

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
Platform: Nintendo Switch/Nintendo Wii U
Genre: Adventure/Survival
Release Date: 03/03/2017
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hidemaro Fujibayashi

Overview

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild follows the story of Link, having awoken from a 100-year stasis slumber to find Hyrule almost entirely devoid of life, all civilization almost entirely wiped out. There are two main narrative threads to this story. The first is in the present where the gameplay takes place occupies most of the player's time, following Link's journey from the moment he wakes up from his stasis to him confronting Ganon (also referred to as Calamity Ganon). Second is 100 years before that, following Link and Zelda's experiences from Link's anointment as a knight to him falling against Ganon, focusing primarily on Zelda's trials and tribulations during that period and her relationship with Link. As Link awakens from his stasis having forgotten everything about his past, players piece together the events of the past by visiting areas where something important to Link happened, causing him to remember more and more of his past.

The structure for the story relies heavily in flashbacks, as Link slowly remembers these events from before Calamity Ganon strikes Hyrule Castle, eventually learning that Zelda has been keeping Calamity Ganon contained inside Hyrule Castle for the 100 years he has been in slumber. Link then must recover his lost memories as well as travel to the ominous and errant Divine Beasts and take back control over them in the hope that their power is enough to aid him in rescuing Zelda and destroying Calamity Ganon.

Characters

- **Link** – The player avatar. He was once a known as the knight protector of Princess Zelda, but to most survivors and current inhabitants of Hyrule he is known as the hero who stood up against Calamity Ganon. As is accustomed for the iconic character, Link is almost entirely quiet and does not speak, despite

Breath of the Wild sporting voice acting for the first time in the franchise's history. However, sprinkled throughout the game are clues and references that hint toward his past and his personality usually absent in past *Legend of Zelda* titles. Zelda mentions that Link is a knight like his father, and that he has trained most of his life towards being one. She also acknowledges that Link is a quiet and reserved boy, however, a diary of hers states that Link is quiet and reserved due to bearing the responsibility and expectations of the knight chosen by the Master Sword. Another interesting fact about this iteration of Link is that he possesses the Master Sword when he appointed to be a knight for Zelda; in other words, by the time the story begins some time before the Great Calamity he has already proven himself to be a capable knight and earned the right to wield the Master Sword.

- **Zelda** – Ostensibly the protagonist of the story, most of the narrative focuses on her trials and training before Calamity Ganon strikes. The Princess of Hyrule, she is a curious and inquisitive person by nature, and enjoys studying the Guardians, Divine Beasts, and other relics left behind by the ancient Sheikah civilization. Unfortunately, she carries a heavy burden; as the heir to the royal throne she has inherited the divine power to seal away Calamity Ganon whenever it returns, yet this power has not awakened inside her, despite her training since she was a child. This presents an interesting dichotomy to players, given most memories earned are about Zelda trying to use her powers and subsequently failing, yet the player knows that she must have eventually succeeded as she is currently keeping Calamity Ganon prisoner inside the castle.
- **Calamity Ganon** – The main antagonist and villain in the story. The player can always see Calamity Ganon should they look towards Hyrule Castle, appearing as a massive specter-like creature sporting the form of a disfigured boar. Calamity Ganon is very different from most iterations of the character because this time it acts as a mindless creature seeking nothing more than the destruction of everything around it. The game heavily mentions the fact that Ganon always eventually returns to plague the royal family of Hyrule, despite the Master Sword used to seal it, as it bound to a curse of darkness that reincarnates it over time. However, Zelda remarks that on this occasion he chose not to reincarnate and is harnessing most of the power that the dark curse brings him; it sacrificed its mind to obtain more power, gaining the ability to spread a vile corruption that allowed him to control the Guardians and the Divine Beasts, and with them almost wipe Hyrule entirely. This portrayal of Ganon makes players feel not like they're fighting a cackling villain, more so a force of nature that constantly lords over Hyrule, especially as he is visible from almost anywhere in the map.
- **Old Man / King Rhoam** – The king of Hyrule, and Zelda's father. He serves as a guide for the player as they begin their adventure and directs the player throughout the tutorial section. He originally appears as an old, hooded man with a knack for always being near Link as he explores the starting area. He asks Link to retrieve some treasure for him in some shrines, and in exchange, bestow him with a paraglider, an indispensable tool for transportation as well as the only way

