Taking a *Breath of the Wild*
The Concept of *Airness* in Nintendo's take on Open World Games

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Abstract With *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017), Japanese game company Nintendo has released a game that combines a vast game world with empowering mechanics. Under the notion of *airness*, this paper distils Nintendo's approach into central aspects that comprehensively span the domains of narrative, space, and mechanics. Due to subtle forms of player guidance regarding both landscape and quest design, players must actively gaze, examine, and move in order to explore the game space. The environment is full of puzzles and hazards that render understanding the complex systems of interaction with the game world's elements vital. In reference to theories of game space and game design, it will therefore be discussed that—based on a minimal narrative framework—manifold possibilities of navigating and manipulating the game world are effectively used to encourage player agency.

Keywords The Legend of Zelda, airness, game space, open world, prospect pacing, landscape as playground, space as canvas

Introduction

The long-awaited instalment in *The Legend of Zelda* series titled *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) manages to informatively address some issues regarding the design of an open world game.[1] The development team calls the design principle behind it "open-air", striving to create a world in which hardly anything is off-limits to the player (Anonymous, Nintendo 2017). This paper's thesis is that the term *airness* essentially describes the emphasis on exploration rather than player guidance that can be

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1 Henceforth, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* will be abbreviated to '*BotW*'.

subsumed as extensive unrestrictedness—or rather appropriate balance between freedom and constraint.

It is suggested here that—based on the narrative framework being widely negligible and optionally accessible—the concept of *airness* essentially consists of three characteristics that encourage player agency: (1) The quest system is not restrictive on the player. Hence, waypoints do not form a chronological and spatial order but offer optional content for exploration. In addition, many quests require engagement with the game world, its landscape and the topographical map in order to find locations; (2) the world design and the types of movement available encourage exploration as well: the climbing and paragliding mechanics are essential for exploring the world in particular; and (3) the complex 'physics and chemistry systems', including the avatar's rune abilities,[2] that manage interaction between objects (corresponding to supposed laws of physics and the four elements of nature) encourage players to creatively use and manipulate the environment. The game thus opens seemingly infinite possibilities for players to approach different situations.

Based on these key points, concepts from disciplines such as game studies, game design, sociology, and human geography are considered to argue that *BotW*'s *airness* appears to function as a counter-matrix to open world game design so far. The latter has long followed design guidelines that have become infamous under the umbrella term of the 'Ubisoft formula', as the game studio was one of the major developers to employ a core game loop of liberating and unlocking distinct regions and an abundance of fixed icons both within the vast game world and on the unfolding map (Sterling 2018, TC 00:03:12–00:03:34).[3] However, recently published open world games increasingly reject this formulaic nature, good examples being *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017). These less "ubified" (ibid.) games provide a foil to *BotW*, in order to illustrate in what Nintendo's *airness* actually differs.

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2 The ancient rune abilities are *Magnesis* (move metallic objects), *Stasis* (freeze objects in time and store kinetic energy), *Cryonis* (rise ice blocks out of water), and spherical/square bombs (explode).

3 Since these similar open world structures even spread to other game franchises, Sterling coins the term of "ubification" (2018).

The Concept of *Airness*

The concept of *airness* is based on an essential design decision, namely that the narrative fades into the background. The story in *BotW* unfolds alongside the actual game action in cutscenes that are only triggered if the player goes through the trouble of finding the location of Zelda's souvenir photos. Generally, players are not forced to repeatedly watch cutscenes in the course of the game,[4] and will only be led into more linear paths if they decide to conquer the titans in the respective areas, as it requires a certain amount of communication and interaction with the local races. However, since these storylines are optional for the completion of the game, the overall obligatorily staged narrative is limited to the heroic tale of a boy who frees the princess from evil.

While the strength of a narrative-focused game like *Red Dead Redemption 2* lies in a convincingly portrayed protagonist and the player being able to empathise with him, Link deliberately remains an almost empty shell into which the player can project their own character. As a rather blank prosthetic proxy, he facilitates a subjective, embodied tele-presence inside the game world (Klevjer 2012, 28), and thus motivates an explorative approach to one's individual appropriation of game space.

