

A Musical Analysis of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*

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Abstract. As a seminal exemplar of open-world game design, *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* achieves profound immersive experiences through its music system, which integrates dynamic interactivity, environmental storytelling, and emotional guidance. This study examines its acoustic characteristics through three analytical dimensions: spatial integration, interactive mechanics, and narrative functionality. The research demonstrates that the game's music transcends conventional ambient utilities, functioning as an "invisible narrator" that actively contributes to world-building and gameplay mechanics. These findings propose an innovative paradigm for audio-visual interaction design in open-world gaming, redefining the role of diegetic music as a structural component of player agency and environmental semantics.

Keywords: Game Music Analysis; Music Analysis; Game Music.

1. Introduction

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, a sequel to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, is an open-world action-adventure game developed by Nintendo for the Switch platform. Set in Kingdom of Hyrule, the game follows the protagonist Link's first-person journey to locate the missing Princess Zelda. The game world comprises three distinct layers: sky islands, surface terrain, and subterranean depths. Each stratum features unique geographical characteristics, weather systems, enemy types, and resource distributions, with players freely traversing between layers via diverse pathways. The main storyline requires players to explore and unlock five elemental temples: the Fire Shrine within volcanic terrain, the Water Shrine, the Wind Shrine suspended in the sky, the Thunder Shrine in desert regions, and the Soul Shrine located underground. Concurrently, players may complete shrines, collect Spirit Orbs, and assist non-player characters (NPCs) encountered during exploration to obtain specialized abilities and equipment, thereby enhancing gameplay progression.

During gameplay, music serves as a critical nexus connecting diverse gameplay elements. Empirical studies indicate that a compelling soundtrack significantly enhances players' cognitive retention and positively correlates with elevated user engagement metrics [1]. In digital gaming ecosystems, audio design transcends mere atmospheric embellishment; it operates as a multimodal semiotic resource that amplifies artistic expression, propels narrative progression, and reinforces thematic coherence, ultimately fulfilling a pivotal role comparable to "the finishing touch that animates the dragon" in traditional artistry [2].

This paper investigates the musical genres, characteristics, and functional roles embedded within *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, analyzing how its acoustic architecture systematically coordinates ludo-narrative consonance across multilayered game spaces.

2. Analysis of Musical Characteristics of *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*

2.1 Characteristics of Context-Integrated Audio Design

The game employs dynamic audio triggering mechanisms that synchronize with spatial transitions. During the opening cinematic—which establishes the game's cataclysmic narrative through Princess Zelda's solemn narration—the soundtrack oscillates between a low-frequency rumble (simulating subterranean collapse), a high-frequency string crescendo (accompanying the crimson energy surge through Hyrule Castle), and absolute silence during Link's freefall, collectively framing *Tears of the*

Kingdom into a perilous tone. Player exploration initiates in the newly introduced Sky Islands biome. Upon completing preliminary objectives, the protagonist's descent triggers the game's symphonic leitmotif, *Tears of the King*, an epic orchestral composition featuring thematic alternations between *erhu* (Chinese fiddle), piccolo, and saxophone. The *erhu* and piccolo evoke historical gravitas, eliciting players' mnemonic engagement with the series' lore, while the saxophone's timbre amplifies narrative urgency. When the player leaps from the air and rushes into the lake, making the sound of splashing water, they enter the exploration world on the ground. The overall style of the ground exploration music is quiet and lively, mainly featuring piano and strings. The melody is relatively simple, with more blank space, creating a sense of vastness and freedom. When players enter the underground, the music becomes low and oppressive, presenting unknown dangers through irregular sound effects and slow rhythms. In *Tears of the Kingdom*, compared with *Breath of the Wild*, two new realms, the Empty Island World and the Underground world, have been added. The harp and bell in the Empty Island World have a light and elegant sound, symbolizing the unpolluted sacred realm. The underground world uses double basses and dissonant interval to create a sense of oppression, hinting at the spread of disaster. Through the rendering of different timbres, players can directly feel the imbalance of "Hyrule", stimulating their desire to explore new fields. In the game's side quests, players will approach the temples and ancient ruins of the three major Spaces. When players enter, the music will automatically switch to the theme related to the scene, and the sound effect design incorporates the environmental sounds of the scene.

