and published child-friendly spin-off games, such as the *Mario* sports series and *Pokémon* games—but these games were not the platform's main attractions. Therefore, while the console's major releases became more mature in nature beginning around 1998, the fundamental child player that Nintendo sought with the console in its earliest years still received some software later in the N64's life cycle, suggesting that Nintendo still cultivated this market even as the company changed direction with the platform.

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[4] See Figure 3 in the Appendix for an illustration of the Nintendo 64 console, including an inserted game cartridge and grey controller. A blue N64 controller is included as Figure 1.

**Lessons From Childhood and Youth Studies: The Adult Hand, Child Player, and Nostalgia**

In order to better understand the power of children's video games, it is worthwhile to consider some theoretical developments taken from the broader field of Childhood and Youth Studies. In order to do so, I consider children's literature scholarship in this section, which is pertinent due to the aesthetic nature of video games, themselves so often the pairing of play with narrative. We might then see children's games as one point on a triangle of children's media, with the other two points being children's toys and children's literature—and as I consider toys in connection to video games in the previous section, I intend to consider literary theories and their applicability to video games in this one. The narrative and structural composition of many children's video games lend themselves well to studies through the lens of children's literature, which is useful given the lack of scholarship in the field of children's video games outside of psychological evaluations. To that end, this section asks an important question: to what extent are recent thoughts on children's literature applicable to children's video games? Although the two genres are not entirely interchangeable, I examine the results or complications of children's literature theories as applied to video games. By comparing these two children's media, I demonstrate the key areas where the two fields are similar, but also where they differ, which will aid the software analyses in the sections that follow.

Of course, it is the similarities between children's literature and children's video games that provide the most useful points of discussion. For example, M.O. Grenby could have been describing the early development of children's video games when he wrote in "The Origins of Children's Literature" that children's literature as a category only began when "adults invented a new commodity, deliberately designed to give a newly identified audience what they thought it wanted, or, rather, needed" (3). In fact, Grenby's analysis of the origins of children's literature is equally applicable to the video game medium more broadly, considering its commercial beginnings. In other words, children's video games were developed, as children's literature was, to satisfy a need that had, up to the point of each medium's early popular reception, been unknown. If we take Grenby's basic thesis at face value—that adults originated modern children's literature at least in part for commercial purposes (3)—then we find in his statements a connection between children's literature and children's video games that I argue has not been examined closely enough in modern scholarship. Certainly, Nintendo's earlier successes with child audiences, especially with the NES and SNES consoles, were a result of their position as the creator of content for these children. In this way, Nintendo not only developed, but imposed, their definition of the child player unto North American audiences—especially given their strict control over their IPs, almost all of which were created in order to be what Nintendo saw as "child-friendly." Later, when Nintendo began to move away from their exclusive production of pure children's content for the N64, the company still resisted that categorization on their own terms, incorporating more mature themes and situations into their games as they deemed them appropriate. Still, it was Nintendo's decision (along with the ESRB, the

Entertainment Software Rating Board) as to what was appropriate for the child players they so designated with the initial release of the N64; however, it was also their ultimate decision to pursue a broader audience of gamers with the console, resisting the classification that they had themselves created and bringing with it great financial risk for the company.

      The ESRB's role in defining the child player is significant; however, criticism exists of rating boards like the ESRB because they involve the video game's publisher heavily in the rating process, which Damiano Felini explores in his article "Beyond Today's Video Game Rating Systems." In fact, in many instances, the ESRB does not actually play the games they rate. This realization, on the one hand concerning, simultaneously indicates that game publishers must accordingly be aware of the importance of a game's rating, and the kinds of subjects that a game may or may not include in order to target a particular rating. As the publisher of a large amount of software released for the N64, Nintendo's key role in the rating process for these games must therefore be understood by the company as much as it should by the consumer, leaving the retailer little responsibility other than checking the age of those purchasing adult-rated games. This greater responsibility of the producer comes in contrast to the children's literature publishing industry, which typically relies more on retailer discretion and display than on a specific descriptive or evaluative rating on the actual text.

      Part of Nintendo's success in marketing to children early in the N64's lifespan resulted from their understanding of their target audience as it existed in the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s. Nintendo's ability to designate this market was similar to the marketing power of popular children's texts, on which much scholarship exists. For example, in *The Pleasure of Children's Literature,* Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer's central textbook on contemporary problems relating to children's texts, the authors state that "texts assume that readers possess a body of knowledge of literature and life, what reader-response theorists call 'repertoire.' The implied reader of a text has in his or her repertoire the factual, cultural, and literary knowledge the text refers to, and this knowledge enables the implied reader to understand the text" (17). Nodelman and Reimer connect Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader to Edward Lear's nonsense poem "The Owl and the Pussycat" as one helpful example; they posit that Lear's text "implies a reader who enjoys unfamiliar words" among other clear identifiers of children's literature (17). Indeed, Nodelman and Reimer identify a repertoire for that children's text, which ultimately builds upon a child's entire narrative experience. Thinking about children's video games then, an implied player, to take up the terminology deployed by Nodelman and Reimer, is one to whom the game's publisher explicitly markets the title itself—especially based upon their previous experiences (or lack thereof) with video games. This implication can be gleaned from previous entries in a game's series (like *Super Mario* games), which would form the player's repertoire; through commercials and in-store advertisements; or through other print media. Perhaps the most enlightening way that modern video games reveal their broad implied audience is in their ESRB age rating, which is emblazoned on every North American

release for the N64. In this way, a game's age rating also defines its implied player, especially for parents, who are often, as with children's literature, the purchasers of video games for children.

As mentioned earlier, one other similarity between children's literature and their video games is in the production dichotomy between the author or developer and the child player. Perry Nodelman notes in his book *The Hidden Adult* that the "actual purchasers of children's books are . . . overwhelmingly, not children but parents, teachers, librarians: adults." Nodelman breaks down this consumerist oddity and argues that "Children's literature is not so much what children read as what producers hope children will read . . . Its producers must make judgments about what to produce based not on what they believe will appeal to children but rather on what they believe adult consumers believe they know will appeal to children" (4-5). Accordingly, in the cases of both media, the product—a text or game—is written or developed in almost all instances by an adult, and purchased in turn by an adult for a child player. In order to make sense of this problem, Nodelman's book focuses on "how literature . . . might operate as an adult practice with intentions toward child readers"; in other words, children's texts typically rely on a "simple text" that hides a more complex "shadow text," which reveals an adult world which is recognized by the child reader (4, 8).