Based on the narrative backdrop as an optional scaffold, there are three central elements to *BotW*'s concept of *airness*, which will be discussed in the following subsections. Two of them revolve around the systematisation and appropriation of game space: the non-restrictive quest design with the map functionality that reinforces a player's autonomy, and the game world's landscape design combined with the avatar's available movement mechanics that facilitate an explorative traversal of space. These two aspects are interdependent and thus difficult to clearly delineate from each other. For the sake of clarity, they will be addressed separately. The last essential aspect of *airness* deals with the interlocking systems of using and manipulating the game world that realise a huge possibility space of interactions and styles of play that can be performed in the game.

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4   After leaving the tutorial area, the only skippable cutscene is the staging of the blood moon, a mechanic used to respawn killed enemies after a certain amount of time.

Air to Breathe: Systematization of Game Space

The first aspect of *airness* in *BotW* concerns the structure of the quest design, which imposes few limitations on the player. In combination with the map functionality that allows players to creatively explore quests based on topography, quests can guide players, but still allow an active approach of wayfinding. If a game offers a rich narrative, player navigation will be more restricted, as plot points need to be anchored in spatial structures (Aarseth 2005, 505).[5] Due to *BotW*'s insignificant narrative, player agency during quests does not need to be too limiting. In many open world games, after accepting a mission, certain functionalities are hidden and only actions that are necessary for the respective mission are allowed.[6] Similarly, natural obstacles such as steep mountains, cliffs or deep snow often limit paths in directions the player is not supposed to take. This "'spatial guidance system' can guide players by limiting their freedom of movement" (Rotzetter 2018, 177). It might be annoying for players though to discover an interesting object (be it a building, an animal or a landscape formation) not that far away, which they would like to take a closer look at, but they are not allowed to leave the mission radius or the mission is considered to have failed.[7] In *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Montreal, Quebec 2018), the player cannot quit certain main quests once they have been initiated. *Marvel's Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games 2018) frames some missions even more as isolated entities in that they are generally triggered when the avatar gets inside a pre-determined radius and certain areas cannot be (re-)entered outside of missions, whereas in *BotW*, the player is never caught inside a 'quest bubble'. This enables the simultaneous pursuit of different (side) quests.[8] In addition, pre-defined quest markers on the map often only locate the character who is associated with the quest, not the location where it must be completed. The latter is often a puzzle in itself and requires thorough investigation of landscape structures in

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5 *Red Dead Redemption 2*, for instance, seems to need a rather strict channelling of the narrative content since the game intrinsic world and the map accordingly change over the course of the story.

6 During a specific mission in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, for example, the player-character can only saddle and climb his horse and cannot brush or feed it anymore. Likewise, saving the game manually is not allowed during missions. The only comparable limitation in *BotW* is the interaction within shrines, where climbing on walls and other constructions is generally not possible. Otherwise the puzzle design would have been considerably more difficult.

7 Unlike *BotW*, *Red Dead Redemption 2* offers only one kind of symbol to place on the map, which complicates identification of different locations later.

8 For example, one shrine quest in *BotW* requires being at a certain spot at a certain time, which is when the blood moon rises respectively. Since the occurrence of the blood moon is not precisely known, the player is well-advised to keep doing other things until first signs of the blood moon can be spotted (red and black particles in the air and a certain sound effect) and only then travel to the location—which should have been marked on the map before—as fast as possible.

Fig. 1 Each tower poses challenges in form of enemies or environmental hazards. The Ridgeland Tower is guarded by several electrically charged enemies and additionally surrounded by water that drains Link's stamina.

order to discover the desired location. Taken together, the first aspect of *BotW*'s *airness* dissolves the linearity with regard to mission sequences that is still strongly present in other open worlds.

Along with that, climbing towers to uncover an area of the map with all kinds of symbols for side missions and collectibles has long been the most emblematic part of the 'Ubisoft formula'.[9] In *BotW*, towers function as recurring landmarks in the vast hillscape, which must still be scaled, yet with two differences: first, each tower poses some kind of environmental puzzle (either through height, chasms, thorns, deadly mud or enemies), so they can never be scaled easily (*» Fig. 1*).