2.2 Use Music for Environmental Narrative

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom continues the series' consistent 'environmental storytelling' style in its music design. By combining the climate, terrain, and cultural background of different regions, and through the clever use of instruments, melodies, and sound effects, it creates a highly immersive atmosphere. When exploring the world, players will encounter volcanoes, plains, frigid polar regions, and desert landscapes.

In Hyrule Field, when the weather is clear, the music primarily features soothing piano melodies, accompanied by violin and flute. The pieces are mainly in C major or G major, creating an atmosphere of tranquility and exploration, highlighting a sense of freedom and adventure. During stormy weather, the music shifts to minor keys or dissonant intervals, incorporating low-pitched strings and percussion. The tempo slows down, making the melodies somber, creating a melancholic, damp, gloomy, and slightly unsettling atmosphere, building tension and a sense of oppression. In the Lanayru Mountain snow region, the music is primarily in D minor or F minor, using strings, brass instruments, wind chimes, and incorporating the sounds of wind and raindrops to create a cold, magnificent, and slightly solemn atmosphere. In the Gerudo Desert, the music features Middle Eastern-inspired melodies primarily in E minor or F# minor, using ethnic percussion instruments (Oud, Darbuka, tambourine), stringed instruments (such as the sitar), and wind instruments (such as the flute). It has a strong rhythmic feel, creating an atmosphere of heat, mystery, and sandstorms. At night, the addition of vocal chanting depicts the desert region's tranquil, mysterious, and slightly dangerous atmosphere. In Goron City and the volcanic region, instruments such as taiko drums, metallic percussion (like anvil sound effects), and low-pitched horns are used. Repetitive short rhythmic motifs create the roaring sensation of a volcanic eruption. In the lava areas, brass instruments use dissonant intervals to create a sense of oppression, along with continuous low-frequency vibration sound effects. In the cooled lava formations, the sound of hollow wooden pipes being struck is added, slowing down the tempo, symbolizing that the player has entered a brief safe zone. In Rito Village and the snow-covered highlands, Nordic folk bagpipes, wooden flutes, and celestas play soaring melodic lines, with a rhythm as erratic as the wind. Decorative ornaments imitating birdsong create a lonely and ethereal atmosphere. During blizzards, the strings tremble in the high register, combined with wind sound samples and fragmented main melodies, creating a sense of disorientation that one experiences when encountering a blizzard. When the weather is clear, a flute solo is used, giving a clear and bright feeling. Dotted piano sounds, like scattered ice crystals, create the effect of sparkling ice crystals in the snow mountain region.

2.3 Music Has Strong Interactivity

Interactive game music refers to music that provides real-time feedback to the player's actions or serves as a cue for specific level interactions [3]. This type of music has a strong interactive relationship with the player. Music enhances immersion by creating atmosphere, increasing the player's emotional investment. It can also provide information cues and regulate the game's pacing.

Firstly, regarding enhancing the player's emotional investment, *Tears of the Kingdom* reuses some of the classic melodies from its predecessor, *Breath of the Wild* (such as the Hateno Village theme), evoking emotional resonance in returning players. To create a sense of epic scale and leave a lasting memory, the final battle features a multi-movement symphony (including the addition of choral vocals) that pushes emotions to a climax, reinforcing the player's sense of accomplishment and narrative closure, and further immersing them in the story.

Furthermore, when players explore new areas, the music becomes more mysterious, magnificent, or exotic, stimulating their desire for exploration and curiosity. When players first enter the Underground world, the dark and oppressive music immediately conveys the danger and unknown nature of this area. During exploration, players will engage in combat with regular enemies and the bosses of the five Shrines, triggering the corresponding battle music. The battle music changes according to the threat level of the enemy. When fighting regular enemies in the overworld, the music's tempo is relatively light and upbeat. As the player continuously defeats enemies, higher-pitched notes and intense percussion are added to the melody. For example, when the player enters a disadvantageous or low-health state, tense drumbeats and rapid strings heighten the sense of danger. Conversely, when the player successfully performs a dodge or uses a skill to counterattack, the music instantly incorporates soaring notes, emphasizing the feeling of victory. When battling the bosses in the five Shrines, the music's layers dynamically progress, while also incorporating elements related to the disaster afflicting the region and the element the region represents. For example, when attacking the Wind Shrine, as the player bounces layer by layer into the air and dives into the Wind Shrine, the music changes from the overworld exploration music accordingly. Based on the Wind Shrine's characteristics of strong winds and the cold temperature of the area, woodwind instruments are added to the melody, allowing players to associate the music with the sound of wind. The accompaniment uses a celesta, creating a sense of biting cold brought by snowflakes. In this piece, the theme music of Rito Village, the village being protected, is also varied, allowing players to have a stronger determination to protect the world under a certain musical theme cycle. Boss battles typically have different phases, and each phase, as well as the victory, has its corresponding music. This type of music reinforces the immediacy of action and feedback, enhancing the player's sense of control and mission.