to leave the tutorial area. When he does, he reveals himself to be the ghost of King Rhoam, slain during the Great Calamity, and explains to Link that Zelda is currently holding Ganon inside the Castle. He plays a prominent role in one of the memories Link can acquire, where he chastises Zelda for not taking her training seriously and demands she ceases her scholarly activities in favor of her divine training. While he is stern and impatient to Zelda's protests in this scene, he is much more calm and mellow when the player meets him as the Old Man.

- **Revali** – Revali is the champion of the Rito. He is very brash, proud, and cocky, expressing dislike that he must work under Link despite his ability to fly and his skills with the bow. When Link travels to retake the Divine Beast Vah Medoh, Revali's spirit tacitly welcomes Link as he works his way through the level that is the inside of the construct. His tone is considerably kinder to him during this trial compared to in the past, and turns friendly once Vah Medoh is back under control.
- **Daruk** – The champion of the Goron, Daruk is a bombastic and loud personality. He suggests that Zelda appoint Link as his knight with as much pomp and circumstance as possible but during said appointment muses that Zelda's tone makes him feel like the coming battle is already lost. During the memory flashbacks, he is usually jovial and friendly towards both Link and Zelda, and his spirit welcomes Link as a friend when he travels to retake the Divine Beast Vah Rudania.
- **Mipha** – The Zora champion, Mipha contrasts heavily with Daruk. She is very quiet and timid, and usually reserved when the rest of her team speaks. Link finds out she had feeling for him as she had created a suit of Zora Armor to give to her future husband that fits Link perfectly, but she does not get to reveal these feelings before her death. She also possesses the ability to heal people, and remarks how she had to constantly heal Link as a child when he got into trouble. When talking alone with Link, she expresses wanting to spend more time with him after the eventual war with Calamity Ganon ends. Link meets her spirit when taking back the Divine Beast Vah Ruta, where she receives him warmly.
- **Urbosa** – As the champion of the Gerudo, Urbosa is a fierce and driven woman. She appears to take an almost motherly role with Zelda, and shows a high insight into the princesses' thought. Link meets her spirit while retaking the Divine Beast Vah Naboris, where she expresses neither Link or Zelda should bear any guilt over the death of the rest of the champions, as well as how proud she is of Zelda.

Breakdown

The brunt of narrative takes place in the past timeline. Throughout the history of Hyrule, Ganon exists as a curse upon the land, always returning to life to cause havoc, in an implied infinite cycle, only stopped by a princess carrying divine blood and a hero wielding the Master Sword. A prophecy has foretold that Ganon is due to return, and the kingdom is preparing itself for the eventual arrival. Princess Zelda and Link are at the center of this, Zelda destined to unlock the divine power that seals Ganon and Link having already earned the right to wield the Master Sword. However, there is a problem. Zelda has not unlocked the divine power despite training for it since she was a child. Whenever she is not praying or training, she enjoys the study of the ancient Sheikah civilization, who sealed Ganon away the last time it returned, 10,000 years ago along with the past heroes. They left behind several artifacts no longer understood, notable amongst these are the Guardians and the Divine Beasts. The Guardians are autonomous machines, and the Divine Beasts are giant robots that require piloting. The King of Hyrule creates a group known as the Champions, made up of Zelda, Link, Revali, Urbosa, Daruk, and Mipha, the latter four chosen to pilot the Divine Beasts. The Champions represent the first and last line of defense against Calamity Ganon, wielding the might of the Divine Beasts, the legendary Master Sword, and the divine powers of the royal bloodline. Despite Zelda's best efforts, however, her training appears to be in vain, causing her to live in frustration, caught between her love of studying these ancient wonders and her responsibility towards her divine destiny which she is unable to fulfill. When Ganon eventually appears as prophesized, she yet unable to access the power to seal him away, but Hyrule still mounts an offence, sending Link, the Divine Beasts, and the Guardians against the beast. Ganon takes them all by surprise when he somehow manages to corrupt the Guardians and the Divine Beasts, turning the tables against the combined forces of Hyrule and killing the four pilots. Without the divine power to seal away Ganon, and now facing the Sheikah machines as well, Ganon conquers Hyrule and mortally wounds Link. At the last moment, Zelda manages to unlock her divine powers, places Link in a Sheikah restoration chamber that can eventually heal his wounds, and faces Calamity Ganon, locking him in Hyrule Castle, and continues to hold back the apocalypse for the next 100 years.