Second, the respective region on the map is unlocked only topographically and the absence of icons is crucial here. In its plainness and with a box of symbolic stamps at hand, the map persuades players to conceptualise their own system to trace promising topography and mark the corresponding places themselves (*» Fig. 2*).

9   In *Far Cry 5*, Ubisoft breaks away from the tower feature and self-reflectively alludes to its repetitiveness: when the protagonist has to climb a radio tower, a non-player character informs both the protagonist and the player that they do not have to climb any more towers.

Fig. 2 The player can choose between nine different stamp symbols as well as five beacons, the latter are visible through the telescope inside the game world.

According to Marc Bonner, using waypoints to mark destinations on a map "enables a goal-oriented, ludic, crossing of the vast landscape" (2018, 8). Bonner applies Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's differentiation between *smooth space* and *striated space* to video games by declaring that the use of diegetic or non-diegetic interfaces and maps comes with an increased concentration towards goals and progress (ibid.). Hence, the space is being perceived as *striated*. However, with a focus on the path in between way-points and without using tools that systemise it, the perception of and the movement through space becomes *smooth* (ibid., 9). Although the use of the map with its variable markers and beacons is central to *BotW*, the traversal of the game space as *smooth space* is just as strongly encouraged. The exact locations of shrines and other quests often pose to be puzzles themselves and must be deduced on the basis of a close inspection of the environment. This results in a constant engagement with the immediate landscape which seems closer to "a practice of wildness" (ibid.).[10] The focus lies on the percep-

10   This can be said at least for a playstyle using *BotW*'s so-called pro HUD-mode that hides all non-diegetic interface elements (except for the health bar in form of heart icons).

tion of the immediate surroundings and appropriation of game space with Link's own hands and the player's acuteness of mind.[11]

In this regard, Adam Chapman differentiates between games that design space as "*narrative gardens*" or as "*canvas structure*" (2016, 101–5). He classifies open world games like *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) and *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010) as *narrative gardens*, in which players are granted spatial freedom to explore the narrative they are presented with (2016, 103). Yet, they also channel the player's path by posing narrative or mechanical constraints, such as the emergence of missions at a certain point in time or the dependency on the player's progress concerning certain items and experience points.

BotW primarily uses environmental threats (high mountain ridges, broad rivers), weather, climate influences (desert, snowscapes, and ice water) and other hostile environments (Hyrule castle) to ward off unexperienced players. It almost never communicates to the players that they cannot go somewhere if they wish to do so. In this respect, Francine Rotzetter observes that *BotW* utilises a so-called *interactive guidance system* which

> uses the players' curiosity and their motivation to guide them. Because of this, the players don't recognize the designers' leading strategies and are under the illusion of deciding in their own way. […] The 'interactive guidance system' doesn't limit the players' mobility. It operates with elements such as motivation-based decisions (menace/ temptation, ways and signposts) [sic!] (2018, 175).

Considering such disguised player guidance, the traversing of the game space as *smooth space* may be exposed as an illusion to some degree. Chapman compares games that utilise a *space as canvas structure* to "patches of unkempt grassland containing the basic resources for a garden, but awaiting a gardener (the player) to formalize and decide its exact spatial narrative expression with the various tools that are provided" (2016, 104). Although this structure usually applies best to city-building games, this concept fits

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11 Evidently, in the case of *BotW*, progress is not achieved in terms of player-character development or level-ups but in terms of the player's knowledge about the game's systems and abilities. As Farca, Lehner, and Navarro-Remesal point out, menacing nature and climate in *BotW* can even induce an experience of the sublime (2018, 2). The Gerudo desert is an especially hostile environment, where temperatures are extreme and sandstorms even disable the map, so that the player—being used to relying on the map—may experience disorientation and stress. "The vastness of the gamespace and its mazes, the Otherness of characters and monsters, and the opacity of the game mechanics—limited visibility, the lack of a map, the constant danger from heat or cold, which means players are never at ease to explore—make the Gerudo Desert almost a textbook example of how games can evoke the affective and aesthetic response of the sublime" (ibid., 18). Thus, the limitation of knowledge caused by the malfunctioning map becomes a mechanism of temporarily taking back the players' progress by reminding them not to rely on the use of interface elements that systemize the game world.

