The Path That Lies Ahead: Intimacy Through Overwhelmedness in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I read *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* to consider the potential of video game worlds to create intimate affects. I trace out a framework of intimacy not as a relationship between individuals but as an affect defined by sensations including vulnerability, the loss of control, and precarity. Then, I read the formal, aesthetic, proprioceptive and structural elements of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* for intimate affects. I understand the intimacy of *Breath of the Wild* as not anchored to any individual but distributed through the game world. Within this framework I argue that *Breath of the Wild* creates intimacy through being overwhelmed and contending with overwhelmedness. Finally, I consider the context of contemporary precarity to understand the stakes of inhabiting intimate game worlds.

KEYWORDS

Intimacy, affect, space, rhythm, precarity, Zelda

INTRODUCTION

I am startled suddenly from the quiet rhythms of piano music and a horse's hooves by the flapping of bird wings, just ahead.

In the midst of cooking I find myself moving the camera to just the right angle to see Link's face, framed by the morning sun and the trees, light up when his dish is ready.

I climb for what seems like hours, carefully positioning myself along an outcropping of rocks so that I have the energy to make it to the top – and I am rewarded with a view of the fields below for a few precious moments before a monster's attack distracts me.

The moments described above will be familiar to anyone who has played *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* They are united by a sense of quiet vulnerability, the precarity of how quickly they could end, and by the interconnected ways that these sensations are brought to bear: through an agglomeration of sonic, aesthetic, proprioceptive and mechanical cues. Like many players, I find myself returning to Hyrule over and over again not to save Princess Zelda, but to experience these quiet moments. How can we understand what is happening here?

In this essay I use the framework of intimacy to closely read the game world of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* for intimate affects. Drawing from Deleuzian affect theory, Lauren Berlant and Nancy Yousef, I trace out a framework of intimacy not as a relationship between individuals but as an affect defined by sensations including vulnerability, the loss of control, and precarity. Then, I closely read the

formal, aesthetic, proprioceptive and structural elements of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* for intimate affects. I understand the intimacy of *Breath of the Wild* as not anchored to any individual but distributed through the game world. Within this framework I argue that *Breath of the Wild* creates intimacy in two main forms: the sensation of being overwhelmed and the necessity of contending with overwhelmedness. Drawing from Emily Brady's and Eugenie Shinkle's notions of the sublime and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology,* I outline a theory of overwhelmedness as a building, accumulative tension rendered through movement in space and an overabundance of affects, creating sensations of smallness, vulnerability and anxiety in ways reminiscent of the sublime. I read for the different forms of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* rendered through the modes of movement and action the game affords. I then return to intimacy and ask what about being overwhelmed is intimate, and how it becomes so in *Breath of the Wild.*

INTIMACY AND AFFECT
Intimacy can refer colloquially to sexual or romantic relations between lovers, interactions with strangers, close friendships, casual sexual encounters or forms of relation that are otherwise hard to describe. To get away from this colloquial baggage, to move away from human-centered and individual-oriented conceptions of intimacy, and to focus on the specific sensations that intimacy describes, I draw from Deleuzian affect theory and define intimacy as an affect.

Deleuze and Guattari locate affects "in the midst of things and relations […] and, then, in the complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously" (Seigworth and Gregg 2009, 6). In their discussion of the becoming-animal, they understand these relations as between an individual and the "machinic assemblage" (1987, 257) in which they are entangled. Using the example of a horse in the city, they consider the affects of a horse as existing within the context of this assemblage of relations: "having eyes blocked by blinders, having a bit and a bridle, being proud, having a big peepee-maker, pulling heavy loads," and so on.

I understand intimacy as an affective weight that a relationship—or any relation within the "complex assemblages" Deleuze and Guattari describe—can take on. In the context of video games, this allows us to examine the forces a game world exerts on the player on a formal level – from the aesthetics of the world to the way characters move with and within it – as potentially containing intimate affects. I draw from Aubrey Anable's call in *Playing With Feelings: Video Games and Affect* to attend to "the unfinished business of representation in theory" by considering aesthetics and representation as elements of this assemblage. My work departs from Anable's, however, in that while she criticizes Deleuzian strains of affect theory that "cleave affect from subjectivity" (2018, 8) by presenting affect as a network independent from the individual body, I find the relational structure of the assemblage useful as a way to flatten out considerations of representation, aesthetics, mechanics, temporal structure and bodily sensation. The affect of intimacy in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is created not by any one element, but by the complex and overwhelming ways they act together.