I argue that children's video games often contain a similar second, adult world—but that the "shadow game" in children's video games is also complex because it is less concerned with the player's actual age, and instead targets their knowledge and abilities both in and of video games through the game's presentation of both simple and difficult situations to multiple audiences at once. For example, several platforming games released for the N64, such as *Super Mario 64* and *Banjo-Kazooie*, feature basic gameplay involving character movement, jumping, and some more complicated maneuvers which are presented to the player gradually throughout each respective game. The goal of each game is to reach the final boss level and save the captive female character, but both games provide prospective players with additional challenges which are not required in order to resolve the plot and complete the game's storyline. Whether adults or children are specifically targeted by these additional, optional challenges is difficult to discern; but that these challenges are typically of greater difficulty than the majority of the games' primary objectives is indicative of a greater repertoire of that particular video game genre. Like literature, which reveals its shadow text to the adult reader through nuanced or absent language, video games usually reveal their shadow game to the adult player in a similar way, indicating additional challenges by appealing to the player's greater video game knowledge. In theory, both children and adults could be able to collect every item in the game and therefore fully complete *Super Mario 64* or *Banjo-Kazooie,* but doing so requires an understanding negotiated by the game and its player that these items or challenges will be more difficult than the resolution of the game's more basic plot. I return to these games and their shadow games in the paper's next section.

Memory also played an important role in Nintendo's focus on children's games, since the company could not be guaranteed that older gamers would purchase the N64 and its software based solely on a given game's shadow world. Indeed, part of Nintendo's ability to transcend one age group with the N64 was due to the company's established IPs and their relative history: for example, by the time the N64 launched in 1996, the Mario and Donkey Kong characters were fifteen years old—just "vintage" enough to appeal to players (at least in their early- or mid-twenties by 1996) who were familiar with the *Donkey Kong* arcade game from 1981. Gary Cross calls this type of nostalgia "consumed nostalgia"; he notes that the "fast capitalism" of the second half of the twentieth century led to increased stress on the consumer, and with that, "people found identity and meaning in specific goods but, as a result, felt that their selfhoods were threatened when they disappeared. The nostalgic impulse came from a desire to get them back. Most important, this longing was often rooted in the formative years of consumers—childhood and youth" (11). Nintendo's reliance on their familiar IPs—especially *Super Mario* and *The Legend of Zelda*—then signified to the aging video game player in 1996 that they could expect not only a quality software title in these franchises, but an experience akin to those had when the consumer played older titles in these series (like *Donkey Kong* or the NES *Super Mario Bros.*) as a child. By releasing several new titles in these existing series, Nintendo hoped to capitalize on Cross's argument that the "consumer nostalgic" hoped to "'regain' [their] childhood" (14).

As we have seen, several theories relating to children's literature are applicable with only minimal modification to video games. These concepts provide entry points into and inform the analyses of N64 games in the sections that follow. Moreover, the children's literature concepts I have considered in this section add to previously identified issues in children's video games identified by Walkerdine. As I have suggested, it is important to consider ESRB age ratings, the game's implied player, and, when possible, the shadow game, which targets a player's video game skill level, when evaluating the N64's actual software. By incorporating these concepts into the sections that follow, we will better understand the rhetoric and marketing strategies of children's games released by Nintendo for their platform, which also provides an opportunity to interrogate these games based on this foundational consideration of children's media and the marketing, purchasing, and consumption thereof.

**Nintendo's Games: The Power of Exclusive Software**

I have mentioned throughout that Nintendo possesses several "child-friendly" intellectual properties, and these IPs almost always find their respective video games exclusive to Nintendo consoles even today. This section analyzes key software exclusive to the N64, and is organized by software release into three sub-groupings: early N64 children's games, from 1996 to early 1998; games that pushed the boundaries of children's media from mid-1998 to 1999; and more mature software, whether rated as such or not, which released for the console from 2000 to 2001. As I demonstrate, the kinds of games released for the console became increasingly mature after the N64 launched in 1996 and was initially supported with mostly child-friendly content, especially in the platformer and racing genres. In the sections that follow, I analyze the key aesthetics, development cycles, and/or new experiences with which each of the discussed games provided players, suggesting areas where the games confirmed or pushed against the boundaries of what we might say would be appropriate content for children.

It is important to note that even as the N64's major games became more complex and mature in nature, Nintendo (and their key second-party studio Rare) still supplemented these games with a wide array of less significant, or spin-off children's titles, including especially the *Mario* sports and *Mario Party* games from 1998 onward, *Donkey Kong 64* and *Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards* in 1998 and 2000 respectively, and *Pokémon* spin-off N64 titles as that series became increasingly popular beginning in 1998. In some cases, these titles added additional hardware components to the N64, such as the "Expansion Pak" that released with *Donkey Kong 64*, which doubled the console's random access memory (RAM) from 4MB to 8MB (Buchanan). Another example, the "Transfer Pak," was bundled with *Pokémon Stadium* in 2000, and allowed for connectivity to those Game Boy games using that new piece of hardware. However, these titles, while child-friendly, are outliers among a greater trend of increasingly mature content that Nintendo and Rare released for the platform as time went on. The release of these spin-off games suggests that Nintendo did not abandon their child audience entirely, as the company continued to release some content—but not their big franchises' main series titles—for children.

