

Tears of the Koroks

Players of one of 2023's hottest video games are committing war crimes, according to recent coverage of the launch of Nintendo's latest *The Legend of Zelda* title, *Tears of the Kingdom*.¹ Alongside an adventurous main quest to save the eponymous Princess Zelda from mortal danger, periodic side stories introduce the playable character, Link, to various inhabitants of the kingdom of Hyrule – humanoid citizens, friendly critters, and vicious monsters alike. One such class of characters are the fairy-like Koroks, also known as Forest Spirits. Roughly the size of a small human child, these cuddly critters are rendered in-game as having spry wooden bodies, and wearing leaf-like masks of varying sizes and colors which express their various personalities.² Koroks are surfaced to the player in a scavenger-hunt like mechanic, often seeking Link's help to reunite with lost friends positioned nearby on the game's open map.

Players are encouraged to complete these tasks creatively via a popular new gameplay mechanic which sees Link use his magical abilities to craft vehicles, weapons, and more from raw materials and mysterious devices strewn about the game's vast open world. What might have been a collection of cute moments of good samaritanism has taken a dark turn, as gameplay footage of players using their abilities to maim and torture Koroks has gone viral on social media. Players have dragged the creatures with horses and flung them skyward attached to gliders and rockets. In a particularly infamous case, a player fashioned materials into machinery to facilitate a rotisserie spit to simulate roasting several Koroks at a time, while another took the time to stage a mock crucifixion for one of the woodland creatures.³

Dan Kois of Slate writes of these behaviors as “mostly harmless and delightful,” and much discussion online has rendered the scenes as amusing experimentation with a novel mechanic in a fairly low-stakes way.⁴ Players insist that Koroks are immortal in the game's lore, and tend to respawn on the nearest solid surface when dispatched by players. Nintendo has historically been known for its family-friendly franchises, including *Super Mario Brothers*, *Pokémon*, *Donkey Kong*, and the *Kirby* series. Even the company's foray into the ever-popular first person shooter genre, *Splatoon*, trades typical ammunition for paintballs in a kid-friendly cartoon environment. In such settings, many think, any potential negative consequence of simulated violence would be minimal if not mitigated completely, and this thinking seems to have made Nintendo's products sure-fire winners among the sector's youngest consumers.

Others, however, find players' treatment of the Koroks a disturbing use of an otherwise creative gaming mechanic, and worry that enabling gratuitous acts of violence—simulated and cartoonish as they may be—could have real consequences for young children.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything morally wrong with acts of cruelty toward video game characters who don't actually exist? Why or why not? Would it make a difference if the character treated cruelly was an avatar of another player? Why or why not?
2. Does the fact that *The Legend of Zelda* series is marketed to young children make a moral difference to your thinking about this issue? Why or why not?
3. Would it make a difference to your consideration if the Koroks were revealed to be the villains (and not just a class of side characters) of *The Legend of Zelda* series?

¹ IGN Daily Fix, “Zelda Players are Committing War Crimes On Koroks in Tears of the Kingdom”

² Zeldapedia, “Korok”

³ The Verge, “Zelda players turned Tears of the Kingdom into a Korok torture chamber”

⁴ Slate, “A Complete Guide to Sending Zelda's Cute Little Forest Spirits Straight to Hell”