



IS ZELDA THE NEW BENCHMARK FOR ALL OPEN-WORLD GAMES?

INTRODUCTION

Many games in recent history have been said to have revolutionised the industry and set the benchmark in quality for a specific type of game. For example, we have the Witcher 3, completely changing what everyone expects from an open-world action role-playing game, with its deep, captivating (and in most cases funny) quests; the brutal and fast-paced combat, all coupled with stunning graphics and a beautiful environment. In 2017, we were given Star Wars: Battlefront II, showing just how fantastically EA could mess-up and ruin a beloved franchise due to the money-whoring scumbaggery at the top, forcing gameplay altering 'Star Cards' to be a necessity for anyone who wants a chance to actually enjoy their experience without getting pwned by 'Pay 2 Winners'.

However, Nintendo has stepped forward and absolutely smashed 2017 with its releases of Super Mario: Odyssey, the Switch, and of course the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. I believe that this Zelda title is as revolutionary as the original, which introduced the world to saving, due to the sheer beauty and quality of the world Nintendo has created. In many years' time, we will be looking back on this game as an example of how to design a world and how to fully immerse a player into the world they are experiencing.

This essay will detail why I believe this is one of, if not the finest world ever crafted in gaming history, I will write about not only the world design, but the how the gameplay mechanics are used to interact with the world, and how the sound design and minimal direction given actually adds more to this game. Let me just preface this by saying, I love the Witcher 3, the Elder Scrolls games, the Fallout franchise (up until Fallout 4), and the worlds of GTA 5, Dragon Age: Inquisition and so on, but the world that Nintendo has crafted can actually be considered art. I never really enjoyed the Zelda games. I found them to be fairly boring and I didn't really get the hype around the series, but then I played BOTW and I was completely mesmerised by what I consider to be one of the greatest games I have ever had the pleasure of playing.

HYRULE VS OTHER WORLDS

A lot of games nowadays include a vast open-world full of deep and rich lore, however only a handful of them can be considered truly great. Games like Far Cry and Assassin's Creed are very popular and have huge open-worlds; however I don't think we could feasibly consider many of the games from these franchises to be great, except from AC 2 and Far Cry 3. But the reason that these games are considered great is more due to the linear, engrossing, narrative and outstanding characters: namely Vaas and Ezio.

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Some of the greatest worlds created in gaming history include Los Santos (GTA V), Skyrim, Afghanistan (Metal Gear Solid V) and the Wild West (Red Dead Redemption). These worlds really appeal to the player and are memorable because they feel real, for example the way that guards have shifts in MGS V, and the way that civilians interact with one another and even the traffic found in GTA V. My biggest problem with games like Infamous, Far Cry and Assassin's Creed, all with enormous and impressive worlds, is that the main story is essentially the only thing that matters; the story is either done now, or done "in a minute". Zelda doesn't do this; there is only two mandatory objectives in this game, leave the 'Great Plateau' and 'Defeat Gannon', the story isn't forced and you are encouraged to explore and just mess about really.

While BOTW doesn't have random bandit ambushes, or reckless drivers cursing at one another, it still feels alive. The little critters that scamper across the plains, the horses meandering around near the duelling peaks, and of course the people, sharing rumours and riddles that could lead to sweet loot. All these small details make you really feel as if you are part of the world; this is further supported by the fact that the game pretty much never holds your hand and tells you where to go, but more on that later. Zelda manages to feel alive, without having these huge cities or even real, voiced dialogue. The way that Zelda manages to have such a great appeal is by literally letting the player do whatever they want in this giant world. You can go anywhere at any point. Yes, you may get absolutely obliterated by a sentinel or a Lynel, but that's part of the journey and in my opinion, this is what makes this games world and atmosphere perfect. In some games, the harder areas are locked off, Far Cry 4 being a good example, but Zelda really redefines the term 'open-world': no invisible walls, if you can see it you can really go there (stamina permitting), no gated off areas.