Rare became a key player in the successes (and failures) of the N64, usually complementing Nintendo's own major franchises with exclusive new IPs—although the company also occasionally created new games in existing Nintendo franchises, as was the case with *Diddy Kong Racing* and *Donkey Kong 64.* Still, the working relationship between the two companies was strong throughout the N64's production cycle, and even in cases where Nintendo did not produce or otherwise aid in the actual development of Rare's games, the console's manufacturer still maintained a strong level of control over the kind of content that Rare created. Interestingly, it was Rare who first began to push against Nintendo's obsession with children's software: the group also developed the "T"-rated *Jet Force Gemini* and *Goldeneye 007* for the N64*,* the later of which was a hugely popular first person shooter (FPS)

title adapted from the eponymous *James Bond* film. Later, Rare released *Perfect Dark*, an "M"-rated FPS similar to *Goldeneye*, and, most surprisingly, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, which I discuss in the paper's next and final section. Because most of these titles, excepting *Conker*, were always intended for older audiences, I do not discuss them throughout; instead, this paper is more interested in the ways that Nintendo subverted the children's software (or games that appeared to be children's software) that released for the console as time went on. Other than *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, all of the games discussed in this section were rated either "E" or "K-A" (the earlier "for everyone" designation, used until 1998) by the ESRB, and therefore align with the general understanding of children's video games that I foregrounded in this paper's previous section.

**Phase One: Launch, *Super Mario 64*, and Children's Video Games**

Much has been made in academic circles of the cultural power of *Super Mario Bros.*, and especially of Mario himself, with many thinkers and consumers, such as Manuel Garin, comparing the video game superstar to Disney's Mickey Mouse in terms of pure iconic adoration. And Mario received more than his share of N64 releases; apart from the revolutionary *Super Mario 64*, which launched with the console in 1996, gamers received the four-player phenomenon *Mario Kart 64* early the year after, with many other spin-off titles releasing before the console's discontinuation in 2001. In fact, if we count the 1998 *Yoshi's Story* game as a spin-off *Mario* series title (since the Yoshi character originated in the SNES game *Super Mario World*), then a *Mario* game or spin-off was released in each of the N64's flagship years from 1996 to 2001. In particular, the *Mario* platformer and racing releases early in the N64's life cycle aided Nintendo's child-focussed strategy, as those genres are especially notable for their appeal to children.

The best starting point for any discussion of N64 software is with *Super Mario 64*, which is not only the most significant *Mario*-series game released for the N64, but in the minds of many gamers, it is the most important game released for the entire platform. *Super Mario 64* became the N64's best-selling game, moving approximately 11 million units, which therefore paired it with over one in three N64 consoles sold worldwide (*VGChartz*). As an introduction for a new generation of young players to the Mario character, the game also introduced many seasoned video game veterans to 3D video games, as a launch title alongside the N64 in 1996.[5] Although the N64 only launched alongside two games, it was the highly anticipated *Super Mario 64* that came to define the console's impact on the gaming market; academics Jeroen L.G. Binken and Stefan Stremersch, for example, cite the game as a key example of "superstar software" in their article, and analyze trends of such software across the console video game market prior to 2004, noting that such superstar games lead to an average 14% increase in hardware sales for their parent platform up to five months after the designated superstar game's release (96). But it is important to underscore that *Super Mario 64* was both the N64's superstar launch title, and the ground-breaking entry point for many players into the 3D video game genre—highlighting its importance to the video game medium. The game's North American commercial features several children narrating about the "true freedom" that the game provides, ending with the tagline "Change the System," making the game practically synonymous with the N64 upon its release date in this market ("U.S Super Mario 64 Commercial").

Given the influence of *Super Mario 64* on the entire video game industry, and on Nintendo's direction for the Mario character himself, the significance of the game cannot be understated. Although the game was not the first 3D video game to ever be released, nor was it

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[5] The other N64 launch game in North America was *Pilotwings 64.*

the first to feature Mario's now-famous voice, provided by voice actor Charles Martinet, it was the first video game to popularize these elements, and which served as but some of the key components that Nintendo would include in almost every *Mario*-related release for their consoles thereafter. The game's visuals consist mostly of bright primary and secondary colours; the green hills on which Mario runs stand out against the distinctly yellow pathways that lead to certain areas in early worlds like Bob-Omb Battlefield. Mario's outfit, having been established later in the NES era, consists of a bright red hat and shirt, which is partially covered by his blue overalls and their sharp, yellow buttons. Other than his brown shoes, the character's outfit is designed with only primary colours, making it both easy to recognize and describe for young children. While his outfit features only basic colour textures and his signature "M" sprawled across the front of his cap, Mario's simple design was probably necessitated by the N64's hardware, which, although powerful at the time, was still not able to render complex textures, likely forcing the developers to absent creases and folds from his clothes. Still, this design is in line with most contemporary children's picture books and cartoons, which forgo detailed depictions of characters for more basic conceptualizations using primary colours.

As most gamers' introduction to 3D video games, *Super Mario 64* was designed accordingly. For example, once the player loads a new save file in the game, Mario jumps out of a "warp pipe" located in the grounds of Princess Peach's castle, having been invited, we are told in a brief narrative sequence just prior, by the Princess to the castle for cake. Once Mario arrives and the game's camera takes its position behind the plumber, a text block interrupts the character's action. "Ciao!," the text begins, before explaining that "Using the controller is a piece of cake. Press A to jump and B to attack. Press B to read signs, too. Use the Control Stick in the center of the controller to move Mario around. Now, head for the castle." By combining its simple narrative with technological instruction, *Super Mario 64's* first in-gameplay text not only tells the player to head for the castle, where their next objective is located, but also implies the correct way to hold the odd, three-pronged N64 controller, which places its control stick in approximately the middle of its chassis, surrounded by the main action buttons (or "verb" buttons), A and B, to the right.[6] In this way, the game suggests through the narrative break both the correct way to hold the unusual controller, and how to perform the basic commands that this platforming game required; important tasks for the first popular 3D game to take up in its earliest moments. The simple language that is deployed in this same speech bubble, as well as the basic plot points emphasized, mask this information in the game's fairy tale-like motif, which really only involves rescuing the princess from Bowser, with a basic reward—cake—offered to the player. These elements, of traversing platforms in order to rescue captive princesses from anthropomorphic and wicked enemies, and especially of cake, a popular treat for children, confirm that the game is intended for this same audience. And since

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[6] See Figure 1 in the Appendix for an example of a blue N64 controller.

the "damsel in distress" trope is (problematically) common both among popular children's fairy tales and previous *Super Mario* games, the game's responsibility—as it recognizes—to inform players about its basic gameplay components is appropriately included in its simultaneous acknowledgement of its children's fairy tale-informed plot.