So what comprises an intimate affect? Lauren Berlant, in her introduction to "Intimacy: A Special Issue" of *Critical Inquiry*, draws attention to the tension between the private – communication "with the sparest of signs and gestures," with "the quality of eloquence and brevity" (1998, 281) – and the public – the ideal of "something shared" – at the heart of intimacy. Similarly, Nancy Yousef in *Romantic Intimacy* notes that intimacy "crystallizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities" (2013, 15), considering it as referring "to what is closely held and personal and to what is deeply shared with

others" (2013, 16). Indeed, intimacy seems to be caught in a moment between the private and the public: to *intimate* is to reveal a closely-held secret. But just as intimacy is connected to revealing, to nakedness, to the baring of secrets, it cannot be fully public, either. Berlant understands that "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" (1998, 282); as both authors note, intimacy can take place between strangers, lovers, or family, but within that relation it establishes a private space in which secrets can be revealed. Yousef describes this as "the phenomenal fact of proximity between persons – whether sustained over time, as in a familial relationship, or in the fleeting immediacy of an encounter with a stranger" (2013, 19). Intimacy as these authors discuss it can be figured, then, as a space between the public and private, felt as the sensation of closeness or proximity and of being seen or of revealing.

But this proximity is never certain; in fact, intimacy is defined by a sense of uncertainty. Berlant understands intimacy as deeply connected to desire and fantasy. She considers intimacy as involving "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (1998, 281) and notes that "its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability" (1998, 282). Indeed, "unstable closeness" seems an apt way to describe intimacy: one may aspire for an intimate relation to last indefinitely, or to "turn out in a particular way," but one can never know for certain what the other will do with that relation, or when they will decide to leave it. But this haunting, I argue, is part of what makes intimacy pleasurable: the precarity of the intimate forces a focus on and existence within the present, in the closeness that might disappear, but *for now*, lingers. This precarious temporality is another intimate sensation.

With these notions in mind, I understand intimate affects in terms of a precarious, synchronous orientation in the present, made pleasurable and terrifying by the sensation of nakedness or revealing of oneself. It is fragile; the threat of embarrassment or humiliation or disappointment lingers at its edges, so much so that it is sometimes more bearable to end the intimate moment than to remain. Intimacy can be cultivated, through gestures or sustained proximity; but one can find oneself thrown into intimacy as well.

Intimacy and precarity are deeply entangled. I use the term *precarity* with consideration towards the contemporary political connotations of the term, which refer to increasing economic and ontological conditions of uncertainty under neoliberal power structures. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* Anna Tsing describes precarity as "life without the promise of stability," as "the condition of trouble without end" (2), but also as "a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others" (29). Tsing tracks the commerce and ecology of matsutake mushrooms to conceive of a path towards "collaborative survival in precarious times" (2015, 2); for Tsing, looking at precarity through the matsutake mushroom "makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible" (2015, 20). To be intimate, then, is to find a way to survive in precarious times. It is with this context in mind that I understand the stakes of intimacy in *Breath of the Wild.*

Intimacy can also take on different affective valences: the intimacy of an unexpected shared moment with a stranger differs from the intimacy of a morning spent with an old friend, but both are intimate. I turn now to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) to consider an intimacy that involves an overwhelming set of interactions with space – and a form of intimacy not anchored to characters but distributed throughout the world.[1]

