To the Bone – an essay on atmosphere
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Atmosphere, an important component in any game. It helps shape the world we're immersed with, how to feel within it, whether it be fear or peace, contentedness or sadness. Sometimes in these magical worlds there's an interesting place between, a place I can't begin to easily describe. *That* is the kind of atmosphere I seek. The indescribable.

There are seldom locations in games where I find myself standing there, silently observing nature and the vast space surrounding me, and have this overwhelming sense of loneliness wash over me. My head, usually bounding with fleeting and busy thoughts, feels slowed and almost vacant in a moment of true immersion. I feel like I could linger there for an eternity, how vast the world around me can be – and how insignificant and lonely I feel, yet I feel entirely content to just appreciate the moment.

It's a sensation that's hard to describe for me, I suppose the best way I can think of stating it is a kind of resigned solitude. It's almost eerie, almost peaceful, and my single thought leaves me with a sorrow that is not fearful but instead profoundly hollow and reaches deep – *I am alone, but that is fine.*

It comes in many forms, from large and vast planes to something smaller and contained. Arriving to Majula, wandering the barren paths and conversing with Saulden the Crestfallen by the seaside and listening to his stories and words of hopelessness. Entering the Hunter's Dream only to linger and grow cold, yet feeling sheltered from the beasts surrounding. Sitting by a makeshift campfire in the Mojave at midnight, watching the stars and listening to the classic 50s songs on the radio until the sun rises. Climbing upon a tall, decrepit building in the City Ruins and watching the wild flora twisting and consuming the fallen, crumbling buildings of an earlier civilisation. Visiting the Astral Observatory as a young child and being fascinated by all the sights and sounds, only to be faced with the intimidating sight of the moon and watching it shed tears for the terrible fate the world is currently facing. Wandering the plane of Zanarkand, no longer the populated sprawling city one had come to know, but sacred ruins guarded by ghosts.

Their designs with splashes of colour, tones of earth, land overrun and reclaimed by nature to small and dreamlike spaces. All varied in some way – they may be places to explore and feel endless, or a comforting reprieve while others run in another direction, ominous and lacking life. The feelings between them carry across different lands and times, all locations that have stayed in my memory long after I've experienced the games.

But a feature that remains as strong as the design is the *sound* of it. Something that reflects between all these settings in particular is the pattern of music heavily shaping the atmosphere, from serene and distant sounds to echoes and slowed notes to something far more dreamlike and mystical. Many of these pieces have a wonder and beauty to them, some more slow and solemn. All give character to their separate worlds.

It's times like these where I can appreciate amazing game design for what it is, and how much it can emotionally and mentally impact us as we play. I've been on many journeys, but these are special places that will remain in my heart, and longer in my memory. These are the places when I think of thought-provoking atmosphere or seek inspiration, the kind of environments I lost myself in for so long and remained with me even as I write this today. I truly felt something to exist in these worlds for that little while.

I felt alone, and that was fine.

Games mentioned in this piece;

Dark Souls II (Majula), Hunter's Dream (Bloodborne), Fallout: New Vegas (Mojave Wasteland), Nier: Automata (City Ruins), the Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (Astral Observatory), Final Fantasy X (Zanarkand).