Players begin the game when Link awakens from this restorative stasis, having lost all memories of the past. He meets a character simply named Old Man who acts as a guidance for the tutorial portion of the game. He eventually reveals himself as the ghost of the King of Hyrule, informs Link that Zelda has held Calamity Ganon prisoner in Hyrule Castle, and urges him to save her.

It is here where *Breath of the Wild* reveals its brilliant structure. The entirety of Hyrule is open to the player, offering three main overarching quests. The first one, simply put, is "Destroy Ganon". The second, is "Free the Divine Beasts" which requires players to track down the four errant Beasts and somehow bring them back into the control of the forces of good. Finally, "Captured Memories" presents Link with 12 pictures of somewhere in Hyrule where he holds an important memory of him and Zelda, and tasks players to figure out and travel to the location shown, so they can remember said memory and slowly piece away the events from the past. These three quests occupy most of the

game's time, with the second two presented to help Link improve his fighting chance against Calamity Ganon. Players soon piece together, however, that the only quest that is necessary to beat the game is to slay Ganon. Everything else is optional.

With the world entirely open to them, players are free to choose where to go and what to do at their leisure. They can tackle any of the four Divine Beasts or visit any of the twelve picture locations in whatever order they wish, or ignore these quests and focus on other side-quests, or simply explore the huge and gorgeous world. This gives the players almost unprecedented freedom to play the game as they see fit.

Freedom is also uncoincidentally the biggest overarching theme and motif of *Breath of the Wild*. As players piece together Link's memories with Zelda, they are presented with a girl that is constantly caught between her responsibilities and her passion for scholarly studies. She has trained daily to awaken her divine power since she was six years old, and has done so diligently because it is her destiny. As the inheritor of the divine power, she-along with the entire kingdom- know if she is unable to unlock said power, it is very unlikely Calamity Ganon can be stopped if and when it returns. Frustrated by her lack of progress, she turns to studying the ancient Sheikah civilization, as she believes her wit and wisdom better suits understanding and mastering the Guardians and the Divine Beasts. Her father the king, however, forces her to focus on her training.

Initially Zelda even dislikes Link for two reasons. First, by the time he comes into to her service as a bodyguard knight, he has already earned the Master Sword, which further pains her insecurities. The Champion Urbosa reflects "That boy is a living reminder of her own failures. Well, at least that's how the princess sees him". Second, she resents Link's assignment to her against her will. However, she eventually opens to Link thanks to his unwavering loyalty despite her continued failure to awaken her powers. In her depressed state, she asks Link what would he do if he "was not meant to be a fighter", despite being born into the role and everyone expecting as much. Zelda feels clearly trapped in a destiny she doesn't feel is right for her.

In a cruel twist of fate, once Zelda does eventually awaken her powers, Link is unable to assist her in sealing away Calamity Ganon. This is why she can contain Ganon inside Hyrule Castle as opposed to fully sealing him away. Even after she has awakened her powers, she once again finds herself trapped; it seems to be her destiny to not be free. Another interesting angle presented, Ganon does not appear to willingly bring itself back into existence, an ancient curse placed on the royal family of Hyrule is responsible¹. Essentially, Ganon appears cursed for what appears to be eternity into a perpetual cycle of reincarnation and conflict with the legendary hero. Furthermore, while not being living creatures, "freeing" is the term used to describe the act of taking back the Divine Beasts, and as the players reach the Divine Beasts, they find the lingering ghosts of the Champions stuck in the Beast unable to move on.