Furthermore, in the game, music serves as a cue, hinting at the environment the player is about to enter or suggesting adjustments to their strategy. When players approach undiscovered secrets, subtle chimes or ascending scales are added to the background music, signaling "this area is worth exploring." When enemies are out of sight, short, staccato notes from low brass instruments are inserted into the music, with the frequency increasing as the distance closes. During puzzle-solving, the music provides feedback. Successful puzzle completion triggers clear chimes or ascending arpeggios, combined with visual effects to enhance the sense of accomplishment. Incorrect solutions are indicated by dissonant sounds (such as notes outside the diatonic scale) or metallic clangs, implying failure. When players unlock certain devices, electronic pulse sounds are integrated into the music, signaling "the device has responded." In other words, the music in *Tears of the Kingdom* functions as a clue and a guide. Quests rely on audio cues, such as the faint notes of hidden shrines or the calls of the Bubbulfrog. Music becomes a tool for exploration, for example, by using changes in musical rhythm (such as phase transitions in boss battles) to help players anticipate attack patterns, reducing reliance on visual cues.

Tears of the Kingdom introduces more player abilities, allowing players to build and create tools for exploring the world through skills like "Ultrahard" and "Recall." When players use "Ultrahard" for complex constructions, the background music gradually becomes more lively, incorporating

upbeat rhythms and intricate sound effects to emphasize the joy of creation. When players use the “Recall” ability, a clear and rapid sound effect can be distinctly heard, pausing briefly to create a sense of frozen time. This skill’s sound design enhances the player’s immersion and sense of freedom. It can be said that *Tears of the Kingdom*’s dynamic music system permeates the game, enriching the interaction with the player.

3. The Role of Music in Tears of the Kingdom

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, music plays a crucial role in driving the plot forward and portraying the emotions and personality traits of different characters.

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, music is not merely atmospheric; it’s a core element that propels the plot and enhances emotional expression. The opening theme music builds upon the classic melodies of *Breath of the Wild*, but incorporates a heavier orchestral arrangement and melancholic tonal shifts, hinting at the darker tone of this installment’s story. During the opening cinematic where Link falls from the sky, the music gradually transitions from tranquil to majestic, conveying a sense of global crisis in conjunction with the visuals. Variations on the main theme foreshadow the game’s inheritance and evolution. The recurring “Princess Zelda Motif” hidden within the musical melodies suggests the close connection between Princess Zelda and the main storyline.

When players explore Zonia ruins, they acquire Zonia civilization items, and ethereal female vocals intertwine with electronic sound effects, creating a sense of mystery and decay. The subtle mechanical sounds (such as the sound of gears turning) within the music directly echo the Zonia technology setting, and the lament of the lost city guides players to pay closer attention to the plot threads of the Zonia civilization.

When players unlock “Dragon’s Tears” memories, a solo piano version of the Zelda theme, “Zelda’s Lullaby,” is presented with a fragmented rhythm, combined with ambient sounds (such as rain and dragon roars) to enhance the tragic atmosphere. When the final memory reveals Zelda’s transformation into a dragon, the music abruptly changes to a symphonic version of “Light of Blessing,” pushing emotions to a climax. The change in music reveals the turning point in Zelda’s fate, becoming a key for players to understand the story.

The final showdown with Ganondorf is divided into three phases. In the first phase, intense drumbeats and choral vocals echo Ganondorf’s raging power. In the second phase, with Zelda’s assistance, the melody of “Zelda’s Lullaby” is integrated into the battle music, symbolizing the rekindling of hope. After defeating Ganondorf, the complete version of the “Zelda Theme” is played in a triumphant style, marking the end of the journey. The dynamically changing music directly reflects the narrative rhythm of the battle, enhancing the player’s emotional investment.

