

IMPROVING OVER PERFECTION



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Horizon Zero Dawn was an incredible surprise when it released last year. Coming from a developer who was only known for linear sci-fi first person shooter, Guerrilla's first attempt at an open world, third-person action RPG exceeded all of my expectations with a wonderfully crafted world, interesting characters, meaningful quests and a fascinating story that continually answered questions that were burning in the back of my mind. It was near-perfect.

The Frozen Wilds, the first and only expansion, is a welcome addition, especially within the same year. I just got my hands on it a week ago. It doesn't feel like a cash-in. It wasn't unveiled before the game's release. Its announcement came after fans have already scoured the world of Zero Dawn and craved for more adventures for Aloy to go on, and Guerrilla Games once again delivered.

Like many quests in the base game whose NPC's can differentiate between you beating the game or not, The Frozen Wilds is integrated in a way that you can access it either before, or after you complete the main story. However, with a suggested level of 30, you should at least get to that first before attempting to step into the new territory, as one of your first encounters will be with a new dino-mech, and it's no walk in the park, even if you now laugh in the face of a Thunderjaw or a Rockbreaker.

This is largely because the machines in the North have a new Daemon affliction, which means just like corrupted machines were more difficult than their standard counterparts, the Daemon mechs are even tougher. It's certainly a welcome change, especially for my level 48 Aloy who scoffs at any challenge before her. With these new Daemon machines, I once again had to be careful how I approach these combat situations, staying mindful of what kinds of weapons or ammunition I'm using.

The feeling of dread that was lost once you upgraded your gear and learned the machines' attack patterns, was back again. Now, whenever I'd see blue lights in the distance, signaling a horde of machines, with the chance of them being new to the Frozen Wilds expansion, I approached them with caution, sometimes even opting to take care of them later, when I knew I was better prepared.

Also new to this zone are daemon towers, new combat encounters that are similar to corrupted cones from the base game. Here, you not only have more difficult machines to contend with, you also have to deal with the daemon towers which keeps pulsing energy and gradually repair machines around them. Each tower location serves as a unique challenge, where you must figure out a way to disable the tower ASAP,

either while taking on the mechs as you make your way toward the tower, or try to sneak past them and disable it in stealth. These challenges are fun, and there's just enough of them where you'll want to do more once you've done one, but not too many so it doesn't become too repetitive. There's also a brand new Hunting Ground, which is devilishly difficult, with a gigantic bandit camp.

All of this is tied to the Banuk Tribe, only referenced in the main game. It's now the focus of the expansion, giving Aloy's inquisitive and good-natured mind even more to learn about and take part in.

Aloy's skill tree gets expanded with the Traveller branch, which provides some much needed post-game skills that wouldn't otherwise feel all that great if starting a new game. One branch of the skill tree is focused on your mount, allowing you to repair it if damaged, give you the ability to pick up resources while riding it or perform a powerful dismount attack. The other part of the skill tree is the game changer, allow-

ing you to carry more resources (a problem I continually have), or give you a better chance at receiving rare drops from animals, which will make upgrading your various pouches much easier.

There's a slew of new gear that you can get, whether it's different armor that all have various specialisations or all new weapons that act like rifles, allowing you to shoot electrified projectiles to stun enemies or to unleash a stream of fire with a flamethrower. However, even with these new weapons, I still found myself going back to my trusty bows. And even though I already possessed the Shield Weaver armour from the base game, I still found myself switching to some of the new armour sets, like the new stealth one, with mods attached that make me near invisible to enemies.

These new pieces of gear and weapons are all tied to Bluegleam, The Frozen Wild's new collectible that also acts as the expansion's currency. You'll earn Bluegleam by completing story and side quests, but there is also a slew of them you'll be able to find in the wild.

It's no secret that Horizon Zero Dawn was a looker, even without playing on a PS4 Pro back when it was first released. However, with a 4K TV and HDR, it became a showcase for Sony. The Frozen Wilds, somehow, looks even better. Guerrilla Games made their facial animations and motion capture more realistic and sprinkled some more interesting camera angles so you're not constantly going from one static face shot to another static face shot. I was impressed when I first talked to one of the Frozen Wilds quest-givers, not remembering how they looked in the base game until I traveled back and initiated a conversation there. It's not game changing by any means, but the subtle tweaks are noticeable.

The new area certainly steals the show. Upon entering it for the first time, seeing the dark red sky, and the sparkle of the white snow that crunched beneath each of my footsteps, that first impression was everything, and it just continued the further I delved. If the new area's goal was to make me feel cold, it certainly succeeded.

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