Furthermore, I believe that the colour palette is also important when comparing games, while I do agree that all of the other games mentioned above got the colour schemes spot on, it has to be said that some bright colours don't go amiss. For example, while Skyrim is one of my favourite games of all-time, it gets to a point where a certain amount of snow covered grass and the same wall textures get boring after a little while and just sort of creates this drab atmosphere. Zelda on the hand uses vibrant tones to appeal to the inner child in the player. I know this is quite a subjective idea, but the greens and yellows used creates this jovial tone that is present throughout most of the game, however BOTW also knows when to tone down the colours and use much more muted tones, this transition in colour scheme tells the player that this area is important, like the Lost Woods with its muted colour palette and overall dark aesthetic, or may have harder enemies than other areas. This awareness is what distinguishes Zelda's world from just any other. I will use Skyrim as a comparison, Skyrim as a whole is covered in greys and whites (mountains, snow etc.), with some brief patches of green, however these greens are still muted and just makes traversing the world feel like a chore, unlike in BOTW, the world is just unappealing to look at. I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't fast travel throughout my entire play through of Zelda, and so far I still haven't, because the world uses a range of different colour palettes in all of its areas to really add a unique feel to each, making travelling feel like a treat rather than a task.

COMBAT

The combat is the only problem with the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. And this isn't because it is just insanely difficult or unfair in any way. It's the durability on the weapons. Oh my god, why is it that a 'Guardian Battle-axe ++' with 60 attack damage only manages to kill four or five Bokoblins before it decides it wants to break. I'm not saying that every weapon should have unlimited use like in other games, such as Skyrim, but just increase the durability of each weapon by about 30%-40% and it would feel so much more manageable. Even if a system like the Witcher 3's was put into place, where you could repair your weapons if they have been damaged and are getting worn. Or use a system that allows for weapons to deal damage based on their sharpness, so the damage decreases by 5-10% after each hit. I fully understand that Nintendo want to encourage the player to

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experience every weapon, and all the different move sets they programmed and animated, but this feels lost when you just move from weapon to weapon, nothing feels permanent and it's just a bit irritating when you're fighting a giant enemy, in a ruthless battle to the death, and all of your weapons break and you end up running around in circles dropping 'remote bombs' which take off the tiniest slither of health possible.

However, in general, I love the combat in BOTW; it's challenging and free flowing. There is a huge range of enemies that try to murder you in a variety of different ways, and it's awesome. The feeling of achievement and the rush triggered by taking down a giant enemy by shooting a bomb arrow on the ground and using the up-draft created to sail miles into the sky just so that you can come crashing down on the beast with a crushing blow and see the health bar plummet, and to be met by the loot sitting on the ground. The way that the player can almost create their own set pieces, is unrivalled by any game, the moves that the player can create, feel similar to the QTEs found in the God of War series. The ways you can take down the enemies feels endless, you could use stealth, and you could cook up a dish that provides a stealth boost and then wait for night fall, then creep into a Bokoblin camp while they're sleeping, steal their weapons and then pick them off from a distance, and even if they do wake up, they won't have any weapons, so it should be easy pickings for Link.

Many enemies live in camps, and the player is incentivised to take on the problem with care, and caution, running straight into a herd of Bokoblins will almost end in certain death in the early game. When you take out all the enemies found in these camps, a chest will become unlocked and you can go and fetch your rewards, it will probably be a piece of amber or maybe some arrows, not necessarily a huge reward, but these enemies aren't exactly highly intelligent or skilled, so you shouldn't be expecting to find a super-duper enchanted weapon or chest piece like you would in games like Skyrim or Oblivion. These rewards also have a much bigger impact on you than you may think if you haven't played it yet, you can easily run out of arrows, you will almost never be overstocked like you would be in a game like Skyrim. Even the smallest of rewards can come in handy in a life or death scenario, who knows that arrow could be the item that wins a fight for you. Arrows don't just have the use of doing damage from a distance, in some cases they can be fired into the enemies' eyes to blind them, to allow you to get up-close and personal. There is also a great variation in weapon types, I'll use arrows as my example again, you can get a variety of arrows that all have vastly different uses, for example the shock arrows are used to stun enemies while bomb arrows are used to deal a devastating amount of damage to a group of enemies, or to create an up-draft so you can hop on and float away using your paraglider.

