



# THE LEGEND OF ZELIARD

BY RONDAL SCOTT III

As gamers and gaming enthusiasts we've each experienced that one, epic quest which sets in motion a lifelong love affair with video games. For myself, that quest began when I was only 9 years old, a nerdy white kid from the suburbs with dreams of being the next Todd McFarlane. The '80s had just come to an end, George H.W. Bush was planted in the oval office and, even though I didn't realize it at the time, the '90s were swelling with a treasure trove of all things "too gross," "rad" and "extreme."

The early 90s also marked the first real "next generation" of home gaming consoles, specifically the Super NES and Sega Genesis. Despite my best attempts to convince my parents to buy one, though, my initial gaming experiences would remain confined primarily to a PC. Now, I should take a moment to point out this was long before my parents would ever consider buying a NES or even an Atari because of the all-too-common "it would ruin my eyesight" myth adults often employed back then. Apparently, Saturday mornings were the exception to that rule—praise Jeebus—not to mention I already had to wear glasses.

Regardless, my lack of the latest gaming hardware never deterred me from falling under the siren song of pixelated PC adventure. I can actually still remember my daily routine of leaping off the school bus—quite literally—in a tuck-and-roll maneuver that would have made John Rambo proud, just so I could race home to play another game of *Battle Chess* and *Street Rod* before my younger brother beat me to it. Every day was an obstacle race between my brother and myself, to the victor went the spoils of having the first play through which could last a few minutes or a few hours.

So, after school and every weekend after baseball practice, homework, chores and countless other obstacles my brother and I would plug ourselves in front of the computer—our personal arcade machine—in an attempt to master the finer points of tuning up a '63 Valiant to street race for pink slips or pretend to vanquish demons in the deceptively difficult point-and-click adventures of *Barbarian*. In fact, it was often in these moments that that brother and I perhaps bonded the most, united in the never-ending struggle for PC gaming supremacy. Of course neither of us knew this was all in preparation for what would become our greatest, and as yet unfinished, challenge.

Even at a young age my brother and I were of two minds, he being the more logical, analytical “left brain” and myself embracing the creative nature of the “right brain.” As you might imagine this led to plenty of brotherly rivalry growing up, neither of us wanting to compromise our way of thinking or yield to the other. But when we sat down and started playing video games, it was like a finely tuned machine at work, two minds firing on all cylinders, and no game became unbeatable. No game except one. One game that, to this day, stands as our only incomplete conquest: *Zeliard*.



*Zeliard* (PC, 1990)

Published in the United States by Sierra Entertainment in 1990, but released a few years earlier in Japan, *Zeliard* is, on the surface, an unassuming story about a young hero and a kidnapped princess. It’s a timeless plot device that has inspired games like *Super Mario Bros.*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Ghosts 'n Goblins* and countless others. But like any first love, *Zeliard* was and always will be “special.” There’s just something about the game that drew me in and never let go. Maybe it was the horribly inaccurate box art (status quo for this era of video games) or perhaps it was the RPG element that drove me to lose sleep in search of a way to impress the Sage and increase my hitpoints.

While the basic plot was simple enough, the story that *Zeliard* told featured a surprising level of depth. You played as Duke Garland, a young knight sent to the Kingdom of Zeliard to rescue it from the torment of Jashiin, an ancient demon, who has put a curse on the city and turned it’s princess, Felicia, to stone. In order to defeat Jashiin, Garland must reclaim the “Nine Tears of Esmesanti” that are each guarded by one of Jashiin’s minions deep in eight different labyrinthine levels. As you go deeper into the game, enemies naturally get tougher and the labyrinths get sinisterly more complex. It was especially frustrating because we never could find the damn map that the game supposedly came with.

Individually, neither my brother nor myself were ever able to get very far. Whereas I would often plow way through a level, sometimes literally beating keyboard, my fingers dropping like mighty hammers with each swing of my sword, my brother eventually came up the idea to create his own map. In doing so, he figured out how the screens worked together in order to make each level look much more daunting than it really was. Even with his map, however, my brother

could never match my skill in cutting a path through Jashiin's monstrous hellspawn nor could I match his logical navigating. But together... together we were a pair of fearless co-pilots, leading Duke Garland into victory.

Unlike games like *Diablo* where some items become superfluous to beating the game, *Zeliard* required you to need every advantage you could get as you descended through the caverns of Santono and Bosque into the macabre graveyard town of Tumba (literally, it was built on a graveyard) and still further to the golden city of Dorado and the fiery Llama, which is as far as my brother and I have ever gotten. Beyond the borders of Llama, lies the almost mythical (to me at least) last stage of the game, the Fruit Gardens, where Jashiin awaits for a final confrontation between good and evil.

Oddly enough, I can't remember why we never beat the game or why we never spoke of it again. Perhaps it was just "growing up" that eventually gave cause to give up Garland's quest to save Felicia and the Kingdom of Zeliard. More likely, it was finally getting our first long-awaited gaming console the following Christmas. Regardless, *Zeliard* was left buried beneath new quests like *Kirby's Dream Land*, *Castlevania*, *Super Metroid* and all those to follow. Whatever the reason, I still think about the game from time to time and apparently so does my brother. This past Christmas, we actually reminisced at length about our adventures in Santono, Dorado and Llama—it was almost like we never left those underground tunnels.

Thanks to the magic of a DOS emulator and some online walkthroughs, my brother and I have recently taken up our quest right where we left off all those many years ago. Talking over the phone and sharing new tips and tricks we've each learned over time, we've individually made it back to the same level... and yet, it's almost as if I dare go no further. Perhaps I'm afraid the end of the game will never live up to the lofty expectations set forth by my 20-year long quest, but I persevere. Just like Duke Garland I must find the courage to raise up my Titanium Shield and my Illumination Sword (I still haven't yet experienced the epic swing of the Enchantment Sword) against the dark forces of evil and throw open the "door of destiny" to see what new adventures await, side by side with my brother.

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