THE OPENNESS OF *BREATH OF THE WILD*

Released in 2017, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is the nineteenth game in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise of action-adventure fantasy games. The player controls Link, a knight who awakens in the land of Hyrule from a hundred-year slumber with no memories. It is soon revealed that Link was once the bodyguard of the eponymous Princess Zelda, who put him in a sort of stasis after a failed attempt to thwart Ganon, an apocalyptic force of darkness that now threatens to destroy the world, held back only by Zelda herself; Link is tasked with defeating Ganon, rescuing Zelda and restoring peace to Hyrule. In a departure from previous titles, *Breath of the Wild* is almost entirely open in structure; though the player is encouraged to seek out allies and power-ups before challenging the final boss, they may travel directly from their stasis chamber to Hyrule Castle to fight him. This openness extends to the way the player can approach combat: they can collect equipment and power-ups to brute force their way through hostile areas, use mechanically complex tricks and flourishes, or avoid combat altogether by taking circuitous routes and sneaking past enemies. Solutions to puzzles are similarly open-ended, as is exploration: there are almost no gated-off areas or linear paths, meaning that players' movements through the world are only limited by Link's limited energetic capacity. For this it has been almost universally praised; in particular, reviewers and players have noted the intricacy of the world,[2] and in this respect it has been positively compared with other open world games.[3]

The immediate problem with analyzing *Breath of the Wild* is one of structure and scope: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a massive game. To an extent this is a problem endemic of video game analysis, but it is particularly difficult for *Breath of the Wild*, which is not only long (the website howlongtobeat.com, which lists average completion times for games based on poll data, averages 45.5 hours for the main story alone and 88 hours for the main story "+ extras") but extremely varied in the number of things the player can do in the game world ("The Legend"). One could easily write an essay entirely about the aesthetic and affective properties of animal photography or cooking, both entirely optional and deeply enjoyable activities in which one can partake. The extent of *Breath of the Wild*'s pleasures make it overwhelming as an object of critical concern, just as playing the game itself can become overwhelming. It only makes sense, then, that intimacy in *Breath of the Wild* is found in being overwhelmed. There is something intimate about having to contend with the vastness of a world, with all of the things one can and can't do within it, and with one's own inability to comprehend it in toto.

Theorizing Overwhelmedness: Not Quite Sublime

In order to understand the many forms of being overwhelmed in *Breath of the Wild*, I want to draw, and ultimately distinguish myself, from the notion of the sublime. In *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature*, Emily Brady, drawing from Kant, describes the sublime as an encounter with "natural objects or phenomena having qualities of great height or vastness or tremendous power which cause an intense emotional response characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed and somewhat anxious, though ultimately an experience that feels exciting and pleasurable" (2013, 6). In "Video Games and the Technological Sublime," Eugenie Shinkle notes that "it was not sensible forms or 'things of nature' in themselves which were the source of sublime affect, but the sensation of the *failure* of the imagination to grasp such things in their entirety. […] Sublime affect was a means of testing subjective boundaries, of exploring and affirming the limits of the human self and its relationship to nature" (2010). She further considers the sublime for Kant as "a process, hybrid by nature, and incorporating a number of different emotional registers" beginning with "a loss of human agency, as the subject feels itself overpowered by a greater force" that gives way to a reassertion of "the subject's

freedom from causal determination and its conformity with moral law." Similarly, Brady notes that the failure of the subject's imaginative capacities "gives way to a feeling or an awareness of the existence of reason. It is in this opening out toward reason that we experience positive feeling, as we discover ourselves, after all, adequate to the task. Reason can cope with such magnitudes where the senses (and imagination) cannot" (2013, 158). We might understand the sublime as an encounter with unimaginable vastness or power that creates sensations of vulnerability, smallness and anxiety, but ultimately reaffirms – or, in Brady's words, uplifts – the subject.

There are aspects of the sublime that I find useful for understanding overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild*. The affective structure of the sublime encounter – the sense of awe imposed by scale, and the vulnerability and anxiety that this awe creates – are both aspects of overwhelmedness.[4] But the sublime also departs from the affect I examine in *Breath of the Wild* in a number of important ways. Firstly, the temporal structure of the sublime, in which the subject suddenly finds themselves "overpowered by a greater force" (Shinkle), does not fully capture the way that *Breath of the Wild* is made up of thousands of smaller encounters that become overwhelming not in their individual power, but in their multiplicity. I also take issue with the way that the negative sensations of the sublime are ultimately resolved by the intervention of reason or "a sense of self as uplifted or elevated" (Brady 2013, 159). The overwhelming quality of *Breath of the Wild* is defined in part by the persistence of sensations of anxiety and smallness; as we will see, one does not overcome being overwhelmed in *Breath of the Wild* but learns to contend with it. In contrast with the sublime, I define overwhelmedness as a series of encounters that, in their multiplicity, create a sense of accumulating tension, anxiety and smallness. Overwhelmedness can dissipate for a time, for example, in a moment of calm, and it can be evaded or postponed, but it cannot be fully resolved; rather, it must be contended with until it subsides.