MOVEMENT

The movement in the Legend of Zelda is arguably one of the most polished and in-depth movement systems ever seen. All the different ways you can travel in this game feel varied and unique, whether it be shield surfing down a sand dune, or gliding from the top of a tower in an attempt to cover as much land as possible without having to walk all the way.

Nintendo have implemented a stamina system that can be used to sprint, climb, swim, glide, do power attacks with weapons or to slow time when aiming your bow when in mid-air. This simple system that drains stamina when performing any of these actions is very effective in teaching players to perhaps take a more conservative approach to traversing the landscape and to combat, for example, you may struggle to just simply climb up a mountain in a straight line, so you must plan your course and hope you have enough stamina, or you won't make it, and you will fall to your death.

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Another great way to traverse Hyrule is by horse. Now, Link doesn't have his legendary steed Epona from the get-go, and instead must find a group of horse, approach slowly, hop on and hope that you don't run out of stamina when trying to calm the horse. Once you have broken the horse, you can bond with it by feeding it apples or just by spending time with it, this allows for you to really create a bond with your horse. There are four different stats that affect your horses performance, these are stamina (the little spurs present on the screen), shows how many times you can dash with the horse (essentially galloping that provides a short speed boost); speed, no prizes for what this governs, the speed of your horse is defined by this stat; and finally, strength, which is how strong your horse is and how much damage it can withstand before kicking the bucket (not literally...obviously). The final characteristic of a horse is its temperament, which affects how easy a horse is to tame, not like knowing this would've been useful before taming it or anything, thanks Nintendo! Moreover, the temperament of a horse also governs how it treats its rider, for example if you try to spur on a horse with a wild temperament, it will throw you off and leave you crying on the ground, while he rides a little way down the path, essentially the biggest 'BUCK YOU' ever... sorry, I had to slip one horse pun in there somewhere. But, if the horse has a gentle temperament, then it wouldn't throw you off, but rather not react to your incessant spurring on.

Arguably the most useful tool is the paraglider. You unlock this early in the game, the 'Old Man' gives it to you, which is what, allows for you to jump off of the 'Great Plateau' and not go "SPLAT!" when you land. The paraglider has an immense amount of uses, despite the fact it only really has one use, speaking in terms of a gameplay mechanics point of view. It is literally just used to glide and to negate fall damage when opened, however this nifty piece of kit can be used in battle in conjunction with bomb arrows to send Link sailing into the air in order for him to rain death upon his enemies from a higher place. The paraglider also acts as a way to travel quickly, if you were to jump off of one of the towers, you could sail as far as your stamina bar will take you, which depending on how much you have, could talk you miles, this helps to skip covering ground that may be littered with baddies, or perhaps if it is a Blood Moon, then to avoid certain death. You will find yourself using the paraglider in almost every situation, especially when jumping off of a cliff and opening it right as you're about to slam into the ground, this will essentially stop you from taking damage, whilst keeping the drop quick easy. Weirdly enough however, I don't think that Nintendo actually meant for it to be used in this way, but what do they know, it's not like they're the company who introduced the world to saving your game progress or created the most iconic video game character of all-time... ok, ignore that last part.

The HUD contains a sound meter, or whatever you call it, basically a little graph that displays how noisy Link is being as he moves around and interacts with his environment, this allows for the player to perhaps take a different approach, for example if you are trying to sneak through a camp, then you are more likely to move slowly and wear light armour, not some giant janky iron chestpiece.

The movement system in BOTW is deep enough to keep me from fast traveling that is something that no other game that I have ever played has been able to do, not even the Witcher 3. For any of you thinking about picking up this game, firstly, I love the way that you are actually debating this and haven't got it already, but more importantly, I highly recommend not fast travelling, as it might detract from the overall experience you will have with this masterpiece.

