

Case study

My case study focuses on the large open-world region of "Tears of the Kingdom," the Great Sky Island. Due to the approximately two-hour gameplay time for the entire island area, I am unable to analyze all details comprehensively. Therefore, this case study will primarily concentrate on the design of path guidance in the levels.



2d map of the island

To analyze a level, I first need to understand its design purpose. As the first playable area of the game, the Island serves as the tutorial section for the entire game. The level aims to:

1. Teach the basic systems of the game, such as the 3Cs, climbing mechanics, and managing stamina.
2. Introduce and teach the special abilities unlocked by three shrines: Ultrahand, Fuse, and Ascend.
3. Showcase the game's storyline and background, including character relationships and player objectives.

The special abilities are a core mechanic of "Tears of the Kingdom," and the designers want to ensure players learn them effectively. They have employed explicit teaching methods by placing the unlockable abilities and teaching segments within the Shrine, which serves as a dedicated environment for focused training. Additionally, the Shrine's exterior design and special effects serve as "weenies" in the game, attracting players to explore. The paths leading to and from the Shrine create the level's main route, guiding players through the primary pathway of the level.



The Shrine has a very high level of recognition. Its effects can be identified from a distance, making it stand out

In contrast, the teaching content for the basic systems of the open-world gameplay, weapons, combat, cooking, and other systems are placed along these paths. This design not only avoids players feeling continuously tense but also serves to regulate player emotions. It ensures that players have opportunities to learn new content throughout their gameplay. The excellent implicit guidance makes players feel like they are making their own choices in selecting paths, avoiding any feelings of being "taught how to play the game."



Attracting player's route with the Shrine

In the previous discussion, it was mentioned that the Shrine and special abilities are the distinctive systems of "Tears of the Kingdom." Among the three special abilities on the Island, "Fuse" primarily affects the weapon system and has a higher correlation with the game's combat system. Its effectiveness during map exploration is relatively weak, as it only works in a few specific scenes. "Ascend" grants players the ability to move vertically, but its usage is limited by the environment's structure. If there are no platforms above or encountering special platforms, it becomes ineffective. "Ultrahand," on the other hand, is the main tool for map exploration. Its ability to interact with all objects provides players with numerous possibilities. It gives players a lot of positive feedback during map exploration, and Ultrahand is also highly related to the game's technology system, the Zonai Technology, in the game. Therefore, the priority for unlocking the Ultimate Hand ability is far higher than the other abilities.

In the players' path route, the Shrine for Ultrahand needs to be unlocked before the other two locations. Early unlocking of Ultrahand allows players to place some small skill points in the subsequent exploration process to improve players' proficiency with this skill, thereby increasing the possibility of exploring more areas.



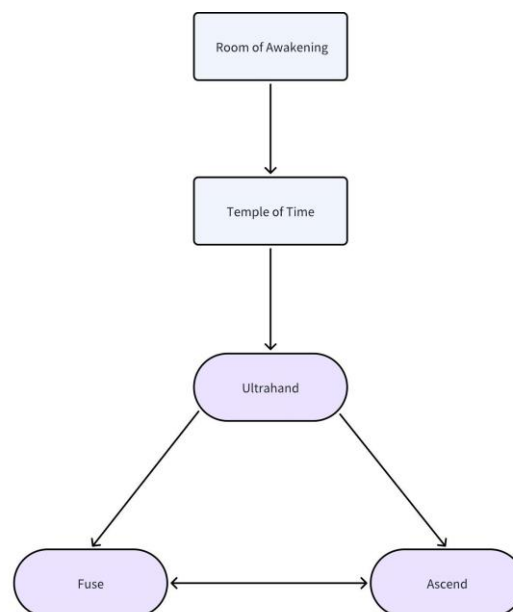
a place where player need to use ultrahand to stick logs together to build a bridge

Before introducing the special abilities, the level also provides motivation for player exploration through the "Temple of Time." The Temple of Time serves as a massive "weenie," a prominent landmark that catches the player's eye. When the player awakens in the Awakening Chamber and looks down, they can immediately see the Temple of Time, distinct from other structures. Furthermore, when the player encounters the first NPC, they repeatedly emphasize that Link needs to go to the Temple of Time. This helps players establish their goal early on and also foreshadows events to come.





This ensures that the first point players head towards is the Temple of Time. Upon arriving at the Temple of Time, NPCs begin to explain the background story, the player's ultimate goal, and the current objectives. However, if the player's first destination is directly the Ultrahand Shrine, they would have to learn more things, which could create more pressure. On the other hand, heading to the Temple of Time first allows players to relax a bit more, and they can establish their understanding of the game's objectives while watching the dialogue. Based on this analysis, we can outline the gameplay flow of this level in an open-world game

