

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
Platform: Nintendo Switch/Wii U
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: March 3rd, 2017
Developer: Nintendo EPD
Publisher: Nintendo
Director: Hidemaro Fujibayashi
Game Writer: Akihito Toda

Overview

Deep inside an ancient shrine, the Eternal Hero of Hyrule awakens to a familiar voice, calling out across time and space. A century of slumber may have muddled his mind, but there is one thing Link is still certain of. Princess Zelda calls for aid, and neither the great Calamity nor death itself will keep her Champion from her.

Despite being around for over thirty years, *The Legend of Zelda* series continues to engage audiences with its latest installment, *Breath of the Wild (BotW)*. Using a carefully sculpted world, interlinking low-level systems, and non-sequential exploration of the Monomyth, *BotW* manages to transfer ownership of authored story moments to the players themselves – integrating carefully designed narrative progression with the type of emergence at which open world games excel.

Characters

- **Zelda** – Fiercely independent, inquisitive, and dutiful, the franchise's eponymous princess returns as the deuteragonist of *Breath of the Wild*. Unable to completely control the magical powers granted to her as the avatar of the goddess Hylia, Zelda resorted to studying and utilizing ancient technology to combat the inevitable return of Calamity Ganon. A stark contrast to her saintlier incarnations, this version of Hyrule's princess is initially portrayed as skeptical towards her people's faith – often to the point of agnosticism - despite, or perhaps because of, her alleged role as a divine vessel. Though not controllable by the player, the princess's role as the commander of the Champions, and mastermind behind Link's resurrection, make her arguably more important to the overarching narrative than the player character.
- **Link** – The eternally recurring Hero of Hyrule serves, once again, as the player character and protagonist. This incarnation of Link is portrayed as a somber young man who

chooses to remain stoic as a means of coping with the unenviable burden of being Hyrule's prophesied savior. From a narratological point of view, Link is one of the purest representations of Joseph Campbell's primordial *Hero* in video games – with his narrative arc matching, almost beat by beat, the 17 stages of the *Hero's Journey* (as described by Campbell) [1].

- **Ganon** – More of a force of nature than a sentient being, Calamity Ganon is an eternally reincarnating entity of pure evil that has haunted the world since time immemorial. It is responsible for the destruction of Hyrule as well as the deaths of Link (he got better) and his companions (they did not). Defeating Ganon is the primary objective of *Breath of the Wild*.
- **The Champions** – Four of Hyrule's most powerful warriors who were chosen to pilot the giant machines known as Divine Beasts, the champions were sworn to help Zelda and Link put an end to Calamity Ganon. Though they all met their demise at the hands of Ganon a century ago, their spirits still linger on in the world – unable to move on till they've fulfilled their sacred duty. Setting their spirits free is the secondary objective in *Breath of the Wild*. Each of the Champions can be defined by one or more Jungian archetypes [2].
 - **Mipha, Champion of the Zora** – Mipha's personality most closely corresponds to the *Caregiver* archetype. The soft-spoken, kind-hearted Zora princess was the emotional backbone of the Champions. Even in death, she continues watching over her still-living companions, soothing them in their moments of pain.
 - **Daruk, Champion of the Goron** – Daruk primarily displays elements of the *Warrior* archetype, with a few aspects of the *Jester*. Boisterous, big, and bold – Daruk continues to protect his friends with his spectral-body long after his living-body was taken from him.
 - **Urbosa, Champion of the Gerudo** – Urbosa's personality and demeanor most accurately correspond to the *Sage* archetype. The wise Gerudo sorceress was a constant source of wisdom and inspiration for all her comrades. This remains the case even a century after her death.
 - **Revali, Champion of the Rito** – Revali displays several characteristics of the *Outlaw* archetype. The only thing that matched the Rito archer's skill with the bow was his arrogance. The only thing that superseded both was his unflinching desire to stop Ganon. Losing his life to the Calamity has done little to humble Revali.

Breakdown

As one of the first franchises to incorporate an overarching storyline, the *Zelda* series is one that isn't afraid of innovating narratives. More importantly, the franchise isn't afraid of innovating its own established narratives - gleefully tearing apart conventions to facilitate growth and change. Previous *Zelda* titles like *The Wind Waker* and *Skyward Sword* did so by respectively deconstructing character tropes and the franchise's creation myth. *Breath of the Wild* innovates the narrative by deconstructing the Monomyth and creating layers of interconnected simulations that combine emergence with authored progression.

The Monomyth has been as essential a component to the *Zelda* franchise as its green-clad hero and magical princess. While *Breath of the Wild* is rather unorthodox in its presentation and

delivery of the Hero's Journey, its adherence to the overall structure of the Monomyth is fairly traditional.