ART STYLE

When discussing BOTW, it is difficult not to mention the art style and to mention how breath-taking the visuals are. The cel shaded art style was clearly inspired by Wind Waker, however Nintendo didn't want to copy the art style, rather than sticking with the cartoonish graphics that would appeal to a younger audience (and may have actually put a more mature audience off playing it), they

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wanted the game to be more detailed and realistic, rather than childish. Don't get me wrong, I know that BOTW isn't a photorealistic game, far from it, however the art style used in tandem with the detail of the textures provides this quality almost akin to a painting, the slow methodical swaying of the grass, the intricate runes on the sentinels and the mesmerising sunsets that can cause even the most hardcore of speed-runners stop for a minute to admire the beauty of this game.

In my opinion, a game's art style has a huge impact on the way a player feels, in some cases, more-so than its narrative or even gameplay. For example, in Journey, there is no real narrative, and instead presents this metaphorical 'Journey' of overcoming adversity, but the colours and art style play a huge part in eliciting the emotional response that many people had when playing it. The gentle sway of the traveller's cloak, the way that when you walk through the sand and leave footprints behind you, the light glow of the ribbon when you walk through the shoal of material. All of the small details add up to really giving a sense of character to the game that appeals to the player's emotional side. Personally, when I first played BOTW, I didn't really think much of the art style, but the more I played and the more I saw... wow! I was absolutely flabbergasted by the level of detail and the sense of awe that I felt whenever I reached the top of a tower and looked down over the world: spotting shrines and other places I wanted to visit, or scouring the landscape to see if I could see any enemies that I may or may not want to fight.

WORLD DESIGN

The world of Hyrule is vast and has an endless quality due to its diverse environments and possibilities in vertical traversal. The gigantic mountains and vast lakes pose a challenge to the player, almost inviting them to clamber up or swim across, as there will probably be a shrine or a chest when you reach your goal.

The many regions of Hyrule, each with their own unique feel, allow for the player to become fully immersed and engrossed in what they are actually experiencing. Travelling across Hyrule is not a task, or a chore it's a pleasure to be able to see all the effort that Nintendo went through when designing the world. There is plenty of hilltops and mountains for the player to clamber up, and use as a point to start sailing through the air using the paraglider. Each environment, whether it be a lush green forest or plain; a boggy, swampy marshland that need to wade through to get to your destination; or even the extreme environments, whether they be insanely hot, biting cold or even incredibly windy, all of these conditions add to the challenge and dare the player to see everything the game has to offer.

Breath of the Wild's time also works on an in-game clock that moves forward in five minute steps, this coupled with the weather forecast can heavily influence a player's approach when it comes to climbing or attacking an enemy camp, for example if you plan to attack a settlement at midnight, it may prove to be easier because all the enemies are asleep, or if it is raining, then the pitter-patter of the rain drops could muffle Link's movement when he is sneaking around. The rain can also cause Link to slip when climbing, adding a further challenge to this element of world design, in most cases it's hard enough to reach the top of a mountain without having to deal with torrential weather conditions as it is, getting set back every ten seconds just adds to the challenge. Weather also plays a huge part in weapon selection, if you are travelling through Death Mountain, then the insane temperatures and bubbling lava can cause Link's wooden weapons to ignite and burn up. Also, thunder storms can use Link's weapons to act as a conductor and allow for Link to be hit by lightning, which will probably ruin his day to be honest, as this deals a large amount of damage.

The Great Plateau essentially acts as a tutorial level for the rest of the game, you unlock runes, meet the Old Man, get the paraglider and are allowed to experience the entirety of Hyrule on a much smaller scale, in essence introducing you to all the gameplay mechanics you could possibly need in

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order to fully understand how to play this game. It is this type of world and game design that sets BOTW apart from all the other open-world games, the way that each mechanic is introduced makes the player feel as if they have figured it out, even if the game has guided you to where you needed to go, or even given you the items needed to survive. For example, the snowy mountains have spices located just outside the archway leading into the winter wonderland, and a cooking pot in close proximity, coincidence? I think not. This isn't a criticism, in fact, I'm praising Zelda's world design and how it makes the player feel like they are really utilizing every aspect and mechanic the game has to offer from the get go. Furthermore, I come back to my previous point about the Great Plateau acting as a smaller version of Hyrule, and I stand by that, you can experience extreme weather, you can experience the shrines and get used to the runes through the clever puzzles, you can experience climbing if you want to reach the snowy area that way, you can meet your first Korok that provides you with a seed and gives you a small amount of exposition about that section of the game, I would carry on, but I think you get the point.