BotW as well because there is not much of a main narrative to be experienced. Rather, the player creates a narrative framework out of the found elements in an arbitrary order, which may drive the progress of the game. Regarding exploration, *BotW* is based on the principle of suggestion and not on the completion of a task list. In this sense, the map, and by extension the entire game space, can also be analysed as a *canvas structure* for the players to fill with their own mode of play and produce a narrative out of provided quests and their own experiences.

Space to Explore: Appropriation of Game Space

Assuming that navigation through game space hinges on the concrete landscape design as well as the afforded means of movement, it is argued that as the second characteristic of *airness* in *BotW* both aspects are intertwined in order to realise as much free exploration as possible. This includes the possibility to reach every visible location, which renders climbing one of the most important mechanics of the gameplay. Being able to scale literally any vertical surface combined with paragliding and swimming as long as Link's stamina lasts, the player is presented with seemingly infinite choices regarding pathfinding, compared to other open world games like *Red Dead Redemption 2, Horizon Zero Dawn,* or *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, in which avatar movement is more strictly inscribed in the landscape's geometry. In terms of Aarseth's distinction of quests in game worlds, *BotW* appears to be the first to structurally display an actual "open landscape" (2005, 499), in which players may roam relatively freely and navigation is less confined by quest hubs than by environmental hazards. Hence, regarding landscape experience, games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* rather oscillate between *architectural probabilism* as some routes are more likely to be taken by players than others and *architectural determinism*, when there is very little navigational choice (Bonner 2019, 219–21). *BotW* might come closest to the other end of the spectrum in "master[ing] *architectural possibilism*" (ibid., 232).

Based on the manifold types of avatar movement, the world design of *BotW* had to follow certain design principles, one of which is the *triangle rule*: landscape features such as rock formations, mountains, hills, but also non-natural objects and landmarks such as the castle of Hyrule were designed roughly shaped like a triangle, rectangle or trapezoid in variable sizes (Wuollett 2017; Kohler 2017) (» *Fig. 3*).

This ensures that the players' vision is constantly obstructed, and they must always decide whether to circumvent an obstacle or climb across it. Either way, usually there is a hidden treasure or a rewarding vista to be discovered as a form of an extrinsic reward. In the sense of *airness* and *architectural possibilism*, the player must make active decisions while traversing the landscape, which is accompanied by an increased feeling of freedom and autonomy.

Fig. 3 The landscape is created under consideration of the *triangle rule*, thereby constantly motivating the player to move further (shapes drawn by the author for the purpose of illustration).

In contrast to this activeness, player passivity can be regarded as the epitome of a more touristic method of reception in many open world games. By indicating destinations on the map, the search for places in the game world becomes a passive journey between two points. This mode of pseudo-exploration in form of passing by various places of interest can accordingly be linked to John Urry's concept of the *tourist gaze*. At its core, it describes a gaze at land- and cityscapes that differs from the one in everyday life (1990, 2–3). Even though gazing in itself can be regarded as a fairly individual activity, within the frame of tourism, masses of people are strongly guided by gazing regimes of the western tourism industry and mass media.[12] The passivity of the *tourist gaze* can be observed in various open world games, causing the experience of the actual game world to often fade into the background.[13] This complements the statement of Nintendo's development team at the Game Developers Conference

12   Culturally, the gazing regimes go back even further when people were first introduced to panoramic vistas within artificially created landscape gardens (see Cosgrove 2003).
13   For instance, the tourist mode in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Montreal, Quebec 2015) is rendered blatantly obvious as players are encouraged to indulge in the practice of passive sightseeing, reminiscent of late nineteenth century phantom rides with a camera installed at the front of a train.