Here, it is useful to return to the Deleuzian notion of the "machinic assemblage." Discussing the becoming-animal, Deleuze and Guattari define affects as attached "to the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual" (1987, 256); affects are intensities that augment or diminish one's power to act in the context of these relational networks or "machinic assemblages" (1987, 257). If we understand an affect as a capacity to affect or be affected within a particular relation, then we might define overwhelmedness as an encounter with an overabundance of affects, as an awareness of the scale of the assemblage within which the player as Link is entangled. This encounter comes into being through forms of movement and action, but also through the accumulation of these forms in itself. In this way, different encounters with this assemblage, and different forms of accumulation and dissipation, create different forms of overwhelmedness.

Rising Tensions: Overwhelmedness as Accumulation

Many flows of gameplay in *Breath of the Wild* are defined by slowly accumulating tensions that are only ever resolved precariously; this is perhaps the clearest form of overwhelmedness. During one particularly long nighttime journey, I found myself passing through a steep, damp cave, its rocky ceilings cracking to let in rain and moonlight. As I walked through the cave I noticed several Lightning Keeses[5] hanging from the ceiling. Using my bow and what few arrows I had, I picked off two or three before the rest noticed me; but when I ran out of arrows and took a moment to switch to a spear, a Keese managed to hit me, shocking me into dropping it. The spear rolled down the hill of the cave, so I equipped a shorter sword and ran down the hill to get it; but the limited range of the sword meant that I was unable to stop another Keese before it hit me as well, shocking me into dropping the sword, which rolled down the

hill to join the spear and left me nearly defenseless. Now with low health, limited healing supplies and no more disposable weapons, I decided to cut my losses and run away; in doing so, however, I depleted my stamina wheel,[6] leaving me exhausted and dangerously close to another nest of monsters.

This scene, typical of combat in *Breath of the Wild,* does not involve a single especially dangerous moment, but rather several moments of escalation, including when I ran out of arrows, when I dropped my spear, when I dropped my sword, and when I ran out of stamina while escaping the cave. It was also marked by aesthetic tensions: the confined space of the cave limited my options for escape and forced the camera closer inwards towards Link, creating a vague sense of claustrophobia, while the openings above me let in rain and lightning, which not only resulted in white noise and visual activity but also created puddles on the floor that made me more vulnerable to electric shock. Each relation here – Link and the puddles, the camera and Link, the Keeses and Link, Link and his weapons, and so on – became imbued with tension until I was so overwhelmed by the ways in which I was vulnerable that I was forced to run away (a process that was itself precarious).

As the player explores the world, solves puzzles, accumulates items and increases Link's maximum health and stamina, the overwhelming combat situation described above becomes less common, though it is never impossible; even when equipped with the strongest armour and weapons and a long health bar, Link is prone to being overwhelmed by an unlucky combination of enemies and unexpected complications. With this accumulation, though, comes another form of overwhelmedness: the management of inventory items. Even if he upgrades his inventory, Link is able to hold very few weapons at once; since weapons are often situational (like a torch that is useless in direct combat but useful to light dark passages, or a hammer that is unwieldy against fast enemies but powerful against slower ones and for breaking rocks), collecting weapons forces the player to choose which situations to prepare for. Complicating this is the fact that weapons are breakable, and that neither the player nor Link can tell when a weapon will break until it has nearly broken; in this way, the accumulation of items becomes a process of selecting between precarious and unpredictable situations, of being confronted by the many potential ways Link can precariously interact with the world.