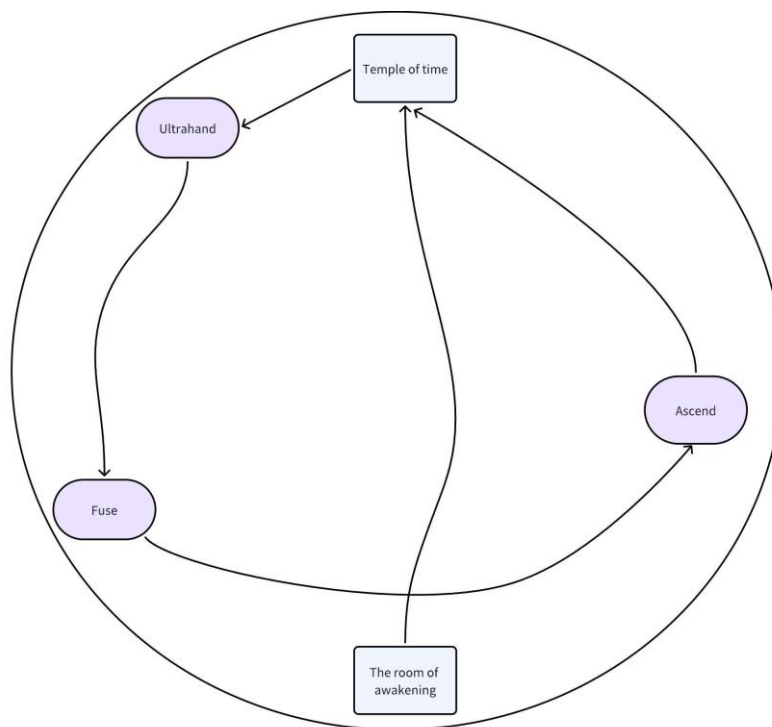


To showcase the open-world level's sense of area and freedom to players, and to allow them to explore the entire map as much as possible, the overall design of the level is a slightly circular shape (as shown in Figure 1). To make the most of the limited space, the designers placed key points at the edge of the map. This means that when players travel from one point

to another, they take longer paths, allowing them to explore more areas during their initial exploration. This approach helps avoid players repeatedly passing through already explored paths, preventing a sense of monotony.

In deciding the specific placement of these key points, the designers chose a path for players from The Room of Awakening to the Temple of Time that passes through the center of the circle, then continues to explore the three Shrines counterclockwise. The benefit of this layout is that the journey to the Temple of Time, the first major destination, is the longest. This allows for the introduction of various intricate systems along this journey. After obtaining the abilities, players can then freely explore the map, following the edges to avoid repeating paths and ensuring a comfortable exploration pace.

As a player, following this path feels very natural, avoids backtracking, and maintains a comfortable overall exploration flow.



After analyzing the pathways, let's further examine how the designers guided players to develop a perception of the surrounding environment, leading them onto the "golden path" designed for an open-world game. First, as previously mentioned, the "weenie," the Temple of Time, stands out as the tallest and most distinctive structure in the map, naturally drawing players' attention. Following this, NPCs remind players to head to the Temple of Time. This cultivates a conscious perception in players of special objects in the environment. Once players develop this perception, they invest more attention, giving them the motivation to explore that area, thus progressing the player's flow in the open world. Likewise, the design of

the Shrines is intentional. The massive stones, coupled with the eerie green dynamic lighting effects at the top, are meant to attract players' attention. Through these scene designs, the designers subtly teach players how to perceive and make decisions.

In addition to these "weenies," the pathways are also emphasized on the Island. When players first step out of The Room of Awakening, they can clearly perceive the pathways on the ground, guiding their movement along these paths.

By combining the prominent features of the "weenies" with the clear pathways, the designers effectively teach players how to perceive the environment and make decisions without explicit instructions. This subtle guidance encourages players to follow the designed path through the open world.



In an open-world game, players cannot only explore areas with existing paths; they also need to learn how to plan their own routes. When players arrive at the Temple of Time and are told to head to the nearest Ultrahand Shrine, they face their first test of path planning.

Players first notice that they are in a position much higher than the ground, and the Shrine is located at the top of a mountain. However, the path between the Temple of Time and the Shrine is on the ground level. So, the first problem players need to think about is how to safely reach the ground. They can see a set of broken stairs leading downwards (hinting that the player needs to descend), and next to the broken stairs are several structures with height differences. Players can quickly assess with their eyes that these height differences won't harm the character, indicating that it's safe to descend to the ground from there.

This setup serves as the first challenge for players to plan their path. By presenting the broken stairs and the safe-looking structures, the designers encourage players to observe their

surroundings and make informed decisions about the best route to take. This not only teaches players how to plan their path but also encourages them to think critically and engage with the environment in the game.



Next, players would proceed through a small grove of trees and climb up a set of stairs to reach the first Shrine. The height differences in the structures, the gaps in the middle of the grove, and the arrangement of grass on the ground all serve to guide players in that direction, forming an implicit path.



Based on the space constraints and the vast content within the levels, this case study focuses solely on the analysis of level design in "Tears of the Kingdom," specifically looking at the paths and guidance provided in the levels. "Tears of the Kingdom" is an exceptionally well-designed video game that, while granting players complete freedom of choice, manages to offer intricate level design that guides players towards the intended paths. Each path's pacing and exploration flow also ensure that players do not feel overly rushed.

In terms of level paths, the game achieves a balance where players can find a linear gameplay flow within the open world experience. Clear objectives and guiding elements, such as the Temple of Time serving as a massive "weenie" and the location of Shrines, allow players to progress naturally without experiencing the same content repeatedly. This design ensures that the overall gameplay remains structured and coherent, providing players with direction and continuity in their exploration.

Regarding level guidance, the game enhances players' environmental awareness through the use of "weenies." Iconic landmarks like the Temple of Time and the Shrines, as well as elements like elevation changes and gaps in the groves, are cleverly utilized to subtly direct players where to go. This implicit guidance allows players to make appropriate path-planning decisions without being explicitly told where to go. This approach increases immersion and enjoyment in the game's exploration.

In conclusion, "Tears of the Kingdom" showcases a perfect balance in level design: it grants players the freedom to explore the open world while accurately guiding them towards the intended paths. This design not only enhances the overall gaming experience, making it smooth and enjoyable, but also demonstrates the designers' profound skill and creativity in level design.