Hyrule is not only beautiful due to the sheer size of the world. However, BOTW's best feature is the story-telling... "Why is this in the 'World Design' section?" I hear you ask, well to you I say that the world is where the true story is. Whenever you ask someone about Breath of the Wild, they will all be able to tell you their own stories about how they managed to overcome adversity and complete a task that they had repeatedly failed by using some cool mechanic or utilizing the cooking system to boost their stats, so they could finally defeat the Lynel they had been struggling with for so long, or how they managed to reach the top of the tallest mountain and sail across Hyrule using their paraglider, taking in every little stunning detail as they went along.

SOUND DESIGN

The music in any game is always very important and can have just as much effect on a player as the gameplay itself. This also applies to Zelda: BOTW of course, I was watching a video the other day – "The music of Breath of the Wild | GMTK Extra" and 'Mark Brown', the channel creator, states that "each Zelda game has a very different vibe, and Nintendo has always reflected this in the choice of music. Ocarina of Time is heroic, Wind Waker is optimistic, and Majora's Mask is foreboding. So what about Breath of the Wild? This is a melancholic game and the quite, slow and subdued piano music really fits the bill." I found this video very informative and it really opened my eyes about not only Zelda's OST, but how Nintendo really utilizes their music to fit the mood and atmosphere, like I said previously I was never really into Zelda when I was younger, so I didn't play all that much of the games, so comparing BOTW's music to all the other games would be quite difficult for me. I highly recommend you watch this video if you want to learn more:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FWVKu1gnWs> .

Breath of the Wild's sound effects and overall design varies based on the time of the day, what you're doing and where you are. For example, if you ride a horse for an extended period of time, then the music "On Horse" will play, and either the day or night version will play depending on what time it is in-game. The differences between the day and night versions of each song may only be small, but the way that each version of the song uses the orchestra in a different way, can either create an upbeat adventurous tone for the day version, or a more calming atmospheric tone for the night edition. My personal favourite song is Rito Village (Day), the NPCs found in Rito Village, are of the Rito species, which is essentially bird-people. They can fly and everything. Anyway, this piece utilizes a woodwind choir, and adds this sense of freedom in a way with the rising melody, mimicking the whole 'bird people' aesthetic. Furthermore, the actual notes get higher as the song progresses, and this can also mimic Link's ascension to the top of the stairs. A beautiful piece of sound design that suits the world around it.

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LESS IS MORE

Zelda doesn't hold your hand at all, no map markers, no dotted-line to follow to the objective and no real direction, after all, there is only two compulsory objectives in the whole game, 'Leave the Great Plateau' and 'Defeat Gannon' – everything else is extra. This element of freedom that Nintendo has given the player really lets them experience the world from their own perspective; they're not being given a checklist, unlike in Assassin's Creed, where you unlock an area in the world and you look at the map just to be greeted with a bunch of icons, collectibles, points of interest, etc. – none of that nonsense in Zelda. It is an 'open' open-world that doesn't tell you where to go or what to do. It's just as much of a sandbox as Minecraft, yes I know that probably sounds ridiculous, but you cannot deny the similarities, like the huge world and the lack of direction in what the game forces you to do. BOTW even has mining, the similarities are undeniable. Now, I'm not saying that they are the same, far from it; Zelda has much better graphics, gameplay mechanics and systems that keep the player enthralled, rather than the randomly generated world. But the popularity and the similarity of these games must be noticed, and I truly believe that if another game developer wants to create one of the revolutionary games, that I mentioned earlier, then they must stop telling the player what to do and just let them experience the world for themselves.

IN CONCLUSION

I truly believe that the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild should be considered to be one of the greatest open-worlds ever created, due to its diverse environments, stunning aesthetics and the way that Nintendo have designed gameplay mechanics and the sound design to suit the world you are living in. If you haven't played Breath of the Wild, then do, it is honestly one of the greatest gaming experiences you will ever have, and it can last you hundreds of hours.