This form of overwhelmedness as an encounter with Link's affects can be found more broadly as well, in the many ways Link can interact with the world and watch other things in the world interact. Discourses about *Breath of the Wild* online point to the sheer number of things one can do in the world as a source of joy, excitement and pleasure in the game.[7] One IGN article titled "100 Little Things in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* That Will Blow Your Mind" notes, for example, that Koroks[8] produce a unique sound when you drop a rock on their head, that steam rises off of flaming weapons while it rains, or that when rolled down hills, snowballs become larger. I have noticed a similar trend in personal experiences: during one conversation I had with friends, when asked about why they enjoyed the game, they were unable to articulate a broader aspect of the game that they liked (like the controls or the story), but instead began listing off the things they could do in quick succession. Even the attempt to explain these sources of pleasure seemed to overwhelm them, and their words began to fail them. I articulated this same overwhelmedness earlier in this essay from a critical perspective, but it exerts a certain force during gameplay as well. Running through a field during a lightning storm, I am shocked to find that my equipped metal items conduct electricity, making me vulnerable to lightning; I laugh when, left alone for a moment, my horse plucks an apple from a shrine and eats it; watching a deer through the lens of my camera, I watch as it lies down in a secluded spot of sunlight to relax.

In her discussion of the technological sublime, Eugenie Shinkle considers glitches, hardware crashes and other technological failures as moments of sublimity in which "the subject experiences a momentary glimpse of technology as an inhuman other;" this other is so opaque, however, that it "demonstrates neither awesome power nor infinite magnitude. Here, the process of sublime experience is emptied of the transcendence that the term originally comprised," instead creating frustration, which Shinkle defines as "an emotional state that is born out of the tedium of the everyday" which draws attention to the video game as a mass-produced consumer object (2010). This mode of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* evokes Shinkle's technological sublime in that it becomes an encounter not only with the world of Hyrule, but with the technological system with which the player interfaces; but rather than glimpsing the "inhuman other" of technology through tedium, frustration and a lack of affect, the player experiences it as an accumulation of affects. Small details accumulate and offer glimpses into the vastness of the machinic assemblage in which Link and the player are entangled, creating a tension that arrests articulation.

Another overwhelming tension is rendered through one of the ways Link most often interacts with the space: climbing. *Breath of the Wild* is fairly unique among open-world games in that Link can scale almost any mountain or structure in the game, limited only by his stamina wheel, which depletes as he climbs. Climbing offers a formal microcosm of the structure of building tension. While climbing, Link moves slowly and repetitively, and the player's capacity to move the camera becomes limited by the mountain or cliff, meaning they cannot as easily see his face (figure 1). Instead, the player can angle the camera to get a glimpse of the scale of the heights Link is climbing by looking either upwards or downwards (figure 2). Ever-present in the frame is the stamina wheel as it empties bit by bit every time Link reaches for the next foothold. As Link approaches the edge of the cliff and his stamina wheel approaches emptiness, the player can either jump, giving Link a burst of movement at the expense of extra stamina and at risk of running out and falling, or continue at pace, forcing the player to wait as Link climbs and tension rises. There are, of course, two possible outcomes to climbing: either Link makes it to the top or he doesn't. The latter option involves its own tensions as Link falls; if he lands on a flat surface he hits the ground immediately and takes significant damage, while if he lands on an incline he rolls until he loses momentum, and the player, unable to control his movement, must watch and wait again as he slowly loses health.

Figure 1: This is the closest I could manage to capturing Link's face as he climbs. As the player moves the camera closer to his face, his body fades from view as the camera apparently passes through him.

Figure 2: Angling the camera from below, we get a sense of how much farther we have to climb. Note the stamina wheel slowly depleting.

The first option offers a different solution to the problem of overwhelming tension in *Breath of the Wild*. The world of Hyrule is made up of rolling hills and mountains that crack into sheer cliffs, all blanketed in a hazy, pastel-esque colourscape; when Link scales a mountain, after finishing his climb he almost always finds himself at the edge of an impressive vista (figure 3). This reveal plays into the building tensions of the climb: as the player climbs higher they can see more and more sky over the edge of the cliff, until they reach the top and see the view in its entirety. Just as the tension built up from scaling the cliff is dissipated, it is replaced by an overwhelming sensation reminiscent of the sublime: an encounter with the magnitude of the world. Climbing the mountain itself allows for the avoidance of other tensions – for example, one can often avoid combat with enemies by climbing around their camps – but it also creates the tensions inherent in a sublime encounter.