2017, where game director Hidemaro Fujibayashi explained that he wanted to move away from passivity towards an active gameplay experience in which the player has the possibility to follow their own path (Fujibayashi, Takizawa, and Dohta 2017, TC 00:12:25–00:15:08). With *BotW*, the journey is the reward in itself, and active pathfinding becomes the main task. The players' activeness is thus a central part of Nintendo's concept of *airness*.

BotW's world design considerably rhythmises the players' movement into a gameplay loop of gazing and moving: huge mountains or small hills in front of the avatar block the view, but usually leave several points of interest, such as shrines or towers, visible in the distance. The player can choose to scale a mountain in order to obtain a better overview. On the mountaintop, a rewarding vista usually awaits, often together with a Korok seed puzzle.[14] In the context of Jay Appleton's *prospect-refuge theory*, such *primary vantage-points* open the field of vision to other potential *secondary vantage-points*, which promise different or even better prospects (1975, 89).[15] The paraglider can be used to glide towards one of them, spotting even more landscape features on the way. Each location will again surround the player by landscape formations that block their view and will render the search for the next *vantage-point* necessary.

Gazing is thus subtly guided but not as passive as the *tourist gaze*. This play pattern of gazing and exploring can rather be described with what Bonner terms *prospect pacing*: "The continuous navigation from horizon to horizon, from hill to mountain top to valley sides, from ledges to watchtowers is not only essential for the experience of landscape (gardens) and wilderness, but also for rhythmising coherent open world games, which can be defined as *prospect pacing*" (2018, 5). Crucially, a mechanism of constant distraction is at play here as players become side-tracked on their journey quite automatically by the overall structuring of the game world (*» Fig. 4*).

14 Korok seeds are collectibles which can be used to unlock more inventory slots. Koroks are to be found all over Hyrule, each of them falls into one of several puzzle categories like pattern recognition. For instance, there are three apple trees and one of them has more apples than the others. The player needs to remove the additional apples to match the pattern of the other trees.

15 Appleton's theory refers to the inherent human behaviour of searching and evaluating landscapes aesthetically in terms of a threefold symbolic base: *prospect spaces* that can be evaluated from *refuge spaces* where one may remain safe and unseen from various types of *hazards* (1975, 73, 82). Christopher W. Totten has acknowledged this principle in game design (2014, 211–12).
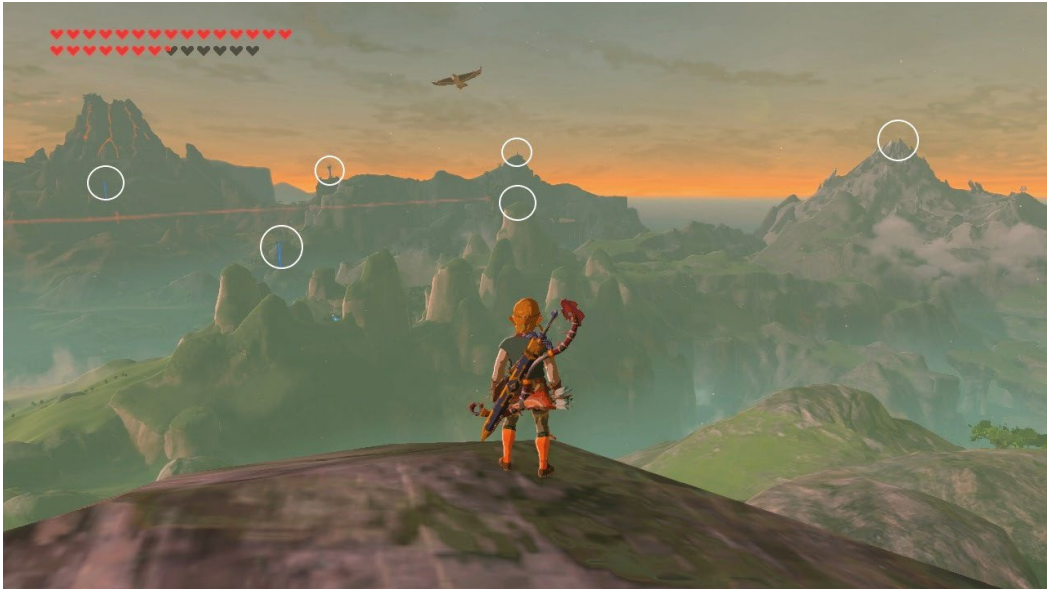
Fig. 4 The view from a mountaintop indicates *secondary vantage points* in the distance (encircled), which promise *prospect spaces* as well as various distractions on the way (shapes drawn by the author for the purpose of illustration).