From the moment Link awakens in the Shrine of Resurrection, it becomes apparent that he is not amongst the *mundane*. Blue veins of power pulse along the walls and ceiling as the emaciated, battle-scarred Hylian takes his first, gasping breath. There is no comforting figure waiting to guide the newly awakened hero – no friend or family to set him on the everyday chore that will eventually lead him to the *extraordinary*. The only thing he hears, as his ears tune out the beating of his heart, is a desperate plea for help echoing inside his mind. His memory remains cloaked in an impenetrable fog – even his own name eludes him.

Right from the get-go, we see that *Breath of the Wild* has skipped over one of the core parts of the Monomyth – the *known world* [1]. With no initial backstory and no context for player action other than the mysterious voice's cryptic plea, there is very little motivation for the player to act. It may even seem, at this point, that *BotW* has abandoned the Monomyth altogether. As Link exits the *Shrine of Awakening* he is treated to a gorgeous vista of all Hyrule. Green hills, forests, and rivers roll out before him into the very horizon itself as the great snow-capped mountains of outer Hyrule look down ominously. Ancient moss-covered ruins dot the landscape with the largest ruin lying at the center of it all – a once ornate castle, covered by an unnatural dark aura. The plea from the princess wasn't the context for the overarching narrative. This vista of Hyrule is. Even without a map or detailed quest log, the player intuitively knows where his journey will take him. The beautiful scenery of Hyrule stretching out before Link is, by itself, an invitation to explore the open world.

The true reason for hiding the *known world* from the player becomes apparent after a short introductory quest and some more (rather vague) exposition. Traditionally, the purpose of the *known world* in works following the Monomyth has been to act as a metaphoric spring-board, pushing the player along a specific narrative vector. This is great for linear titles which rely on maintaining narrative momentum to push players through scripted story moments – but not so much for open world settings which thrive on non-linear progression. Only through exploration can the veil surrounding the *known world* be rolled back bit by bit.

For every memory Link recovers, and for every encounter he has with an old acquaintance, a little bit more of the *unknown world* is teased. The player does not have to make a choice between pursuing his past or chasing his future. The arrangement of the authored narrative sections, scattered throughout Hyrule in a largely non-sequential fashion, ensures that Link is uncovering both his past and his future at once. For example, tracking down the location of a *memory point* in game often leads players directly to a large settlement that offers players a variety of side-quests. Not only do these side-quests provide additional context and incentive to explore the surrounding region, they almost always bring the player closer to other regions that Link hasn't explored yet. It becomes clear that *BotW* hadn't abandoned the Monomyth – it merely rearranged and obscured its individual parts. By holding the *known world* hostage from the player, *BotW* maintains the allure of an unexplored world while creating a framework for organic progression.

Aside from being a tool that normalizes the pacing of authored content, exploration also reduces *ludonarrative dissonance* [4]. It does so by replacing combat and 'experience points' and/or monster kills as the primary means of character progression. Link's two permanent stats, health (hearts) and stamina, are raised via the collection of spirit orbs. These orbs can only be found in ancient shrines that are scattered across Hyrule. Each shrine offers unique challenges to Link, usually in the form of puzzles, that the player can only complete once. They are thus a

limited resource that forces players to continually expand their horizons to attain more power. Whereas in many other games the player character is incentivized to grind in a small area to progress, *BotW* compels players to actively engage with the world. Because the primary narrative beats are arranged in the overworld to be conducive to exploration, the quest for character progression invariably ends up also progressing the overarching narrative. Thus, *BotW* gets past the dissonance often found in open world titles when the player grows much more powerful than would make sense given their level of narrative progression.

Of course, this exploration-driven progression system wouldn't be nearly as engaging if traversing Hyrule was repetitive and uninteresting. Not having enough content in the overworld makes the game feel empty and hollow from a narrative standpoint. Gratuitously filling it up with pre-authored segments, on the other hand, makes the player's personal journey feel impersonal. *BotW* resolves this issue through the implementation of low-level systems that facilitate emergent storytelling and make the world feel more natural. The Hyrule seen in this game isn't a mere representation of the fantasy-kingdom, it is a simulation of it. From wind-speed, to heat and ambient sound levels – the number of low-level systems that *BotW* simulates is staggering. And the level of interconnection between these low-level systems is unlike anything seen in the franchise before. Starting a fire in a dry area when the wind is blowing can cause the flames to spread much more quickly to surrounding objects. These then quickly burn up creating updrafts that Link can ride with his paraglider to reach great heights. Among other things, this example also illustrates the fine degree of control the player has over this system - a degree of control that facilitates the creation of unique, emergent micro-narratives.

What sets *BotW*'s open-world emergence apart from that of other similar titles is how this emergence is incorporated into authored content. Whereas many other franchises try to enforce an artificial sense of linearity to keep player experience consistent, *BotW* revels in non-linear sequence skipping. The game understands that sometimes figuring out how to skip content is more enjoyable than the content itself to certain players. To that end, *BotW*'s open-ended quest objectives and level design go a long way in accommodating unorthodox attempts at progressing without ever making the game feel "broken". Player ingenuity is rewarded without demeaning the designer's original vision. And because the player achieved their objective on their own terms, they feel a greater sense of ownership over the narrative reward that comes at the end of every story beat.

