

***The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* through the Lens of Italo Calvino's Memo on "Lightness"**

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ABSTRACT

In 1985, the Italian postmodernist writer Italo Calvino composed a series of six lectures to be delivered at Harvard University. Although never delivered, the lectures were posthumously published under the title, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Calvino, 1988). The eponymous memos explore the following themes as they relate to the literature of the past and future: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency (left incomplete). Elsewhere, Calvino (1986) had much to say about the burgeoning relationship between computers and literature. But he probably could not have predicted that the game—rather than the novel or the poem—was to become the predominant cultural form by which fiction became computational. In light of the development of the game as a literary form in its own right, I propose that Calvino's six memos offer to the games criticism of today compelling insights from one of the last century's most forward-thinking writers. By way of example, I draw a connection between Calvino's first memo on "lightness" and a recent milestone of design, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017).

Breath of the Wild (*BotW*) is a game of lightness. Even its developers obliquely reference this quality; the game's marketing material defines it, not in the customary phrasing as an "open world game" but instead as a new brand of "open air adventure." The essential game mechanic that best defines the lightness in *BotW* is climbing. Link, the game's protagonist, can climb nearly any surface in the game. Then, from any summit, Link can leap and deploy his reusable paraglider to soften his descent to solid ground—or to another climbable surface. Over and over, players find themselves climbing something just to glide down the other side.

To initiate a climb in *BotW*, the player need only point Link in the direction of a wall and keep pressing forward. The adventurer will automatically latch onto the surface. Link cannot take any other action while climbing apart from moving or releasing his grip, but once embarked the player is free to guide him across the entire plane. There is only one limiting factor: a green "stamina" meter that constantly depletes. Although the player cannot simply shimmy from one end of the game to the other—certain obstacles remain impassable—the world is otherwise a climber's paradise.

In his memo, Calvino (1988) enumerates three primary forms of lightness:

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1. “a lightening of language by which meanings are carried by a verbal fabric that seems weightless” (p. 19)
2. “the narration of a train of thought [...] or any description involving a high degree of abstraction” (p. 20)
3. “a visual image of lightness that takes on symbolic value” (p. 20).

BotW exemplifies these aspects as they apply to games. Connecting them is an established convention of design and criticism that treats game mechanics as verbs. Miguel Sicart (2008), taking inspiration from Aki Järvinen, identifies mechanics that way—e.g. to “take cover” or to “repel.” Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark (2014) further codify the approach, defining a verb as “any rule that gives the player liberty to act within the rules of the game.” If we extend Calvino’s (1988) notion of a “lightening of language” to mechanical verbs, we can think of lightened, “weightless” verbs as those that are applied broadly, across the game world, in response to diverse challenges. The verb floats across the “verbal fabric” (Calvino, 1988) of the game’s mechanics. To “climb” in *BotW* becomes one such verb.

To Calvino’s second point, a “high degree of abstraction” is equally relevant to the lightening of the verb to “climb.” Contrary to other games involving climbing, the mechanics of *BotW* are highly abstracted from input to output, that is, from controller to action. As the cognitive semiotician Johan Blomberg (2018) writes, the relationship of the “two actions” of digital games—acting on a controller and in a game—is analogous to abstractions present in other kinds of semiotic systems of signifier and signified. The linguistic metaphor of the verb is expanded by this semiotic approach. In *BotW*, Link executes deft and exhausting maneuvers while the player who controls him needs to perform little more than a few basic directional inputs. Relative to other examples of climbing in games, it asks for a minimum of cognitive and manual effort on the part of its player. Nor does the applicability or expressivity of the verb suffer for it. Rather, this disjunction of complexity and simplicity points to effortless, “train-of-thought” (Calvino, 1988) abstraction.

Lastly, the “visual image of lightness that takes on symbolic value” (Calvino, 1988) is apparent. An examination of the lineage of climbing in games—that is, of the mechanic to “climb”—reveals that *BotW*, in the stark austerity of its central mechanic, remains opposed to recent trends. *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007) and *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007) were released as de facto “killer apps” for their console generation. Both games represented climbing with unprecedented attention to animated detail. Nonetheless, in both instances, the player found a clear distinction between the climbable and the un-climbable. Outside of the rare exception of a scripted combat encounter or emergent chase sequence, neither game makes dangerous the climb itself. Instead, attempts were made to model the intricacies of climbing chiefly by presenting the action as a puzzle to solve. The perennial question: not “How do I get up there?” but more often, “How do the developers want me to get up there?” *BotW* eschews this naturalistic mode for symbolic, visual abstraction. Link climbs where you want him to.

Here is the innovation of *Breath of the Wild*: the enlightened climb. The feeling of seeing something and wondering, as a player, not *if* you can climb it, but rather *if you* can climb it, is a function of lightness. By subtracting and abstracting out of the equation what were, primarily, exponents of the whims of designers rather than of players, the game succeeds in developing a world of maximalist interaction through minimalist systematization.

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