It is interesting, then, that the method that *Breath of the Wild* presents to contend with this tension is the paraglider, a thick cloth Link uses as a sort of parachute to glide across the land. This is a precarious way to dissipate the tension of the climb: the paraglider is limited by Link's stamina, meaning that the player often must repeatedly fold and unfold it, falling in fits and starts, in order to reach the ground safely. But this use of the paraglider also draws attention to a different form of overwhelmedness, one defined not by accumulating tensions but by a flow or rhythm that is constantly disturbed.

Overwhelmedness as Rhythm Disrupted

We see this structure of rhythms and flows that are always interrupted at other times throughout *Breath of the Wild* as well. One example of this is horseback riding. Hyrule is lined with winding paths through its fields and along the sides of its mountains; when Link rides his horse along these paths, the horse automatically follows them without any input from Link or the player. If Link rides without any interruptions for long enough, a quiet piano theme begins to play in the background, reminiscent of the rhythm of a galloping horse. The clopping of the horse's hooves along the path, the repetitive piano music and the horse's automatic following of the path threaten to lull Link and the player into an ambient daze. But what few moments of calm Link and the player experience here are disrupted: along the path sit a small flock of herons, who, as Link and his horse draw close, scamper and fly away in a burst of feathers and cawing. Or maybe a monster crosses the road and notices Link as he rides toward it, threatening conflict that could harm the horse. Or perhaps, without warning, the path gives way to a cliff, cutting short the movement and the music and putting Link and his horse in danger. As soon as the rhythms of horse, rider and path come into harmony, they are lost, and Link must find his way back to the path and to the lost rhythm. Link's rhythms are overwhelmed by these constant disruptions. If this structure occurred only once, it might be more apt to describe it as shock or disruption; but rhythms are constantly under threat in *Breath of the Wild*, and it is this constantly-repeating disruptive process – the fact that *whenever* Link and the player find a rhythm, it is interrupted – makes it a form of overwhelmedness.

Creating Rhythms

What can be done about these constant disruptions? Though it is possible to exploit the game's physics engine to a certain degree, the player cannot avoid them – they can only evade them for a time and contend with them when they appear. And just like paragliding is at once a precarious rhythm and a way to contend with the overwhelming process of climbing, the repetition of small actions and cutscenes becomes a way to contend with *Breath of the Wild's* overwhelming assemblage.

For a game in which there is so much to do, *Breath of the Wild* is surprisingly repetitive. In one two-hour gameplay session, for example, I cooked by a fire pit for nearly twenty minutes. Cooking a single dish takes about a minute: the player opens their inventory, selects up to five food items to hold at once, closes their inventory, and throws them into the fire pit. Then, Link hums and the player watches as a brief jingle plays and the food items bounce and dance around in the pan, culminating in a whistling sound as the food jumps upwards in a puff of smoke; Link makes a satisfied noise as the completed dish is added to the inventory. As with climbing, the player can fill the time by moving the camera, in this case to get a better look at the food or at Link's face. The sounds – the rustling noises that punctuate the player's movements through the inventory menu, the drumming as the food cooks, the jingle when the dish is finished – create a pleasantly repetitive rhythm. Link's movements

and expressions become similarly calming, and I find myself angling the camera slightly differently with each dish, testing out different shots and perspectives on Link's face, the food, and the area around us. Even when I have more than enough cooked food in my inventory, I am taken with the rhythms of cooking and continue until I am almost out of ingredients. Presented with a vast world to explore, overwhelming in its capacities, it is interesting that I am compelled to spend so long at the cooking pot. I find myself similarly drawn to the rhythms of gathering food items, rhythms structured by mushrooms, apples and eggs strewn about the land, bursts of sprinting up trees and across grassland to get to them, and the ringing sound that plays when I pick something up.