Strongest Element

The shrines are some of the strongest elements of *BotW*. Most of them are hidden throughout the world and require quite a bit of thoughtful exploration to locate them. Sometimes unlocking the shrines involve an open-ended quest chain that requires Link to not only exploit the simulation of Hyrule to its fullest, but also to decipher cryptic clues that add to the narrative depth of the setting. The puzzles inside the shrines are also perfect examples of excellent "immersive sim" style problem solving - accommodating a wide variety of solutions and playstyles, while retaining a cohesive narrative theme. For example, the Shrine of Rin Oyaa was structured around remotely triggering a switch by rolling a ball into it. The narrative of the shrine, from the environmental storytelling to the title of the challenge itself, implied that the "correct" solution was using the wind turbines to roll the ball into the switch. However, by utilizing the *Stasis* rune to freeze momentum on the ball, I was able to beat the shrine without touching any of the wind turbines. The fact that the game rewarded me for this unorthodox

approach made me care more about the rewards. In fact, this made me care more than I would have if only a single solution was available.

Unsuccessful Element

The dungeons, by far, are the weakest elements in *BotW*, not because they are poorly designed, but because they don't utilize or exploit the non-linearity that the game's narrative thrives on. Every dungeon in the game features a sequence of linear tasks that can only be completed in a certain order in a very specific manner, eliminating the possibility of emergent narratives forming. Some dungeons may offer a bit more leeway in how the objectives are approached (e.g. Vah Ruta), but overall, they feel restrictive – especially when compared to everything that the player has overcome to reach the dungeons themselves. Special mention goes to the dungeon Vah Rudania, and its associated region of Death Mountain. Whereas other regions encourage exploration through open-ended level design, Death Mountain railroads the player through an overuse of lava rivers. As such, finally reaching Vah Rudania feels like a very impersonal journey, especially compared to other dungeons Link has overcome so far. The added impersonality of the Goron NPCs and quest givers that dot the area don't really help matters.

Highlight

The series of quest chains related to quelling the rogue Divine Beast, Vah Ruta, is the emotional centerpiece of Link's adventures across Hyrule. From the arduous trek to the Domain of the Zora through rain soaked mountain passes, to unlocking the ability to scale waterfalls – the water-based mechanics involved in this arc feel refreshing and thematically appropriate. It feels as though Hyrule itself is crying at the tragedy of Mipha, the Zora Princess who lost her life piloting the Divine Beast a century ago. Link's repressed memories of Mipha are some of the most heartbreaking authored moments in the game, and they really motivate the player to defeat the monster that murdered her. Add in interesting side-characters like Prince Sidon and the surprisingly forgiving Zora King, and an extremely difficult optional boss in the form of a Red Lynel, and you have the recipe for a great section. Two of the more open-ended shrines being right next to the general quest area is just icing on the cake.

Critical Reception

- **Polygon - Arthur Gies – 10/10:** Gies praises the narrative setup of *BotW*, describing it as familiar enough to get long-term fans engaged but innovative enough to be noticeable. Specifically, he points out the degree of subtext in the game's writing regarding implied stories and relationships. [5]
- **Wired – Matt Kamen – 10/10:** Kamen describes the story of *BotW* as “surprisingly deep” and discusses how the open world solves the franchise's “repetition problem”. This game's iteration of Ganon is also praised as the ever-present world threat that pushes the narrative along. [6]

Lessons

- **Embrace the Open World:** The open world should be seen less as pure geography in which content is kept, and more as geometry that shapes the player's core experience. The best quests in *BotW* were, undoubtedly, the ones that integrated the open-world geometry to control the pacing of narrative progression.
- **Don't be afraid of old narrative conventions:** The Monomyth may be an extremely old idea that has been done to death in various different mediums. But, at the end of the day, there's a reason why it's so popular and overused – it works. And adopting tried and tested storytelling methods not only reduce creative load but also save time for additional refinement of narrative beats.
- **Vague quest objectives and maps can be an explorer's best friend:** The relative lack of map icons and quest markers (when compared to similar titles) created a more mysterious world that's practically begging to be explored. Vagueness of the few existing quest markers also encouraged players to adopt multiple different approaches - most of which lead to the discovery of many interesting micro-narratives.

Summation

Breath of the Wild isn't a success story simply because it chose to adopt change. It's a success story because it knew precisely where to adopt these changes. Instead of radically altering or removing the Monomyth at the heart of every *Zelda* story, the designers chose to simply change the method of its delivery. Hyrule itself, formed from hundreds of interconnected low-level simulations [7], is made into the title's storyteller. And by making it so, Nintendo created a game, steeped in modern innovations, that somehow still captures the narrative essence of its thirty-year-old predecessor.

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