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The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom is a critically acclaimed game created and published by Nintendo in May 2023. The game gives players an unprecedented level of freedom in how players approach challenges within its expansive open world. These abilities allow players to manipulate the world around them such as objects, weapons, and materials in whatever shape the player sees fit. This leads players to create solutions that developers may not have originally intended for. The game introduces four main abilities, however, only two of them will be the focus. Those abilities are Ultrahand and Fuse. Ultrahand allows players to construct tools, vehicles, and structures from stones to wooden boxes to even fruit. This ability enables players to bypass obstacles and solve puzzles in ways the developers never foresaw. Similarly, Fuse allows players to customize their equipment with items around them which leads to both new combat strategies as well as puzzle solving. The freedom offered by these mechanics empowers players to find their own unique solutions to problems. By blending open-world exploration and highly flexible mechanics, *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* blends an open-world environment with highly flexible mechanics that allow problem-solving to flourish, resulting in solutions never intended by the developers.



Figure 1

The design of *Tears of the Kingdom*'s map is an extension of the previous title in the series *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* which included a big map (Figure 1). *Tears of the Kingdom* expands upon the original map, adding two new layers for players to explore: the sky islands and the depths. The sky islands consist of many islands floating throughout Hyrule, while the depths are a dark underground area that is an inverse topography of the main map. Joel Vidqvist (2019) defines open-world as a “nonlinear virtual world” that gives players the agency to roam wherever and tackle objectives in any order. *Tears of the Kingdom* fits this description as the game doesn't block the player from traversing to whatever they want. If a player wants to climb a mountain or explore through the water, they are given the necessary tools to do so right at the beginning. Furthermore, the entirety of the depths and sky islands are unlocked from the start. For the sky islands, normally players can use fallen debris, however, Johnny Yu (2023) notes that players can create aircraft that lift the player to the sky islands. Then players discovered new ways to traverse these lands, players have created the hoverbike which is a vehicle that makes exploration and traversal exponentially easier (Rodriguez, 2023). The hoverbike was not a machine included in the game, rather it was a creation made by someone

based on the tools the game gave them. Players created a new vehicle that wasn't originally in the game because of the mechanics the game offers and because of the incentive the open world gave them.



Figure 2

Next, Ultrahand is one of the abilities that give players agency to create their solutions. Stang (2019) writes that agency is the capability of humans to act in a world that is restricted by factors such as physicality. Ultrahand pushes this definition to the limit by allowing players to freely move, manipulate, and attach objects to create structures and even vehicles. Physics is the only thing restricting players in *Tears of the Kingdom* and even that is being pushed to the limit with this ability. Figure 2 shows a player's solution to a side puzzle that involves bringing a “korok” to his friend, and the developers will give hints to players on how they would solve this problem. But, as seen in Figure 2, making a giant launcher to launch the “korok” to his friend is a solution the game allows. No borders blocking the player and no single solution, the game’s open world and Ultrahand allow for these innovative solutions as there are no singular solutions to a problem. Players are empowered to approach challenges in inventive ways and get rewarded with a gameplay experience that feels player-driven as opposed to the game’s rules. Moll et al.

(2019) researched the influence of game mechanics on players' satisfaction. Moll et al. (2019) hypothesized that the player's success influences satisfaction in the game. *Tears of the Kingdom* has flexible game mechanics such as Ultrahand that allow for creations and for them to work, satisfying players. Many players have posted their creations for other people to view such as a flying mech that obliterates monsters with lasers (Plant 2023). It can be seen from these sources that players are actively using Ultrahand to create contraptions the developers never anticipated.



Figure 3

Fuse grants players the ability to merge any item with something in their toolkit such as their sword, shield, or bow. Fuse also enables players to push the boundaries of the game and invent their solutions to problems presented to them. In Figure 3 a player is flying above an enemy camp by using a rocket that was fused to their shield. An intended route to getting into the camp would be to fight through the entrance, but this player's answer was to use a rocket fused to his shield to get in. Another fusion a player made was fusing a beehive into a stick to launch bees at enemies (Thielenhaus, 2023). These abilities show the flexibility *Tears of the Kingdom* has in gameplay mechanics.

In conclusion, *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* built upon the legacy of its predecessor by revolutionizing player interaction with its open world. Through innovative abilities of Ultrahand and Fuse, players are empowered to produce their own solutions to problems resulting in varied gameplay and experiences that reflect their creativity. The freedom to manipulate the environment and customize equipment gives players agency, enabling them to create solutions unintended by developers. As shown by the hoverbike and various fusion combinations, the game rewards imaginative thinking. Ultimately, *Tears of the Kingdom* stands out as an impressive storytelling game with game mechanics that prioritize player expression, reinforcing the idea that memorable gaming moments occur from unexpected solutions and a more personalized experience.

Works Cited

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