¹ Most likely referring to the events of *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*.

Along the way, there are several side quests and tertiary characters that also fit into the theme of freedom or unburdening oneself. Several mini-dungeons known as shrines exist scattered all over Hyrule, ostensibly built by the Sheikah 10,000 years ago to help the hero of legend in his quest. Inside each of them is a monk that offers Link a trial, and should he succeed bestows him orbs that exchangeable for permanent upgrades. Four orbs allow players to pick between upgrading Link's maximum health or his maximum stamina, once more providing freedom for players to choose to play the way they want to. There is also a rather long quest called "From the Ground Up", in which a man recruits Link to help him build a new town from scratch. Link finds people all over the world that wish to start anew and invites them to live in this new town where they can freely pursue their interests.

Curiously enough, the game never addresses the irony in Zelda keeping Calamity Ganon locked inside Hyrule Castle. Link must rescue her before Ganon can free itself, therefore in this case Ganon's freedom is the apocalypse that looms over the land. And, in the end, Zelda only achieves freedom after Ganon's sealing away at the very end of the game, losing her divine powers due to their constant use over 100 years. It is possible to interpret this as the destiny of the ones holding the Triforce trumping their individual freedom in the end.

Strongest Element

The story's overarching theme of freedom and destiny meld very well into the narrative progression. Notably, upon completing the tutorial section of the game, Link has full access to the entirety of the overworld's map. In previous *Zelda* games, such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* and *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, story progression dictates which areas of the map are available, closing off most of the world until unlocked. *Breath of the Wild* eschews this tradition by allowing the player absolute freedom to travel to any destination they see on their map or in the landscape.

This applies to progressing the story in two key ways. First, almost all the story content is optional. The only two things you absolutely must do to complete the game is finish the tutorial section and fight Calamity Ganon. Players can run straight towards the final fight as soon as they finish the tutorial and there's nothing completely stopping them, outside of the incredibly hard encounters found while storming Hyrule Castle. Even then, there's no unpassable barriers, and a highly skilled or sneaky player can handle these with the weapons available at the beginning of the game. Second, player can acquire memories and clear the Divine Beasts in whatever order they desire. Once more the theme of freedom shines in allowing the player to experience the world however they see fit.

This results in players most likely having a unique experience as they progress through the story. Some player may abandon the memory questline and focus entirely on clearing the Divine Beasts first, which means they familiarize themselves with the Champions before they really understand Zelda's character. For others, the first memory they see could show Zelda and Link escaping Calamity Ganon after it has claimed the life of the Champions, beat Link in combat, and broke Zelda's spirit, making the memories that chronologically occur before this more bittersweet.

In forgoing directing players through a set path, the designers crafted a story that is experienced just as unique to each player as the way they traverse the land and the goals they set for themselves.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite rounding out the roster of characters and being generally welcome additions to the game, the four Champions that assist Link throughout the game feel very underdeveloped compared to Link, Zelda, and to a certain extent King Rhoam and Calamity Ganon. As the pilots of the Divine Beasts, they bear a large responsibility to protect Hyrule and princess Zelda. However, they receive very little treatment throughout the whole game, each receiving essentially the exact same number of dialogues:

- Small speaking role during two of Link's memories of Zelda, where each gets at most two lines.
- One dedicated memory in the lead up to Link rushing each Divine Beast, where he remembers a short conversation he had with the champion. During this cutscene, they show a special ability that they alone can perform.
- During the exploration of the dungeon inside each Divine Beast, they get a couple of lines where they introduce themselves to Link, and direct him on what to do.
- Before the boss fight at the end of each Divine Beast dungeon, a small introduction to the boss when it appears. They all mention said boss as the enemy that killed them in combat during the Great Calamity.
- After said fight, a small dialogue with Link where they grant him the power shown off during their dedicated cutscene.
- A monologue where they reclaim control over the Divine Beast.
- Once the fight against Calamity Ganon begins, a cutscene shows each of the champions use their Divine Beasts to fire a laser at Calamity Ganon, and they get one line of dialogue each along with it.