After an opportunity to practice their basic platforming and combat skills (which revolve around basic jumps, punches, and kicks), the player is ready to engage with the game's actual levels—which are sandbox-style, semi-open world levels accessed inside the castle—and begins collecting Power Stars in order to unlock the castle's additional challenges and eventually save the princess. The player is able to save the princess and therefore "beat the game" after obtaining 60 stars, but a special ending is available if the player collects all 120—some of which are quite challenging to find. I posit that this additional challenge is *Super Mario 64's* rendering of its shadow game, since the game does not require the player to undertake this additional challenge, but still suggests to the player that additional challenges are available. The complexity of collecting all 120 stars should be underscored, especially because players have already "finished" the game; thus, the player is really only done with the game on their own terms, and could stop collecting stars (at any point, but especially) after getting their 60th, or 61st, or 119th star. In other words, the game does not make explicitly clear this extra challenge or its designated reward, but promotes additional gameplay by pointing players to their incomplete levels, which they understand contain these additional challenges, even if they are unaware what exactly they are in all cases.[7]

Having established Mario as the N64's most recognizable game character, Nintendo followed *Super Mario 64* with the spin-off game *Mario Kart 64* in February 1997, a racing adaptation of the Mario characters for children. Just as *Super Mario 64* highlighted the N64's basic controller elements, such as its control stick, and introduced players to 3D worlds, *Mario Kart 64* became the first popular demonstration of the console's four-player multiplayer capabilities, as the N64 included four controller ports on each unit. Four-player multiplayer had been previously found in the 1982 Atari 5200 console just as the video game market crashed, but the N64 was the first to revive this feature, which further supported nuclear family play or simply doubled the social potential of Nintendo's software from two children to four. Ultimately, *Mario Kart 64* performed very well, selling almost 10 million copies, making it the console's second-best-selling game, after *Super Mario 64* (*VGChartz*). These impressive sales figures were no doubt due to *Mario Kart 64*'s range of multiplayer options available early in the N64's lifespan.

The next major N64 release, *Star Fox 64*, launched for the console in June 1997 and was also developed by Nintendo. As a follow-up to the SNES *Star Fox* game, *Star Fox 64* seriously improved upon its predecessor's basic 3D graphics by taking advantage of the N64's advanced

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[7] The game contains 15 "Secret Stars" located throughout the castle outside of the main worlds, which makes collecting these stars even more difficult since the game does not often explicitly gesture toward their location.

hardware in order to flesh out the game's space setting. Additionally, the N64 controller's analog stick greatly benefitted this game, as it allowed for more precise control of the player's designated vehicle than the original SNES game. The game features both single-player and multiplayer modes, continuing Nintendo's investment in multiplayer experiences on the console. In the game's single-player mode, the player controls Fox McCloud, a space-shooting expert, who variously controls vehicles including the Arwing spaceship, Landmaster tank, and in one level, a submarine. Additionally, *Star Fox 64* was the first title to be compatible (and bundled) with the N64's Rumble Pak controller attachment, which added a level of tactile feedback to the game experience by vibrating when the player's spaceship is hit by an enemy, for example. The aim of the device was to increase the player's immersion in the given game, providing another sense to a game's sight and sound feedback. Most N64 games developed hereafter would be compatible with the device, which foreshadowed the now-standard rumble features found in modern gaming controllers on Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft platforms.

What makes *Star Fox 64* interesting is the ways in which it pushed the boundaries of what children's video games had been and done up to its release. Whereas both previous *Mario* games were colourful and relatively simple, *Star Fox 64* placed its characters in the depths of space, and is accordingly dark throughout. The death of Fox's father haunts the player as they are constantly reminded by non-playable characters (NPCs) of his death and their rivals' roles in it—placing the death theme at the forefront of the game. The shooting mechanics, as well as the visible explosions and loud screams heard from important enemy fighters when they are defeated by the player, seem contrary to the game's "E" rating—especially given the force feedback provided by the Rumble Pak during these tense moments. *Star Fox 64*'s more destructive lasers and bombs certainly set the game apart from the rudimentary combat from *Mario Kart 64*, which involved simpler weapons such as turtle shells and banana peels, which never resulted in any character's death in that game. Contrarily, *Star Fox 64* also uses anthropomorphic animals as its heroes—a common trend in children's literature that is often used to distance the characters from their real, human characteristics. Moreover, the game's full voice acting brings to life these characters, who are, except in instances relating to other characters' deaths, appropriately co-operative as a team unit; suggesting a sort of moral for young players. Although the game was likely not disturbing enough for most young players, it is still the first N64 game to push the limits of the children's genre, making it an important game to consider as such.

The next major N64 release was *Diddy Kong Racing*, which was a kart racing game similar to *Mario Kart 64*; it was also Rare's first game for the system. The game naturally starred Diddy Kong, the sidekick from the SNES *Donkey Kong Country* title, alongside a cast of mostly original characters, save for Banjo and Conker, from their respective franchises. The crossover between this Nintendo character and the then-unreleased Rare characters was meant to market the upcoming *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Conker's Quest* titles, which were originally due to

release shortly after *Diddy Kong Racing*, making the game a sort of advertisement for upcoming Rare titles. *Diddy Kong Racing* sold well; although it did not outsell its cousin game *Mario Kart 64*, the game still sold almost 5 million units, making it the second-best-selling racing game for the platform (*VGChartz*). These sales were impressive, and resulted from the game's expanded features over *Mario Kart 64*, such as airplane and hovercraft vehicles, as well as a single-player adventure mode, and its features borrowed from its cousin game, like four-player multiplayer.