Things to Do: Interaction in Game Space

Besides the two characteristics that relate directly to the systemisation and appropriation of game space, the third aspect of *airness* concerns the interaction with objects within it. It is remarkable that many open world games provide the player with a feature that lets them scan the surroundings with regard to resources, traces and enemies.[16] Being no exception, *BotW* offers the ancient rune abilities *Magnesis* and *Stasis* that highlight interactable objects (and enemies) in the environment. Yet, they do not function as a mere pointing device but comprise more intricate features based on the game's 'physics system.' Along with the *Cryonis* rune, the twofold bomb feature, and a likewise complex so-called "chemistry system" (Fujibayashi, Takizawa, and Dohta 2017, TC 00:38:16–00:46:55) with regard to the natural elements, the player is presented with multifarious options to manipulate the environment and approach situations. The 'physics system,' which is based on the Havok Physics engine, influences objects in terms of collision and movement, while the 'chemistry system' handles state changes, for example the fire element can burn objects made of combustible materials such as wooden weapons, food items, or Link himself (ibid.). Importantly, these systems interact with each other in multiple ways and can be used for puzzles within shrines as well as in the complete overworld for combat, distance bridging, or other environmental puzzles.[17] This systemic unrestrictedness and comprehensiveness is what makes *BotW*'s interaction unique:

> In most games, the designers manually define a number of outcomes or interactions and allow the player to pick one, which restricts the player's freedom in interacting and removes the possibility of emergent gameplay. A more pleasing experience for the player is theorized to result when the player has greater freedom in terms of deciding how to interact with the environment (Sweetser and Johnson 2004, 322).

Thus, the player becomes involved by thinking about the solution of a puzzle or the overcoming of an obstacle in ever new ways. It also benefits the players to go through different modes of experiencing the game world while playing. Alternating between a cultural and a biological mode, landscape in video game worlds can either be perceived

16   Witcher Senses in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015), the Focus device in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, Eagle Vision in the *Assassin's Creed* series, Eagle Eye in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, NetHack View in *Watch Dogs* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), and the scan function in *Marvel's Spider-Man*.

17   This breaks with the conventions of *The Legend of Zelda* series because in former games, players were usually provided with items that were predominantly needed for just one particular dungeon system.

Fig. 5 The ancient rune abilities offer a wide variety of applicability, rendering Hyrule a *landscape as playground*. Here, the *Magnesis* ability is used to move a self-built vehicle high up in the air.

and appreciated for its beauty (*landscape as image*) or navigated with regard to one's own survival (*landscape as environment*) (Liboriussen 2008, 148). The former mode is increasingly reflected in the form of in-game photography. Since the use of the physics system in *BotW* is not always used for the sake of survival and progress, a third category, *landscape as playground*, seems conceivable for this kind of player interaction, where players appreciate playing around with *BotW*'s complex mechanics even after the missions have been completed (*» Fig. 5*).

Admittedly, this borders on the cultural mode, since the videos and instructions of testing out the mechanics are being shared in community platforms similar to memorable screenshots.[18] As Miguel Sicart points out, a game's rule system creates a possibility space of potential interaction (2008). This space can turn negative if players' expectations are not met as to what they can do and whether they are rewarded for it (Doan 2017). With *BotW*'s various interlocking systems, Nintendo manages to fill the

18   At this point, the border between intended and *transgressive play* blurs, as the *Stasis* rune is used heavily in speedruns to allow players to bridge large distances rather quickly. Aarseth calls play practices that are not intended and predicted by the developers *transgressive*, in contrast to the developers' idea and expectations of the player as *implied player* (2007, 132).