It may not seem like a bad number of dialogue options and opportunities, as we see them in the context of how they acted in life and how their spirit talks with Link. However, when it comes to developing their character and personalities the list is deceptively short. First, their appearance in both Zelda memories are about her and her trials, and they show very little of their own personality. Second, their lines upon reaching a Divine Beast, directing Link inside it, and introducing the dungeon's boss are not very interesting nor do they give the character any growth; they simply repeat the exact same message through the lens of their most defining character trait. Similarly, their line when assisting Link against Calamity Ganon is mostly a "one liner" to give extra oomph to the action of the sequence without adding much to their character. When all is said and done, the majority of the important lines of each Champion are from their dedicated memory, their monologue after regaining control of their Divine Beast, and their talk with Link when they grant him their power.

All of this is not to say that the actual number of dialogues is the takeaway. The problem lies in how little these precious few scenes add to the characters. The narrative enjoys well developed primary characters, memorable tertiary characters, but very weak secondary characters.

There is a silver lining to this. Of the four Champions, Mipha stands out above the other three for a couple of reasons. Due to Zoras having an unspecified but long lifespan, most Zora the player meets in the world remember Mipha before her death, and Link interacts with her father and brother. It is thanks to these exchanges that we learn that Mipha had feelings for Link and made a Zora Tunic specifically for him as a marriage offer. These details add a good measure of depth to her character and make some of her lines more powerful, specifically her dedicated memory with Link. The other three Champions do receive some mention by their people, however, the player does not gain much insight into them like they did with Mipha. The Champions would have benefited greatly by learning more about their personality, even if small details, without the need to give them additional complex story beats.

Highlight

One moment that stands out is the final memory between Link and Zelda. Unlocked by collecting all other memories of Zelda, it serves as a closure of sorts for her character arc. In this memory, we see a wounded Link on the verge of collapse protecting Zelda as they try to escape from a large group of Guardian pursuers. Zelda tries to tell Link to escape and save himself, while he feebly attempts to protect her. An errant Guardian spots them and moves in to fire at them, but before it finished charging its attack Zelda steps in and, unleashing a wave of holy light, awakens her powers and shuts down all guardians in the area. We then hear Link collapse, Zelda rush to hold him, and him dying² in Zelda's arms.

By this point, both events of importance that transpire in this scene are known to the player. Zelda must have awakened her powers at some point, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to keep Calamity Ganon prisoner for 100 years. Link falls in battle, resulting in the game beginning at the Shrine of Resurrection and the entire reason behind the 100-year gap in the story. Thus, the scene shows arguably the two most momentous events of that era next to Calamity Ganon's return. There is power in the presentation, as it shows Links' unwavering determination in the face of sure death, Zelda's desire to protect him as well, and her divine powers shutting down a small army one of the game's most terrifying enemy.

Several details in the scene add to the drama. Link collapses only after Zelda destroys the Guardians, essentially allowing himself to die only when he sees that she is safe. The fact that Zelda awakens her powers to protect Link adds depth to their relationship and shows the strong bonds between them. It represents a big transition between the game's two

² The game murky regarding Link's fate at this scene. Some characters refer to him receiving mortal wounds but surviving his journey to the stasis machine which heals him over 100 years. Other characters say he "fell in battle". Adding to the confusion, only Zelda and two Sheikah warriors are present. The scene could be interpreted either way.

timelines, marking the end of the Great Calamity era and setting up the present timeframe. Zelda also sees a transition in this scene, as it marks her transformation from the damsel in distress into the heroine. One must keep in mind, after only one accidental use of her powers, she travels to Hyrule castle- alone- and successfully confronts and contains Calamity Ganon, who only moments ago eviscerated Hyrule, killed the Champions, and defeated Link in battle. The scene also sells the long-mentioned divine powers that Zelda had been struggling so hard to achieve very effectively, in a way that makes it believable that she has been containing Calamity Ganon for 100 years.