The last major N64 title released before Nintendo's change in direction later in 1998 was *Yoshi's Story*, which was probably the most "child-friendly" game released by Nintendo for the console. With its simple sidescrolling gameplay and basic, storybook-esque graphical style, *Yoshi's Story* appealed to children due to the recognizability of its characters, as well as its linear structure. Simply put, this games was likely too easy for adult players, who might find the game's characters and worlds charming, but too simplistic compared to even *Super Mario 64.* Therefore, in order to make clear their child audience, Nintendo marketed this game more explicitly toward children; the North American commercial for *Yoshi's Story* shows two pre-teen boys whipping their tongues around a living room space, mimicking the move that Yoshi performs as his primary attack in-game ("Yoshi's Story (Nintendo 64 Commercial)"). It is fitting that *Yoshi's Story* would be the clearest example of a children's game for the N64, considering it was the last major title developed by Nintendo before *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* released later in 1998, which threw out of balance many of the pre-established norms of the N64's software library.

As we have seen, Nintendo clearly emphasized children's games with the N64's earliest releases, as these games, released in its earliest days, were used to show off the console's 3D graphics, the new Rumble Pak accessory, and four-player multiplayer all within two years of the console's release. The *Mario* IP was put to particularly good use, with *Super Mario 64* and *Mario Kart 64* remaining as the console's best-selling games through to the N64's discontinuation. But Nintendo's other releases during this early period, including *Star Fox 64* and *Yoshi's Story*, as well as Rare's *Diddy Kong Racing*, all confirm the console's child-focussed approach, with only *Star Fox 64* challenging some of the notions of children's games with its release—and even then, only mildly. As Nintendo continued to develop and produce software for the N64, their development skills (with 3D graphics, with external hardware add-ons, and with commercial marketing) were greatly enhanced. It was children's video games that acted as the catalyst for these important developments, and the relatively high sales especially of the early *Mario* games suggested that Nintendo might reap some successes with this approach. However, even though the other three games sold well, they never outsold the console's first two major releases, and Nintendo would change directions after the release of *Yoshi's Story* no doubt in an attempt to widen their player base.

**Phase Two: 1998 and the First Turning Point**

1998 marked an important turning point in the development of major software for the N64; indeed, it was in this year when both Nintendo and Rare began to take some calculated risks with the software each group developed for the platform. While both companies still released and classified their games specifically as children's software, questionable content exists in each of the following three examples of games released by the two developers that sets them apart from the clearly identifiable earlier children's games released for the console.

Rare's first game after *Diddy Kong Racing* was *Banjo-Kazooie,* which was released in June 1998. As mentioned earlier, the Banjo character had appeared in *Diddy Kong Racing* alongside Conker as a sort of in-game advertisement for these upcoming N64 IPs, but he was joined in *Banjo-Kazooie* by Kazooie the bird, who assists Banjo by helping him to fly, run quicker, and shoot eggs from her beak (and behind) in certain instances in-game. Like *Super Mario 64*, *Banjo-Kazooie* is a 3D platformer game with obvious appeals to children: namely, the game features bright and colourful worlds, akin to *Mario*; cheerful and upbeat music; and several collectible items, including golden jigsaw pieces, musical notes, and other objects scattered throughout the game's ten large worlds. The game features a similar shadow game system to *Super Mario 64* as well, rewarding players for continuing to collect items well after the game's main storyline is completed. *Banjo-Kazooie*'s cast of anthropomorphic animals are used similarly to *Star Fox 64*, but instead of full voice acting, Banjo, Kazooie, and the rest of the game's characters have identifiable (but nonsensical) mumbles which are played overtop their dialogue text, which is to be read on the screen. Still, it is clear that the game drew its greatest inspiration from *Super Mario 64*; in fact, Rare designer Gregg Mayles stated in an official interview on the developer's YouTube channel that "As soon as we saw an early version of the game that became *Mario 64*, it was like . . . 'that's going to be the future of what 3D games are going to look like,'" and therefore notes the influence that *Super Mario 64* had on the N64 project on which he was working at the time—*Banjo-Kazooie* ("Rare Revealed: A Rare Look at Dream")*.* The additional, more complicated moves that Banjo can learn in the game expanded the formula put forth by *Super Mario 64*, but the similarity between the two platformers cements their relationship as related children's software nonetheless.

Where *Banjo-Kazooie* challenges its classification as a children's game, though, is in its relatively infrequent adult humour—something Rare developers have acknowledged in interviews and articles. For example, a tree character named Trunker in the level Gobi's Valley requests that the player water him, as the desert environment has caused him to shrivel. "How's your nuts, bark breath?" Kazooie asks Trunker, before Banjo immediately scolds her. The reference to testicles comes as a surprise to the player, and is a questionable line to include in a children's game. Banjo's offence at Kazooie's question confirms its inappropriateness, further complicating its inclusion in the first place. This double entendre is a deeper example of the shadow game in *Banjo-Kazooie* since it is humour with which adults would likely be familiar,

but which children might not, further separating the two player audiences. Another example, upon completion of the game, finds a human female character walking by Banjo, Kazooie, and a few other characters relaxing on a beach. The woman is holding a tray with two watermelons that cover her breasts—another sexual reference that seems out of place. Nintendo was clearly aware of the risks that Rare took with the game; in another interview on Rare's YouTube channel, *Banjo-Kazooie*'s music composer (and voice actor for several of the game's characters), Grant Kirkhope, notes a scene in the Mad Monster Mansion level where the player drops eggs into a flower pot in order to receive a golden jigsaw piece. The flower pot eerily thanks the player, and, as Kirkhope says, "That's me going 'thank you,' and Nintendo was obsessed that I was saying 'fuck you' . . . Do you really think I'm going to say that in a kid's game? They wouldn't believe me. I had to record it about 50 times" ("Rare Revealed: Five Things You Didn't Know About Banjo-Kazooie"). Kirkhope's interview is revealing for two important reasons: first, he confirms that the game is "a kid's game," and that both Rare and Nintendo understood that *Banjo-Kazooie* was targeted at children as was much of the N64's earlier content. But Nintendo's concern that Rare might have been trying to hide an explicit word in the game also reveals that Rare was the developer first interested in seriously challenging the notions of children's software, as Nintendo would have also been aware of the "nuts" line, as well as the watermelon scene, in the game. The tension between the two groups was obviously resolved with the release of *Banjo-Kazooie*, but it remains the first example where a game targeted specifically at children decidedly pushed the boundaries of the genre.

