

Observant play: colonial readings in *Breath of the Wild*

Rachael Hutchinson

University of Delaware
113 Jastak-Burgess Hall
30 Main St. Newark DE 19716
+1 (302) 831-2597
rhutch@udel.edu

Keywords

colonialism, postwar Japan, player agency, ideology, Nintendo

INTRODUCTION

The open world of *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) offers players an exciting, explorable environment for absorbing gameplay, complementing the main missions of the central narrative. The actions of player-character Link are to a high degree based on player choice and decision-making, as players determine what kind of person they will be in the land of Hyrule – a law-abiding, helpful traveller who treats people well, or a mischief-maker who steals and attacks the inhabitants at will. While NPCs respond to Link’s kindness or rudeness with appropriate comments, they will not attack, and cannot be hurt by Link’s weapons. Monsters in the environment, however, can be hurt and killed, and will attack Link on minor provocation such as entering their territory. This paper examines the monster behaviors of *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* in terms of player agency and the game’s ideology, which poses thought-provoking questions about violence, colonialism, and the nature of history.

OBSERVANT PLAY AND PACIFISM

Game design in *Breath of the Wild* encourages monster-killing at low levels, with treasure rewards such as gemstones and useful weapons. Loading screens constantly advise the player on tips and tricks for monster-battling. In the environment, Bokoblin monsters dance around a campfire with roasting meat, presenting a tempting target: meat gives a great deal of health points early in the game, where nuts and fruits do not. At higher levels, the player encounters Lizalfos monsters in the Faron jungle who dance around fruits rather than meat. Observant players will realize that these fruits have religious significance, since Lizalfos dancing occurs near large stone statues, each with an offering of fruit in front of them. We are also told that Lizalfos are purely carnivorous, so the fruit has symbolic rather than food-based significance. Up to this point, an observant player, who takes time to watch the monsters and take note of their behaviour, will have realized that Bokoblins, Moblins and Lizalfos are sentient and intelligent, speaking to each other at length and prepared to defend their territory. But the Lizalfos encountered in the Faron jungle are not holding weapons, and are engaged in different behaviour, presenting as a civilized culture rather than mere ‘barbarian monster.’

Regardless of whether the player has to this point followed the loading screen advice to kill monsters, the more time the player spends in the game, the more obvious it becomes that killing the monsters is unnecessary. Some gameplay elements encourage players to leave the monsters alone, including the fact that every 13 days

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019

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they regenerate. While the locked treasure boxes of monster encampments cannot be opened without killing their protectors, the same treasures (gems, weapons and so forth) can easily be acquired through exploration or mining. There is only one treasure box that is necessary for upgrading the Inventory, but the weapons displays in Link's house in Hateno Village make this option unnecessary. Monster horns, tusks and eyeballs can be collected to make magical elixirs, but the same magical effects are available through clothing upgrades or cooking vegetables. Monster parts may also be converted into currency called 'mon', but the player can also use Ancient Machinery as an alternative. If players choose not to engage in combat, in fact, progression through the map is much faster. Enemies can be easily avoided, especially if Link's stamina is high. 'Pacifist runs' have proved popular as a player-imposed game style, discussed at length online.

A COLONIAL NARRATIVE

Running parallel to this experience in the gameworld is the unfolding of the narrative, which tells a tale of peaceful times in the past – until technology was abused by those in power, splintering the land into civil war. The monster enemies in the environment are on the side of those who tired of technological oppression and split from the kingdom, while it is slowly revealed that Link's side – the kingdom of Hyrule, led by Zelda's family – was responsible for the abuse of power in the first place. This story can be read as a tale of colonial allegory, with the so-called 'civilization' of Hyrule versus the imagined 'barbarism' of the monster enemies, but observant play shows that the monsters are not so barbaric, and the kingdom perhaps not so civilized. In his current incarnation, Link has the choice to continue the oppression of monsters as a Knight of Hyrule, or to leave them alone in his quest to defeat the far mightier enemy Ganon.

This subtle ideological message is a far cry from the blatant and obvious anti-nuclear narratives of Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* series (Hutchinson 2017) and Kojima Hideo's *Metal Gear Solid* (Noon and Dyer-Witheford, 2010). On one hand, the hidden depths of *Breath of the Wild* speak to obsessive fans of the series, who debate the lore and history of Hyrule at length online. But regular players, including people new to the series, can also understand the colonial critique of the game, merely through observant play. The fact that the anti-colonial ideology remains somewhat hidden speaks to the tendency towards analogy, allegory and self-censorship in the Japanese arts (Hutchinson 2013), and the conservative nature of Nintendo as a development company.

THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

As Mukherjee (2017) and others have argued, there is much to be gained from postcolonial readings of videogames as texts. Postcolonial readings of Japanese games in particular are interesting since they address not only Western colonialism of Japanese territory (especially in the postwar Allied Occupation of Japan, from 1945-1952) but also the Japanese colonialism in the Asia-Pacific region (from the late 1880s through to 1945). The dualistic nature of Japan's colonial experience makes Japanese games an interesting case study for the postcolonial reading. Taking the Japanese origins of the game into account, as urged by Martin (2017), allows a fuller understanding of its colonial subtext, seen here in the role of monsters in both gameplay and narrative.

CONCLUSION

This paper adds to the wider field of Game Studies by building on Sicart's work on ethical and subjective play (2009, 2013), as well as Parker's (2011) work on 'expansive play,' to focus on the player's observations and learning curve in

revealing less obvious ideologies of the game designer. *Breath of the Wild* is well known for player experimentation with different self-imposed conditions, such as non-violent play, vegan play, and so forth (Westerlaken 2017). This paper assesses ‘observant play’ as a purposeful element of game design, whereby the development team manipulates the player’s realization of certain game mechanics, in tandem with the unfolding of a central narrative. Dual methods of progress are included in the game rules, but only observant players will be able to use these options to make choices, and only after a certain amount of in-game time. The paper includes a case study of pacifist play by the author, and reports the difficulty of certain missions dependent on the choice of play mode. This paper reports on research in progress.

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