Critical Reception

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild met near universal critical acclaim. Cody Gravelle of GameRant writes “Just days after *Breath of the Wild* released to an almost unheard-of amount of critical acclaim [...] the title has now set the Metacritic record for most perfects reviews from critics on the aggregate website with an astounding 43.” [1] Otero from IGN awards the game a rating of 10/10, quote “But what elevates *Breath of Wild* above its open-world contemporaries is its sheer freedom, both in its non-linear questing structure and in your ability to climb almost any surface and travel in any direction once you leave the starting area.” [2] He praises the openness of the game’s mechanics, its approach to story-telling, and the depth of the game’s numerous mechanics. “*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a masterclass in open-world design and a watershed game that reinvents a 30-year-old franchise.” [2]

Hilliard’s review for Game Informer also awards the game a perfect 10, and has this to say about Calamity Ganon: “In *Breath of the Wild*, Link is not trying to prevent the villain’s resurrection. Ganon is there the moment Link wakes, visible in the distance. His evil presence is clear from nearly every vantage point on the map as a disturbing, glowing evil and it has a tangible effect on the world. I felt it at every moment, whether it was by seeing Ganon in the distance or by talking to Hyrulians living under his oppression. Seeing the goal from the moment I started the game also made my final sprint to defeat Ganon hugely rewarding. When I finally decided I was ready to face Ganon, it felt like the culmination of a lifetime of preparation that ended with a hugely satisfying finale.” [3]

Peter Brown’s review for GameSpot joins the perfect scores, remarking about the way the world truly feels wild: “No matter how gorgeous its environments are, how clever its enemies are, and how tricky its puzzles get, the fact that *Breath of the Wild* continues to surprise you with newfound rules and possibilities after dozens of hours is by far its most valuable quality.” [4]

Lessons

- Lesson 1 Non-linear story telling can be very powerful: The structure of *Breath of the Wild* is a huge departure from classical *The Legend of Zelda* stories. In fact, it is a departure from what is found in the vast majority of games. Lots of games suffer from holding the player’s hand excessively and telling them what to do at every turn; *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* made Navi infamous for

interrupting the player to give them advice. Now, however, the player discovers the story not only at their own pace, but in the order of their choosing, which sounds like a ludicrous proposition. After all, is it possible to design a game where virtually every puzzle and event is beatable completely independently from any other? *Breath of the Wild* proves not only that it is possible beyond the shadow of a doubt, but also does so in a truly masterful way.

- Lesson 2 Tying your motif into your gameplay bolsters both: The motif of freedom and the actual freedom available meld incredibly well and feed off one another. It may be a challenging proposition, but making your mechanics feed your story achieves gestalt very effectively.
- Lesson 3 Do not underestimate the player: It is easy to argue against having this much freedom by asserting that players tend towards overload of choice and the lack of directions and order hampers their enjoyment. The success of the game proves that it is very possible to reach a mass market without the need for long tutorials or hand holding.
- Lesson 4 You can reinvent yourself while still being loyal to your roots: *Breath of the Wild* is a completely different beast from most other games in the franchise. It does away with conventions that have stood the test of time for almost three decades and in the process revolutionized open world games. This is due to the fact that, despite being different from almost all Zelda games, it borrows the same feel of the original *The Legend of Zelda*, and hits that sweet spot of exploration without feeling trying to simply appeal to nostalgia or making a modern adaptation of the classic. Good game design is all about knowing what lies at the core of the experience you wish to provide.

Summation

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild represents a fundamental challenge to a long-standing tradition of storytelling in open world games. It is definitive proof that an almost complete lack of explicit direction can be a powerful tool without detracting from a powerful narrative. By giving the player near total freedom in how they approach almost every aspect and mechanic of the game, a truly unique experience is born, reflecting how each player tackles the massive world. This helps amplify the core motif of freedom that the player experiences in the story, if they so choose to take part of it, that is.

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