The next major N64 release was Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, which is probably the second-best-known game for the console, behind *Super Mario 64*. Released in November 1998, *Ocarina of Time* had been hotly anticipated by gamers eager to see one of the medium's most popular series make its debut in 3D. Upon release, the game received almost-universal acclaim from critics, and is still, almost 20 years later, the highest-rated video game of all time, according to contemporary reviews compiled by *Metacritic* ("Best Video Games of All Time - Metacritic"). In short, the game's impact on the video game industry, along with *Super Mario 64*, is paramount. And although *Ocarina of Time* shares its ESRB "E" rating with many games aimed at a broad child audience, its gameplay is somewhat darker, implying a slightly older player than the typical six-year-old. Nonetheless, the game is an homage of sorts to fantasy texts like *The Hobbit*, and relies on fairytale tropes as its plot progresses, connecting the game to a larger body of identifiable children's literature. As such, the game is a sort of quasi-children's video game, as its implied player is older than that of *Super Mario 64* or *Banjo-Kazooie*, but still locates itself in the fantasy subgenre and connects itself to specific children's literature, making it Nintendo's first N64 game for an ambivalent audience.

The game begins with a cinematic where Link, the player-controlled (and named) character, experiences a traumatic nightmare foretelling of some of the game's eventual events. While these initial plot points are quickly replaced by the more light-hearted Kokiri

Forest setting and its cheery music, the game's early nightmare seems out of place among the much-less-frightening N64 children's games that preceded it. In fact, the Kokiri characters explain an important intertext with the *Peter Pan* texts: like the children in *Peter Pan's* Neverland, the Kokiri children never age. Despite Link growing up in Kokiri Forest, a few Kokiris (namely the player's rival Mido) question whether he is truly one of them; a bullying trope borrowed from other children's narratives that necessitates the player's compliance with Mido's rules in order to progress in this section of the game. Later on, the player travels into the future and emerges as "adult Link" (who is actually around 17 years old). At this point, the player is to return to Kokiri Forest to complete the game's next dungeon. Along the way, they find that their Kokiri friends from the first section of the game have not, as expected, grown older, confirming that *Peter Pan* connection. But Link has matured, and grown in both height and strength, now able to equip a heavier shield and wield stronger weapons.

As such, the game offers a commentary on adult life, as the world in *Ocarina of Time* went under siege by the villain Ganondorf, as foretold in Link's nightmare, some time between the player's time travel. When adult Link first leaves the Temple of Time, where his time travel occurs, the difference is clear: gone are the sun and the residents of Hyrule Castle Town gleefully dancing and playing in its streets from Link's childhood. In their place are ReDeads, zombie-like monsters who are implied to be the remnants of Castle Town's inhabitants seven years ago. The music and overall tone of adult Link's adventure generally darken, and his sword is capable of greater damage to enemies, which result in more realistic sound effects and, in the case of the game's final boss, a realistic blood spatter.[8] Apart from their obviously mature nature, these elements all cement the game's trite commentary on adult life: although the game's plot relies on Ganondorf's siege of Hyrule, and the recognizable darkness that ensues, it is telling that the game relegates its harsher reality to the adult version of the player-controlled character. The anxieties of adulthood in *Ocarina of Time* are barely "hidden," as Perry Nodelman describes of texts in *The Hidden Adult*; instead, the game very clearly identifies the difficulties of adult life for its child player, contrasting them totally with the easier and more casual experience to be had as child Link. It is unsurprising that Nintendo chose a *Legend of Zelda* game with which to broaden the age of their player base: in addition to the series' well-known swordplay and magical themes (easily adapted to a more violent setting), the franchise recalls the experiences of older players who were familiar with the NES *Legend of Zelda* titles; an appeal that confirms Gary Cross's theory of consumed nostalgia. Overall, the game's tone is clearly darker than the earlier platformer and racing games released for the N64, and its trite evaluation of adult life is evidence enough of *Ocarina of Time*'s older implied audience. These themes all designate the game as a clear example of Nintendo's appeal to older gamers with

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[8] The red blood from the final boss battle was re-coloured green in all copies of *Ocarina of Time* released some time after the November 1998 launch. The green blood has been maintained in all subsequent re-releases, including the game's 2011 remake on the Nintendo 3DS.

the N64 in 1998.

Although Nintendo mostly released spin-off *Mario* and *Pokémon* games in 1999, the company's biggest first-party game was also its only new IP released for the N64 in North America: the crossover fighting game *Super Smash Bros.*, which saw famous Nintendo characters like Mario, Donkey Kong, Pikachu, and Link taking up hand-to-hand combat against each other. Although *Super Smash Bros.* was also rated "E," its violence—considering its cast of recognizable children's characters, especially including Mario, Yoshi, Kirby, and Pikachu—is another example of questionable content in a children's game. The game's first two sequels, *Super Smash Bros. Melee* for the Gamecube, and *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for Wii, both remedied this problem with their more appropriate "T" ratings, but the principle among all three games is the same: to assault the other player's character and eventually knock them off the stage in order to win. The game's direct physical combat is notable: rather than attacking other characters' vehicles, as was the case in *Mario Kart 64* and *Diddy Kong Racing*, *Super Smash Bros.* pits its characters against each other in hand-to-hand gameplay with louder and more damaging sound effects than those resulting from Mario's lighter punches and kicks in *Super Mario 64*.

The commercial for *Super Smash Bros.* clearly understood the dichotomy between its cast and its genre, as the ad featured real costumed Mario, Donkey Kong, Pikachu and Yoshi characters prancing gleefully in a field while The Turtles' song "Happy Together" played in the background. Suddenly, Mario trips Donkey Kong, and the music scratches to a halt. "Something's gone wrong in the happy-go-lucky world of Nintendo," the narrator announces as the commercial splices together real *Super Smash Bros.* gameplay and scenes of the costumed characters violently attacking each other ("Super Smash Bros. (Nintendo 64 Commercial)"). The commercial is jarring because of its absurdity—perhaps an appropriate way to advertise the actual game, given its absurd premise. But the game is still evidence that Nintendo was willing, especially after *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, to take new risks in order to widen the N64's player base. The incorporation of Nintendo's characters, known especially by children, represents a sort of hybridity between child players and more mature gamers— whether the game's violence was appropriate for the N64's youngest install base or not.

