

Breath of the Wild

by Duygu Bayram

When the first version of Nintendo Switch was released back in 2017, it was met with an enthusiastic round of applause. It was a refreshingly novel, handheld device that could handle demanding games like *Doom* *and* could also be switched to a traditional home console. Within a year of its release, Nintendo sold over 14 million of these consoles worldwide, marking a turn in the company's downward trend. As the console got more popular, eyes were turned to Nintendo exclusives, and it was not too long before the console came to be associated with the new addition the Legend of Zelda series: *Breath of the Wild*. There is no doubt that this game played a big part in the popularity of the console as well, as it holds the title of being the favourite game of many, and is often one of the first and most popularly recommended games to newcomers.

Like most other Turkish youth, I did not grow up playing Nintendo games. The last clear memory I even have of it being relevant prior to the Switch is when the Wii came out back in 2006. Although granted, I was not too involved in the gaming world until a few years ago either. All the same, I was not at all familiar with the Zelda franchise until this game. That is why I believe it is a testament to the success of *BOTW* that it drew *me* in, with limited gaming practice, no attachment to its characters or its world, and a very high susceptibility to getting bored a little too fast. The ingenuity of *Breath of the Wild's* game design is truly something to admire, something that pulls you in and fills you with passion and curiosity for this artificial world you find yourself in.

The best part of *BOTW* is that it imposes very few limits on you, and then throws you out into this giant world full of monsters, weapons, quests, different weather conditions, and characters with absolutely no memory. And you are allowed to do whatever you want. Do you want to go to the final boss right away with just a tree branch and no clothes? Go ahead. Do you want to kill monsters over and over again without ever completing the game? You can. Do you want to solve dozens upon dozens of puzzles and make small, exciting discoveries? Done. Want to just practice your paragliding and arrow shooting skills for 2 hours straight? Sure, I did it. Do you want to just roam around the world exploring mountains and caves and islands and oceans? The game encourages you to, and the art is beautiful. You can climb any mountain, you can swim, fly, ride a horse, or a motorcycle. You can go virtually anywhere.

Apart from bringing a whole new meaning to "open world", the way the world functions is astounding. It is packed with puzzles, and there is no one solution to any of them. *BOTW* makes this possible with what is called a chemistry engine, the world has three rules and no other

limits, much like their plot design: An element can change the state of another element, an element can change the state of a material, a material can not change the state of another material. In simple terms, this means that if something is made of wood, you can set it on fire, if something is made of metal, you can use magnetism on it, and so on. It is such a simple, elegant design that allows a world full of possibilities because it lets you use your common sense rather than have you guess what the game might be expecting from you within its limitations. If you want to fly, you can just set the grass on fire and use the updraft of the rising air. If you cannot get to a chest, try magnetism, try stacking objects on top of each other to climb them, try hitting it with an object to make it fall. Any solution you come up with will work, there are no pre-programmed ways. This underlying mechanism of the game is an enormous factor in player enjoyment because you do not get frustrated when you can't exactly find the solution the game needs from you, you can make your own solutions, and come out with a sense of pride every time. The world in this game is yours, and you are free. As a side addition, intentionally or not, this is also a big driving factor of BOTW's big community, as the freedom allowed in the game allows for unique and sometimes amusing scenarios during gameplay.

The NPCs in the game are similarly well-designed. They have a wide range of personalities and sometimes hilarious dialogue. Some characters will get really annoyed if you stand on a table, try it! If you stand before them naked, they will make a comment. If you snoop in their diaries and they catch you, they will reprimand you. A nice detail I noticed is that NPCs usually cannot hit you, but stand in front of the training Gerudo warriors and their spears will harm you. You can even take a dating lesson in the game if you want, in the Gerudo town! Go ahead and set the throne on fire, the characters will respond to that. And my personal favourite, if you hit a cucco, expect a whole flock of them to attack you, but get an enemy to hit one, guess who they will attack?

Of course, the game is not all fun and smiles. It has a very challenging fighting system, do not let the graphics fool you. Firstly, the game is an open world, so the chance of running into an enemy before you are physically prepared is a real possibility. Secondly, weapons break a lot. This means you might often have to strategize, save your weapons, or fight new monsters to get new weapons if you are running short. Luckily, the mechanics of the puzzles apply here as well, if you do not have the weapons or the health, see if you can roll a rock on them or make one of their explosive barrels go off. Another fun factor is that the monsters are also very varied, some are very easy, some require you to climb them to hit a specific spot, some will shoot lasers at you, and some will just come straight for your neck and all you will be able to do is fast travel out of there in sweat and tears, and every time you see them again your heart will drop (yes, I am talking about Lynels).

There is much more to say about Breath of the Wild but to wrap up this review, it is one of the most notable games ever made. It approaches the concept of game design in an entirely new way, placing so few rules in such a smart way that it creates a free world for the player. It is packed full of things to do, fights to have, puzzles to solve, people to talk to, memories to unlock. It is the kind of game that surprises you at every turn, keeps you thinking, paying attention, and exploring. If you have the means, it is surely a game worth playing.