

Robomaze III: The Dome

Although today it has largely been lost to history, Robomaze III was quite popular in its day with users of MS-DOS. Released in 1991 by Wetware, this top-down adventure game likely served as inspiration for the slightly earlier Legend of Zelda (NES). Like the Legend of Zelda, it is a RPG exploration and dungeon crawler, with grid-based movement and basic inventory management. However, there are several distinct improvements present in Zelda which were not implemented by Robomaze. These mechanical modifications most likely made the difference between a game that would go down in history, and a game that would be lost to history.

Chief among these differences is the fact that while Zelda's inventory management is quick, effortless and unobtrusive, that in Robomaze was infuriatingly clunky. Pressing the inventory management button would pause the game (even in combat), bring up a new menu painfully slowly, and completely break the player's immersion. Another significant difference in design is the fact that at the beginning of Zelda, the player is spawned in a relatively safe area, in which they can familiarize themselves with game controls. The Zelda player is also presented with a weapon outright, and may practice with it before confronting enemies. This is completely overlooked in Robomaze, in which the player is immediately thrown into a hostile starting zone full of enemies, given no weapon, no control directions, and told to fend for himself. For good reason, some players would feel quite alienated by their introduction to Robomaze.

Lastly, players of Robomaze are given no indication as to their character's purpose, or the plot of which they are a part. This is certainly fixed by the Legend of Zelda, which has occasional dialogue that serves to move the plot forward and keep the player interested. Although story is

generally second in importance to mechanics, Robomaze seems to avoid any mention of plot or dialogue whatsoever, and instead relies on the player's curiosity to observe their environment. Based on the two games' respective popularity, this seems to have been a poor design choice.

The Dungeons of Grimlor

Released in 1993 by RederWare, the Dungeons of Grimlor for MS-DOS is another once-popular video game which is seldom remembered. The game has a similar mechanical feel to that of The Legend of Zelda (NES), in that it has a darker, moody atmosphere which is quite immersive. Combined with a shared genre of top-down adventure, these two games share a vast arrangement of mechanics, particularly with regard to player movement. However, there are a couple key differences which set them apart, and sent Zelda alone to the hall of fame.

In particular, a major difference between the DOG and Zelda is the respective map design. The Legend of Zelda gave the player largely free reign of movement in spacious, open areas, and allowed the player to choose from a number of directions, adding to the feeling of adventurous exploration of an unknown land. This is vastly different from The Dungeons of Grimlor, which was known for tight, claustrophobic maps with just a few small rooms and long, narrow hallways. Because of the walled-in nature of the entire DOG game, many players were left feeling that the game was too linear; there was very little choice involved in where to go and when, which can be frustrating for many players.

Another significant design difference was the availability of multiple save slots in Zelda. A player could maintain multiple games at once, or enjoy sharing the machine with a friend without losing his progress. This was not the case in the Dungeons of Grimlor, which was infamous for

only offering a single save slot. Coupled with the unfortunate choice in level design, this most likely made the difference between going down in history and being lost to history.

Crystalis(1990)

Looking at another one of titles that seems to be inspired and similar to the Legend of Zelda is the game Crystalis, produced by SNK . The game takes a 2D action RPG top down approach to the fantasy genre like zelda, and is captured with a higher graphical fidelity than the Legend of Zelda..

The game had detailed graphics for the era with some flashy visuals that initially makes this game appealing. It looks and acts like a much more complicated Legend of Zelda. There are many items that give you more options for combatting the creatures featured in the game with different magic and sword types to use. However, utilizing these weapons is done through navigating a very clunky screen change breaking the flow of combat. A typical encounter has you changing weapons multiple times to be effective. There are even multiple types of swords that function and unfortunately look similar on the screen but affect different types of enemies. The game seems to only let you equip one item at a time, so that when put in a hairy situation, you constantly need to switch. In the Legend of Zelda, you are able to set two items to a hotkey so that switching between items on the menu screen can be minimized. Chrystalis also has a more complex combat system, with charging weapons and an exp meter that effects damage, however these features bloat the combat and take away from the pick up and play feel of the Legend of Zelda. This probably did not transition well to a playerbase that was used to consuming videogames through the arcade cabinet. Chrystalis looked a little ahead of the time

but had too many layers and comes off with a lot of feature bloat. The player's movement in Chrystalis is faster and the space to move provided on the screen seems to constrict the player's movement, making the scale of the world feel small while having the player feel powerful. Legend of Zelda respects the scale and grandiosity of the dungeons that the player is exploring, making the player feel smaller in the world and making the goals, objectives, and environments feel more epic.

Chronicle of The Radia War(1991)

Another game we look at a look at was Chronicle of the Radia War. This is a JRPG developed by Tecmo. The game is an action RPG with higher story elements than the Legend of Zelda. It is dialogue driven, much like Final Fantasy. While the game tries to intersect more story and narrative into the genre, it does so in a very clunky way. The player transitions out of and into combat, almost like how the Final Fantasy series handles combat, but this transition is very slow. The player is loaded into a screen that is like zelda dungeon room, and fights the encounters monsters within the screen. The combat is slower than Zelda but also has enemy movement feeling more sporadic. The sword animations for the player character are very slow, (much slower than the legend of zelda) and there isn't much feedback when the player is hit or enemies are hit on the screen. Even in the middle of combat, after the player defeats a singular enemy, the player might meet a experience requirement, and the entire stage freezes in the middle of combat to show a level up animation. The player's movement is slow, and while this might try and give the player room for strategy on how they want to handle the encounter, it comes off as unexciting. These elements really makes the feeling of the game disjointed and clunky. Legend of Zelda has good flow between rooms and encounters, and has feedback for the player through

its images when you are damaging enemies. Combat in Chronicle has initial actions that effect how encounters start and the UI is not clear what these even do. Health and EXP are not shown clearly and are condensed into a hard to read bar. . Zelda presents its items, inputs, and health in the UI in a clear concise way with its heart system so that it's clear what the status of the player is and what they can do with the buttons. While Chronicles is an ambitious title, it really misses the mark on how it presents its content, making not stand the test of time. While it blunders, it does do some things different that wasn't often seen in games at the time. I imagine it filled some appetites for RPG enthusiasts at the time as an enjoyable experience.