Each of these sequences lasts a matter of seconds, but in aggregate they make up the majority of my play experience; as I approach an enemy camp or get back on my horse, I am more prepared for the ways these things will overwhelm me. Creating rhythms becomes a way to contend with the constant threat of their disruption, and in the face of *Breath of the Wild*'s overwhelming assemblage of things that can be done to Link, repetition anchors the player to something familiar that might help them weather the sensation of being overwhelmed.

TWO INTIMACIES: BEING OVERWHELMED AND CONTENDING WITH IT

So far, we have explored two forms of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* – the building tension and the disrupted rhythm – and a form of contending with being overwhelmed by repeating small actions and cutscenes (figure 4). But where do we locate intimacy in this system of overwhelmedness? Is it being overwhelmed that is intimate, or is it intimate to contend with overwhelmedness? I argue that both experiences of overwhelmedness – the overwhelming accumulation itself *and* the process of dealing with it – are intimate. Here, I turn to Lauren Berlant, Henri Lefebvre, and Sara Ahmed to understand what it means to be overwhelmed and to contend with it, particularly in the spatial mode that *Breath of the Wild* maps out.

	Overwhelmedness in building tensions	**Overwhelmedness in disrupted rhythms**	**Creating rhythms as contending with overwhelmedness**
In-game actions	Combat; climbing; inventory management; meta-critical overwhelmedness	Paragliding; horseback riding	Shrine cutscenes; cooking; item collection (as process)
Beginning	Small problems or affects interact with one another	A rhythm is found via movement through space	A single, purposeful action
Continuation	Affects accumulate and become unmanageable	The rhythm is disrupted and temporarily ended	The action is repeated in a slightly different way
Culmination	Tension is temporarily diffused (by death, flight, pause or victory)	The rhythm and its disruption are repeated	The action is repeated until its repetition becomes rhythmic

Affective Valence	Building anxiety; frustration through bodily incapacity	Repetitive shock; constant discomfort; inability to synchronize	Respite; comfort in expected reactions; inhabitation

Table 1: Forms of overwhelmedness, and contending with such, in *Breath of the Wild.*

To be overwhelmed in *Breath of the Wild* is to be faced – either through a slow, progressive build-up or in repeated disruptions – with the sheer abundance of one's affects. This is reminiscent of the sublime, in which an encounter with the scale and power of a space creates a sharp and sometimes painful awareness of one's smallness and finitude. Overwhelmedness too in *Breath of the Wild* is often staged through a relation to space. In the midst of combat, the space Link occupies becomes too full of complications. Moving through new spaces opens up new ways Link can be affected by the world, such that exploring too much space at once overwhelms the player with new affects and vulnerabilities. Flying or riding across a field opens up the potential for a way of moving through space, only for that potential to be foreclosed by constant interruptions. What does it mean to encounter finitude and smallness in this explicitly spatial way?

Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, uses the term "orientation" to lay out a relationship between bodies and space that is useful here. In Ahmed's schema, space "does not contain the body as if the body were 'in it.' Rather bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the 'where' of that movement" (2006). This description of a becoming with/in space is evocative of becoming overwhelmed, in which Link's body is affected, disrupted and increasingly weighted by relations with the space he and the player inhabit. For Ahmed, orientation is a process of "making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space," which necessarily involves the body becoming the space it inhabits; disorientation "occurs when that extension fails." But disorientation is also, as she points out, "a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are."[9] In this way, disorientation is a loss of oneself experienced through a loss of one's relationship to space. One becomes unable to extend into and become with/in space, and this unmoors them from it, just as being overwhelmed arrests action and articulation. But being overwhelmed also enables an awareness of the extent of one's vulnerabilities; as opposed to disorientation, which is experienced as a loss of the self, overwhelmedness is an encounter with all that the self is in terms of space. In that way, to be overwhelmed is a radical process of reorientation in space according to one's vulnerabilities. Having sprinted out of a cave full of dangers, I look back at what I'm escaping from. As Link catches his breath, the scale of our capacities in the assemblage of Link-Keese-lightning-sword-spear-bow-arrows-cave (and so on) becomes clear – I come to know our place better, though this perhaps only makes itself felt as caution and an attentiveness to more circuitous routes. Calming my horse after it rears back from a cliffside, recognizing how close we came to toppling over the edge, I find myself able to re-enter our rhythmic cantering more quickly next time.