**Phase Three: The Dichotomy of Mature Games: 2000 Onward**

After their experiments with games like *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Super Smash Bros.* in the late 1990s, Nintendo's major N64 releases beginning in 2000 took on an even more mature tone. Most notably, three N64 games, including *Banjo-Tooie*, and especially *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* and *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, each disrupted the child-focussed strategy put forth by Nintendo in most of the rest of the platform's software library, and each game is therefore interesting to consider as more mature (whether rated that way or not) software for the system. It is important to note that, with the exception of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, this section focuses not on software aimed explicitly at adults, but on children's software that attempted to widen the N64's player base by clearly disrupting the tenets of children's video games established up to this point.

      *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* released for the N64 in October 2000, two years after *Ocarina of Time*. *Majora's Mask* was the other title, in addition to *Donkey Kong 64*, to require the N64's Expansion Pak in order to function. The game uses many of *Ocarina's* graphical and sound assets, but places Link in a new world called Termina, which is at risk of being completely destroyed in three days as the moon appears to be crashing to the earth. *Majora's Mask* is incredibly dark, as its plot revolves around Link saving the planet from this impending disaster, which was put in motion by the villain Skull Kid, who has been possessed by Majora's Mask; an ancient mask that contains an embodiment of evil energy. The game forces the player to constantly restart their three-day quest by travelling through time back to the first day, making them relive the end of the world scenario it presents to the player. Another new aspect in *Majora's Mask* is the incorporation of the "living masks" that allow Link to transform into forms that embody deceased characters of other in-game races (the plant-like Dekus, anthropomorphic fish Zoras, and the powerful, rocky Gorons). The game's emphasis on death should be underscored: while it is only hinted that Link embodies a deceased Deku from an early moment in the game, he receives the Zora mask only after he watches a Zora physically die, reincarnating itself in the mask with which Link is presented. This event follows the game's haunting introduction, which shows Skull Kid ambushing Link, stealing his horse companion, stripping his body of the ocarina from the previous game, and leading Link deeper into a dark forest, finally trapping him in his Deku form through a disturbing nightmare sequence. Link is eventually returned to his Hylian (human/elvish) form, but when Link puts on any of the game's central masks, such as the Zora mask, which are required in order to advance, the screen turns black, his eyes become bloodshot, and he screams, as the transformation appears to cause his physical possession.

      *Majora's Mask* is a moving commentary on the experience of death, but it is a highly questionable children's game. Simply stated, it is far darker than *Zelda: Ocarina of Time,* which was itself noticeably more mature than the earlier *Mario* and *Banjo* platformers released for the N64. Still, both *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* received their curious "E" ratings,

suggesting they were as suitable for children as the other children's games on the console. To that end, I argue that *Majora's Mask* ought to have received a "T" rating in 2001 for its haunting themes and violence, which were that much darker than *Ocarina of Time*'s fairly standard fantasy adventure. *Majora's Mask's* obsession with death, and with torturing Link every time he performs one of the game's most common actions, made it unsuitable for children, although the ESRB did not deem it troubling enough to change its actual rating. The organization eventually acquiesced, however, rating the remakes of both *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* "E10+" when they released in 2011 and 2015, respectively.[9] Still, the original *Majora's Mask*'s disturbing sequences separate it from much of the rest of the console's software, including its own predecessor, suggesting that Nintendo and the ESRB failed to uphold the expectations of their child base, for whom the game was rated*.*

   *Banjo-Tooie* launched approximately one month after *Zelda: Majora's Mask,* and features some striking similarities to that earlier sequel game. Like *Majora's Mask*, Rare's second *Banjo* game opens with a death scene, where Bottles, the mole character from *Banjo-Kazooie* who taught the player their new moves, is killed. Other characters are horrifyingly turned into zombies at certain points in the game, and the game's worlds and  enemies are all far darker in tone than the first *Banjo* game. In place of cheery jingles, *Banjo-Tooie*'s music is also slower and often more haunting, replacing xylophones with wistful trombones, and so on. Most strikingly, *Banjo-Tooie* expanded greatly upon *Banjo-Kazooie*'s adult humour, placing characters into inappropriate situations far more frequently. Just a few examples of the game's odd scenes include an intoxicated sailor character in the Jolly Roger's Lagoon level, as well as a sign on the bar in that same area that identifies a dish called the "Seaman's Surprise" as an on-item menu; finally, a rabbit character in Grunty Industries can be heard experiencing traumatic diarrhea, as they painfully describe their symptoms. Other crude moments exists in the game, further complicating the game's ESRB rating and its implied player. Like *Majora's Mask*, the game is still classified as a children's game by its "E" rating, but *Banjo-Tooie*'s haunting worlds, music, and mature humour all suggest an additional appeal to more mature players than either *Super Mario 64* or even the original *Banjo-Kazooie*, making *Banjo-Tooie* another interesting anomaly among the N64's library of children's software.

   Rare's last N64 game, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, further disrupts the N64's child focus, and does so more explicitly than any prior N64 release*.* Before *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was released, it was shown to the press as a children's game, but the game then underwent several prototype versions, which were constantly scrapped and rebuilt. Initially titled *Conker's Quest*, and then renamed *Twelve Tales: Conker 64*, Rare's initial plan for the Conker character was similar to *Banjo-Kazooie*: a child-friendly platformer game, likely aimed at an even younger audience, given the rather basic gameplay mechanics and graphical style revealed by early development

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[9] "E10+" is a newer rating that the ESRB added in 2005, well after the final N64 software released in 2002.

screenshots and gameplay videos ("Rare Revealed: A Rare Look at Twelve Tales: Conker 64"). As mentioned earlier, Conker's appearance in *Diddy Kong Racing* along with Banjo was meant to market those characters ahead of their respective games' release dates, but each would be pushed back, with the final, adult-oriented *Conker's Bad Fur Day* not releasing until near the N64's discontinuation in 2001. The 1999 Game Boy Color game *Conker's Pocket Tales* confirms Conker's initial target audience of very young players as its plot involves the character simply collecting his stolen birthday presents. *Pocket Tales* primarily features basic top-down exploration gameplay across its series of levels, and in this game, Conker's main weapon is a slingshot that fires conkers (a type of chestnut). These are all elements even more basic than those from *Super Mario 64*, and which most children would likely understand and find enjoyable—presumably, these elements would also have informed the earlier N64 *Conker* builds too. Unsurprisingly, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* invited some confusion when the game was finally released, as players were introduced to this violent, profane, and alcohol-obsessed version of Conker quite antithetical to the one found in *Diddy Kong Racing* and *Conker's Pocket Tales*.

