



by Shawn Struck and Scott Sharkey, 08.03.2006

In the early 1990s, Scholastic Books released the Worlds of Power series -- books based on popular third-party Nintendo Entertainment System games. While the series bears the mark of childhood nostalgia for many gamers that grew up with the NES, there has been much speculation about its creator, F.X. Nine. Why did he create this series? Was his name really F.X. Nine? Why did Solid Snake never shoot anyone after collecting all those weapons?

F.X. Nine is the pen name of Seth Godin, the best-selling author of *Free Prize Inside* and *Purple Cow*, and the founder of Yoyodyne, an Internet-based direct marketing company. Why did Godin decide to create a book series based on third-party NES games, and why did he use the name F.X. Nine?

His reasons were both sentimental and practical. Godin was talking to his 10-year-old nephew about his hobbies, and was surprised to discover that the boy had never read a book for fun. Ever. Reading didn't seem to interest him or other children his age. What was popular with children, however, was playing video games on the NES. Godin set out to create books that his nephew would want to read -- and thus the Worlds of Power series was born.

As for why he chose the name F.X. Nine, Godin said it was a simple matter of how bookstores organize book displays -- by the author's last name. He figured that anyone looking for the books would walk into a bookstore and search under Nintendo, so "you might go over to the Ns, or maybe 'NIN', hence NINE."

Godin was the head of a book packaging company. His role in the publishing industry was similar to that of a movie producer in the film industry. Since publishers generally work with one author per project, it was up to him to assemble a series idea, choose the games to novelize, find writers, and then pitch the idea to a publisher. Godin said he was very close to working out a deal with a key contact at Nintendo, but negotiations fell through at the last minute. However, every subsequent publisher he approached about the Worlds of Power series agreed to let him novelize their games. After that, Scholastic Books eagerly approved the project.

Godin's work, however, was just beginning.

After he set a production schedule, chose the titles to novelize, and the authors to work for him, he had to create a 40-page "bible" for each game outlining the its plot, characters, and level layout. While these guides would make it easier for the author to create the narrative and dialogue, assembling them was quite a challenge. Most of the game companies were too busy to assist with the books, so Godin and the authors had to reverse-engineer the story by playing through the games themselves -- *without* the benefit of strategy guides.

There were eight games that were novelized for the Worlds of Power series: Sunsoft's **Blaster Master**, Konami's **Castlevania II: Simon's Quest**, Tecmo's **Ninja Gaiden**, Konami's **Metal Gear**, Acclaim's **Wizards and Warriors**, Kemco-Seika's **Shadowgate**, Capcom's **Bionic Commando**, and Mindscape's **Infiltrator**. Two games were novelized under the Junior Worlds of Power banner: **Mega Man II** and **Bases Loaded II: Second Season**.

Adapting these games from the TV screen to the printed page provided several narrative and logistical challenges. These challenges ranged from explaining exactly how an energy capsule replenished the hero's health to dealing with death and violence in games where characters blasted, zapped, or blew up their foes.

Or, as it turned out, how there was no death or overt violence at all -- at least, none inflicted on any of the humans or animals in the series.

Since the book covers were based on each game's box artwork, they were altered to have weaponry removed, no matter how awkward it made the cover appears. There are two particularly egregious examples. The cover to Ninja Gaiden has Ryu's katana airbrushed out, showing him making a fist instead. The cover to Metal Gear fares even worse -- the gun Solid Snake was holding is missing, making it look like Solid Snake is, as 1UP.com's Scott Sharkey put it, "making a vaguely masturbatory gesture."

This trend toward whitewashing death and violence also extended the books' text. In Blaster Master, all the defeated "underboss" characters that look like mutated animals turn out to be holographic projections placed over formless blobs. In Metal Gear, Solid Snake is described as a "walking arsenal," yet he only uses his various weapons to shoot locks off doors. In Ninja Gaiden, Ryu's father is shown losing a duel to the death in the game's prologue, and is said to have passed away in the book's early chapters. Yet he turns up at the very end of the book, very much alive. In Infiltrator, a double agent that is ordered to be sent away to be "voided" has his fate described as either having his memory wiped, being exiled, or getting demoted. In Before Shadowgate, nearly every overtly magical or occult reference from the NES game is stripped from the book. Bionic Commando describes the hero's gun shooting "stun bullets" and dispatching enemies with karate chops. While Bionic Commando does follow the NES game's climax -- with the enemy leader fatally double-crossed by a clone of Hitler -- the hero's complete lack of sympathy for an evil man being eliminated by an even more evil man is clearly noted.

Godin says that these changes were stylistic in nature and that he "wanted to minimize the death" seen in many of the NES games. "Ironically enough," he said, "Scholastic insisted that we excise witchcraft and occult-type stuff just a few years before they published Harry Potter!"

One author that worked closely with Seth Godin was Peter Lerangis. Using the pen name of A.L. Singer, Lerangis wrote four titles: Blaster Master, Ninja Gaiden, Infiltrator, and Bases Loaded II: Second Season. He was approached by Godin at the project's beginning, and while he admits he's never been very good at videogames, he relished the challenge of bringing their stories to the printed page.

Lerangis wrote fairly quickly -- each book took about four weeks to complete. His two favorite titles are the most popular and most obscure in the lineup, respectively: Ninja Gaiden and Bases Loaded II: Second Season.

Ninja Gaiden was one of the most popular books in the Worlds of Power series, Lerangis said, and he really enjoyed working on Ninja Gaiden because he felt he "was able to get into the character's head pretty quickly," especially when writing the book's beginning. As for the book's departure from the videogame's ending, Lerangis says that both he and Godin felt that the ending seemed to be a better fit with the aim of the Worlds of Power series. On a more personal level, he admits that since both he and Godin were both fathers of small children at the time, they were probably a little reluctant to leave Ryu without a father.

Bases Loaded II: Second Season was Lerangis' other favorite title. It doesn't hurt that he considers himself a lifelong baseball fan. Since the game itself didn't have much of a plot, Lerangis was free to create a comedic baseball story line; it turned out to be the title he felt was the most fun to write.

The most challenging title for Lerangis to write was also the first in the series: Blaster Master. Citing the game's lack of a strong middle plot, he had to invent many details to flesh out the story and connect the game's beginning and ending. His work did not pass unnoticed. In the PlayStation sequel **Blaster Master: Blasting Again**, Lerangis' novel is used for backstory. The character Eve was a creation of the novel and did not appear in the original NES game. This makes Blaster Master the only title in the Worlds of Power series that has been accepted as official canon. (Lerangis only discovered the "canonization" of his work upon being contacted for this feature, but found it to be "quite an honor!")

Godin says that the only game he wished he had a chance to novelize but never had the opportunity was Myst, as it was released on the PC. The biggest frustration for him while working on the Worlds of Power series was, ironically, that playing videogames for too long gives him a huge headache.

For Godin, the rewards of the Worlds of Power series far outweighed any game-induced headaches. The series was a huge success, selling a million copies. This is especially remarkable considering that the target audience, young boys, wasn't considered a large audience for book series.

"We sold a million copies to kids that may not have read for fun before," said Godin. "That's a huge success a home run!"

Asked to ruminate on the contemporary gaming scene and whether books in the Worlds of Power style would still be relevant, the series' turned somewhat philosophical. "I think that stories never go out of style," he said. "I think we need a series like this now more than ever& kids need to learn the habit of reading."

And what of the Worlds of Power audience? What does he hope the generation of gamers that read those books should have taken with them, now that they are adults?

"I think the lesson of each book was that there is a hero in everyone. You just have to set it free."