negative possibility space to a large extent by offering extensive options for approaching a problem and secrets that reward the player for solving it, thereby strengthening the feeling of self-efficacy. For instance, spicy peppers can be lit on fire to produce an air draft that propels Link's paraglider upwards. The principle of not explicitly communicating to the players what is possible can induce a feeling of the sublime which is different from the sublime of being in awe of overwhelming nature. Daniel Vella argues for the *ludic sublime*: "Even after extended play has resulted in mastery of the game, there remains at least an opening for the possibility of surprise and further revelation—and the result of this is that the player's cosmic understanding of the game […] can never be finally closed" (2015). Players are inspired to engage with the game intrinsic world and the game mechanics alike for a long time and discover playful mechanics like the cucco storm.[19] Those are not desperately needed in any form, nor are they excessively helpful, yet they function as a reward for intrinsically motivated exploration and might create a stronger sense of player expression and agency. The concept of *airness* thus manifests itself in various interlocking aspects, including a huge possibility space and a low punishment for trial and error.[20]

Given that *BotW* offers a wide range of possibilities to approach specific objectives or scenarios, seemingly unrewarding moments can still motivate the player as self-imposed challenges.[21] Hence, filling negative possibility space relies on a balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Treasure chests in shrines and enemy camps, for instance, serve as extrinsic motivation. Since these rewards are—after some time of playing the game—rarely considered valuable, it is often the player's intrinsic motivation that propels them to go there regardless or try out whether something completely irrelevant to progress might work. This sandbox character with the *landscape as playground* also qualifies *BotW* for an abundance of creative playthroughs like Michelle Westerlaken's vegan run (Westerlaken 2017; Farca, Lehner and Navarro-Remesal 2018, 6).

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19 If the avatar holds a cucco chicken when being attacked by an enemy, the cucco may summon an entire flock of chickens that will ideally attack the enemy.

20 For instance, in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, combat can become rather repetitive and unimaginative. Despite various kinds of weapons available, there are certain mechanisms of discouragement to strive for more creative combat: after a game-over screen outside of missions, the player-character will not spawn at the same place again, the horse might have died in the process, permanently, and even money is taken away. Consequently, the player must literally pay for boldness.

21 Graeme Kirkpatrick distils "a freely chosen challenge that is specified in terms of unnecessary rules" as the essence of a video game (2013, 42). Arguably, critically acclaimed and commercially successful games like *Minecraft* (Mojang 2009) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) seem to be so popular not because of their narrative value but because they offer huge, vibrant worlds with a sandbox character that encourage players to be creative for a long time to come. These two games rank under the three best-selling games worldwide (Sirani 2019).

Conclusion

The previous analysis has shown that *BotW*'s concept of *airness* signifies exploration performed for the sake of exploration and not merely in between pre-defined waypoints that are structured around a narrative arc. The narrative frames the events, but largely recede into the background. This precondition enables the three aspects of *airness* to unfold into the play experience of *BotW*. Neither the largely optional quests nor the topographic map to individually systemise game space restrict the players. On the contrary, in the form of a *canvas structure*, the open world of Hyrule encourages players to follow their own path and focus on the game content in their own pace. Similarly, the world design inspires a rather individual, immediate traversal, and explorative contemplation of space in terms of *prospect pacing*. Albeit rhythmising gazes and movements, it promotes active decision-making due to the avatar's movement mechanics. In this respect, the spatial design, including the *triangle rule* and constraints in form of climatic threats, configures an *interactive guidance system* that is less obtrusive than other forms of spatial player guidance. Intrinsic motivation becomes the essential driving force to progress in the game. This is supported by the complex 'physics and chemistry systems' that allow the player to trigger interactions between objects and elements, hereby also creating a *landscape as playground* to test out various strategies for puzzle solving and combat situations. Keeping little negative possibility space is so effective because the player is rarely disappointed in their expectations and even after many hours of playing, there are still secrets to be disclosed. All of these key aspects of *airness* elevate player agency and decisional power in many respects and render Hyrule a place full of opportunities, where there is not only scenery to explore but also plenty of air to breathe, allowing players to discover all the things to do on their own.

Figures

Fig. 1–5: Screenshots by the author (Wii U, Nintendo 2017).

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