Nintendo was ambivalent about marketing *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. Although they supported the game with secret E3 showings, inviting the gaming press to a full bar event with alcohol, the game was never discussed in the company's official *Nintendo Power* magazine, likely due to a fear that child readers of the magazine would be interested in the mature game due to the character's appearance in both *Conker's Pocket Tales* and *Diddy Kong Racing* ("Rare Revealed: A Rare Look at Conker's Bad Fur Day").[10] When the game first loads, Conker violently slashes the N64's 3D logo in half with his chainsaw, mumbling "stupid logo!"—a stark contrast to the cheerful spin of the same logo in Rare's earlier *Banjo-Kazooie*. The file select scene in *Bad Fur Day* is set in the Cock & Plucker, the game's tavern area (an obviously crude location), and displays a stuffed head of Banjo on the wall, further connecting the *Banjo* and *Conker* series, while simultaneously contrasting the child-marketed *Banjo* games and this *Conker* entry. The game touches on countless adult themes thereafter, including alcohol addiction, sex, and features blood and gore; it also incorporates sections that parody adult films such as *The Terminator* and *The Matrix*, further drawing a line between its target audience and the child base that the N64 had amassed by the time of its 2001 release.

Apart from the game's unsurprising "M for Mature" rating, Rare took the extra step of including a bold, all-caps warning on the game's box, manual, and in sharp red when the game first loads, which reads: "ADVISORY: THIS GAME IS NOT FOR ANYONE UNDER AGE 17." This extra precaution was no doubt deemed necessary due to the familiar character on the boxart (though he is depicted holding a glass of beer). While it is telling that Nintendo and Rare felt that they needed to clearly label this game as a product for adults, it is even more revealing

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[10] *Conker's Bad Fur Day* did receive an official *Nintendo Power* player's guide, however.

that they chose to differentiate any N64 *Conker* game from Rare's existing *Banjo* titles in this surprisingly obscene way, since all three, including Conker's initial development as *Conker's Quest*, were similar platformer games featuring anthropomorphic animals. The best way to make both Conker's character and game unique, it seemed to Rare, was to push against the child focus of the console, but to do so by using a character already established in children's video games.

Several moments in the game satirize this decision, as characters variously reference the parameters in which children's video games normally operate. For example, one early scene shows the scarecrow character Beardy painfully attempting to explain to Conker the purpose of the "context-sensitive" action buttons that he will encounter throughout the game. Context-sensitive buttons were previously found in Rare's *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Donkey Kong 64*, and would react differently depending on where the player found the button. Still, the game continues as a practically uncensored parody of children's video games, demonstrating that the most obvious way to disrupt the existing trend of children's software on the N64 was to make its best-regarded genre as mature as possible, therefore excluding the implied players of so many of the platform's previous entries.

**Conclusion**

The N64 was not Nintendo's last home console to lose the console hardware sales race; the Gamecube, which replaced the N64, sold even worse, especially in comparison to its rivals, the PlayStation 2—the best-selling video game platform of all time (*VGChartz* "Platform Totals")—and Microsoft's Xbox, which was seen by the public as the adult-centered console of its generation with exclusive franchises like *Halo*. It was not until the launch of Nintendo's Wii console in 2006 that the company regained the lead that they turned over to the competition with the N64, although the Wii system was successful not because of its children's software (although the console had those games in spades), but due to its emphasis on casual games for the entire family unit. Indeed, Nintendo ignored most "core" video gamers with the Gamecube, the Wii, and their portable consoles in the years following the discontinuation of the N64.

What this might seem to suggest is that focussing on children's video games, although successful with the NES and with most handheld Nintendo platforms, actually caused a decrease in the company's subsequent hardware sales (especially with the N64) until Nintendo changed their approach with the Wii. Despite games like *Super Mario 64* and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* reshaping the entire gaming industry as successful transitions of their massively popular franchises into the third dimension, consumers still opted overwhelmingly for the PlayStation, with many gamers therefore foregoing their opportunity to play these excellent games. The gamble Nintendo took by re-orienting the N64 to more mature content must have been considered a failure by the company, given their sale of Rare to Microsoft in 2002, and considering Nintendo's return to form with children's games like *Super Mario Sunshine* and *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, which ultimately drove down the Gamecube's sales a generation later. Nintendo's powerful technology, it would seem, typically sells less than their platforms that innovate more broadly, like the Wii. Rebranding their children's IPs for an older audience, as was especially the case with *Super Smash Bros.* and *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, was simply not enough to turn around the N64's sales situation, but the platform's lower overall sales compared to the PlayStation did result in these interesting games, many of which pushed against the boundaries of content appropriate for the children's video game genre. It remains to be seen the lasting effect that children's video games have on the actual gaming industry, but the popular identification of video games as products for children still exists in spite of the wealth of more mature software being bought and sold today—even if no longer by Nintendo.

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**Appendix**

Figure 1: A blue Nintendo 64 Controller. Note the placement of the analog control stick in the center of the controller and its matte blue colour. Photograph by mboverload, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.

Figure 2: A North American R.O.B. unit. The robot could play certain games alongside the player. Photograph by Evan-Amos, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.



Figure 3: A black Nintendo 64 console, grey controller, and game cartridge, which is inserted into the top of the console. Photograph by Evan-Amos, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.