If the intimacy of being overwhelmed is located in the moment when one is reoriented in their vulnerabilities, then the intimacy of contending with overwhelmedness is located in finding rhythms that make those vulnerabilities more livable. In *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre uses the term "dressage" to define, as Lauren Berlant summarizes, "the mode of enacting life through habituated gestures that stretch the present out so that enjoyment is possible" (2011, 63). For Lefebvre, dressage is a process of breaking oneself in to social systems through repetition, but here, I evoke the term to understand the ways that rhythmic, repeated actions can create a habitable orientation in the present. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant draws out a theory of optimism to understand how people "find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (2011, 8) in a politically, socially and economically precarious present moment which "increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (2011, 7). Discussing presence in Gregg Bordowitz's autobiographical film *Habit,* Berlant posits that "whatever one might say about history and memory tumbles together into an ordinariness that has not quite been achieved, nor rested in, but that comforts, somehow, because the camera keeps going into the familiar/unfamiliar spaces of the ongoing, drive-through present, marked by its jerky rhythm" (2011, 63). This structure of a present created by rhythms that never quite settle is crucial for Berlant as a method to "live on in unstable and shattered ordinaries" (2011, 93). There are resonances here with the process of contending with overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild*, in the jerky rhythms of angling the camera while one cooks dish after dish or the familiar unfamiliarity of collecting vegetables in an unexplored jungle. The structure that Berlant outlines of precarious comfort and tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity is evocative of intimacy as well: the precarity of Hyrule's assemblage means that these rhythms can never be quite settled in, but for a long moment before confronting the next enemy or moving on to the next place, they can be lingered in, and somehow, they provide comfort in their drive-through presentness.

CONCLUSION: LIVING IN AN INTIMATE WORLD

Breath of the Wild has mapped out a method for inhabiting precarious space that becomes intimate just as it withdraws from the possibility of a consistent rhythm. Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* is concerned with what it means to manage living in precarious conditions, and finds solace in how "thinking about life during lived time, everyone is figuring out the terms and genres for valuing *living*. No one imagines having expertise enough to have mastered the situation—just a commitment to cultivating better intuitive skills for moving around this extended, extensive time and space where the crisis of the present meets multiple crises of presence" (2011, 59). Open world games, through their vast potential for new, unexpected and perhaps overwhelming interactions with space, carry the possibility for "genres for valuing *living*" – for imagining ways of becoming intimate with spaces that, like the precarious spaces in which we find ourselves, withhold the promise of a predictable life. Rather than a space to be conquered or mastered, Hyrule is an intimate world where finding a way of living in unstable rhythms, as precarious as they are, is enough.

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ENDNOTES

1 Parts of this section were adapted from my Master's thesis, *Intimate Worlds: Reading for Intimate Affects in Contemporary Video Games,* and can also be found in

my article "The Monster Has Kind Eyes: Intimacy and Frustration in *The Last Guardian*" in Issue 30 of *InVisible Culture.*

2 See, for example, online reviews by Otero, Oxford, and Carter.

3 See, for example, articles by Ckurab and Burch.

4 This has been considered in more depth by Farca et. al. in their presentation "Regenerative Play and the Experience of the Sublime in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.*"

5 A Keese is a small, frail, bat-like monster often found in caves in Hyrule. Lightning Keeses are imbued with electrical energy, meaning they shock whoever they touch, temporarily paralyzing them and forcing them to drop a weapon.

6 The stamina wheel is a circular bar that symbolizes Link's physical energy. It is depleted through sprinting, climbing, swimming or engaging in otherwise physically taxing activities; when it runs out, Link stops what he is doing for several seconds to catch his breath.

7 For example, see articles by Oxford and Davis.

8 Koroks are forest spirits who appear throughout Hyrule to offer Link rewards in return for solving simple puzzles.

9 The Kindle e-book version of this text did not list page numbers for these quotations, but they are in the introduction of the book.