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, the synergy between Princess Zelda’s storyline and the music continues the series’ tradition of “emotional storytelling,” using music to enhance her character arc, plot twists, and the immersive quality of the world. Zelda’s thematic melody, while drawing from her piano theme in the first game, *Breath of the Wild* (such as in *Zelda’s Lament*), reflects her nobility and sense of duty as the Princess of Hyrule. At the same time, the melody carries a subtle undertone of sorrow, hinting at the pressures and struggles within her heart. In *Tears of the Kingdom*, variations in the musical arrangement reflect her transformation. For example, in the early stages of Zelda’s character arc, where she is torn between confusion and responsibility, the music features a piano solo accompanied by sustained string notes, primarily in a minor key, creating a melancholic tone. As Zelda progresses into her awakening and sacrificial phase, the same melody transitions into a full orchestral arrangement with choral vocals, symbolizing her acceptance of her mission and newfound strength. During key plot moments, such as Zelda’s time travel, the music employs sudden, brief silences followed by chimes and ethereal female vocals, evoking a sense of temporal detachment. Later, the music incorporates electronic elements inspired by the ancient Zonia civilization, highlighting the collision of sci-fi and mysticism. In the pivotal narrative sequence

depicting Princess Zelda's metamorphosis into the Light Dragon, the musical accompaniment employs a sophisticated compositional technique: the gradual intensification of string tremolos in a crescendo formation, culminating in a dramatic transition to unaccompanied choral voicing precisely synchronized with her transformative leap. This musical device bears significant intertextual resonance with the memorial sequence featuring Mipha in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. It simultaneously establishes a complex affective dialectic between the sacred and the tragic through its harmonic and timbral construction. In the dual narrative structure, Zelda and Link's musical themes intertwine in counterpoint (such as in the duet during cutscenes), symbolizing their fated bond. In the post-final battle ending sequence, Zelda's theme is fully reprised with piano and orchestra, interwoven with fragments of the classic *Zelda's Lullaby*, creating an emotional closure. *Tears of the Kingdom* uses variations of Zelda's theme, explosive musical moments at key plot points, and emotional environmental soundscapes to transform her struggles, sacrifices, and rebirth into a tangible emotional experience. The music is not merely an accompaniment but a key for players to understand Zelda's inner world—especially in the absence of extensive dialogue, the melody becomes her most direct language.

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, the music vividly paints the different scenes. Throughout the narrative, where Hyrule has been struck by a cataclysm, the overall music often carries a sense of tragic grandeur, using slow strings, piano, and choir to build atmosphere. The world's calamity defines the core musical themes, setting a tone of disaster. The main theme of *Breath of the Wild* has been transformed into a dark variation of "calamity". The original expansive and melodious main themes (such as the title screen BGM) in *Tears of the Kingdom* incorporate minor keys and dissonant chromatic descents, with heavy percussion mimicking the sounds of earthquakes and collapses, symbolizing the end of an era of peace. For example, in the Great Sky Island segment, the background music layers the original theme with low-register string performances, increasing the sense of oppressive exploration. The surface world is plagued by Gloom, which surges up from the newly added Depths. The music of the Depths and Gloom-infested areas is primarily ambient. When Gloom appears, it emits sharp, metallic sounds, and a persistent, low-frequency hum that intimidates and consumes players who venture there. As the concentration of Gloom increases, the background music during combat with Gloom-infected enemies dynamically mixes synthesizer distortion effects and warped audio fragments, on top of the combat melodies from *Breath of the Wild*. Atonal rhythmic pulses render the Gloom regions mysterious and dangerous.

After the cataclysmic upheaval, the world underwent significant transformations, which are reflected in the music and sound design. Central Hyrule, once a peaceful and harmonious utopia, suffered the disaster of the castle's ascension and the distortion of time and space. Ruins were destroyed, and new chasms and rifts appeared around the area. The overworld theme now incorporates intermittent brass warnings, constantly reminding the player of the region's tragic grandeur and their sense of duty. In Goron City, where volcanic eruptions were once regular, the volcano has ceased erupting, and magma activity is abnormal. Rock Octoroks frequently rampage and mutate. The original volcanic rumbling is now overlaid with industrial noises resembling machine malfunctions, echoing the malfunctioning and worker deaths in the Death Mountain region. The pristine Zora's Domain has been severely polluted, with some bridges collapsing and unknown phantom enemies appearing in the mist. The music, which was once beautifully ethereal with vocal chants, now features sudden silences, adding a sense of abrupt eeriness and instability, hinting at the corruption of the Divine Beast. In the Gerudo Desert, some oases have vanished, replaced by raging sandstorms. The background soundscape, which originally featured the howling of wind and sand, now incorporates deliberately out-of-tune and distorted ethnic instruments, such as the oud and ney, reflecting the game's theme of rebuilding after the calamity.

When encountering the five shrines altered by the cataclysm, the musical themes from *Breath of the Wild*, which primarily blend orchestral arrangements with ethnic instruments, are reorchestrated to create a richer and more layered experience. As players progress through gameplay or storylines, the music dynamically shifts from a subdued exploration melody to an intense variation when

activating mechanisms. In certain divine beast scenes, choral elements are introduced, heightening the player's sense of sacredness and the oppressive danger. When players take control of the divine beasts, the music incorporates a pronounced driving rhythm, amplifying the mechanical pulse of movement even more intensely than in *Breath of the Wild*.

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, the game plays different background music depending on the time of day (such as daytime, nighttime, morning, etc.) to create the corresponding atmosphere. When players explore during a clear day, the background music is typically dominated by woodwinds and harp, with a bright, relaxed tone that evokes a sense of adventure. During safe nighttime exploration, the background music often features slow-paced piano and strings, creating a soothing and serene ambiance, occasionally tinged with mystery. However, monsters are ever-present at night, and when enemies appear within the player's field of view, the background sound incorporates deep drum beats and wind noises, heightening the solemn anticipation of an impending battle. The world of exploration also undergoes subtle changes during dawn and dusk, with brief transitional melodies as day shifts to night or vice versa. These transitions often include gradual sound effects characteristic of the time change (such as bird songs or bell tolls), allowing players to discern the passage of time through shifts in the background music. During rain or thunderstorms, the world is shrouded in a thin mist, and the background music incorporates raindrop sounds. The piano melodies are partially overtaken by low rumbles and urgent strings, intensifying the tension of unknown dangers. In towns where residents live, daytime and nighttime also have distinct styles. In Kakariko Village, cheerful music accompanies the villagers' daytime activities, while a quiet lullaby-style tune plays during their nighttime rest. When players explore the underground world or caves, the sound of dripping water and echoes subtly changes with variations in light. During the Blood Moon event, enemies respawn and revive, accompanied by eerie, oppressive melodies paired with the Blood Moon animation. The red sky and haunting choral howls signal the world's reset and the revival of enemies, using both visual and auditory effects to warn players of the dangers brought by the world's refresh.

4. Summary

In *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, music serves as the "Invisible Narrator." The game's music is not merely a tool for atmosphere creation but also an integral component of storytelling, emotional conveyance, and gameplay mechanics.

The game's music not only enhances players' immersion but also reinforces their world-building experience. By utilizing ambient sound effects and dynamic music, the soundtrack varies significantly across different regions (such as grasslands, underground caves, or sky islands), synergizing with environmental audio (wind, flowing water) to deepen players' engagement with Hyrule's open world. It also incorporates thematic melodies played with diverse ethnic instruments (like harps and orchestral arrangements), subtly hinting at the cultural identities of distinct races within the game.

The game's music guides narrative progression and character development. Variations of the main theme melody permeate the storyline. In key plot moments, the serene piano piece of the Great Plateau contrasts with later battle sequences' intense symphonic arrangements, reflecting narrative tension through musical shifts (e.g., Princess Zelda's sacrifice or Link's awakening). When pivotal characters appear (such as the Sages or Ganondorf), their signature themes amplify personality traits and motivations. For example, Ganon's melodies are often accompanied by dissonant intervals, highlighting a sense of oppression.

Tears of the Kingdom is a meticulously designed "auditory interactive system," seamlessly integrating gameplay, narrative, and emotion. Composers Toru Minegishi and Yasuaki Iwata not only honor the series' legacy but also employ dynamic composition techniques to evolve music in real-time with player actions, acting as an "invisible director" of the gaming experience. By transforming music into a playable game system, it achieves:

Gameplay dimension: Transitioning from “listening to music” to “playing with music,” where melodies become organic components of puzzle-solving and combat.

Emotional dimension: Dynamic themes heighten player empathy toward characters and environments through adaptive harmonies.

Immersive dimension: Eliminating the disconnect between “background music” and the game world, ensuring every breath of Hyrule is sonically acknowledged.

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