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Dark Souls and Existentialism: How community defines a genre

Released in 2011 by developers FromSoftware, *Dark Souls* is perhaps one of the most influential video games in the past decade. Defined by its unorthodox narratives, brutal combat systems and intricately designed environments, the game went on to spawn what is now known as the “souls-like” subgenre of video games¹. However, what sets *Dark Souls* apart even from its brand of souls borne is its grappling with the existentialist nature of existence through its interactive game world. Unlike traditional fantasy stories of triumph and success, *Dark Souls* embodies the underlying themes of futility. Even within similar games from Fromsoft, *Dark Souls* possesses a distinctly subversive and melancholic aesthetic that permeates its environment. As the player continually progresses through the dying world of Lordram, the main setting of the game, they will slowly uncover the underlying meaninglessness of their journey. Despite the apparent grimness of the themes, paradoxically, the game has grown a cult following and continues to still be a massive influence on video game culture. Instead of the deeply nihilistic, the game through its multiplayer elements creates an empowering experience by forging solidarity between players through its difficult gameplay. In active defiance of the very nature of the setting, players are unified in their struggles against the uncaring harsh violence of Lordram.

Outside of the game, the narrative richness of the world and its ambiguous nature creates a

¹ Souls-like has become almost synonymous with environmental storytelling and high levels of difficulty within the gaming fandom. While the first soulslike is FromSoftware's previous title *Demon Souls* (2009), *Dark Souls*, its spiritual successor, is what laid down the heart of what has become synonymous with the subgenre. Within the fandom, soulslike developed by FromSoftware are dubbed soulsborne games.

strong fascination within players that grow to budding communities unified on their interest in uncovering the secrets of the world. While *Dark Souls* at its core is about the emptiness of the world and the loneliness found within that realization, this incompleteness is what unifies players together as fans of the franchise and elevates the experience.²

The story of *Dark Souls* is set within the nihilist game world of Lordram, and its narrative highlights the meaninglessness of player intervention. At the beginning of time the “Gods”, in particular the Lord of Sunlight, Gwyn, sparked the Age of Fire by slaying the everlasting Dragons, the original rulers of the world. Gwyn and his fellow Gods had initially ignited this new age to stave off the stagnation of the Dragons who sat in nonexistence. In a twist of irony, however, Lordram now wallows in a similar stagnation due to Gwyn’s obsessions with prolonging his Age of Fire. Due to this stagnation the vast majority of humans in Lordran have been blighted with the Undead Curse, and thus are not allowed the release of death. The goal of the “Chosen Undead” in this world is to continue Gwyn’s legacy and free humanity from this curse or at least that is what the game wants the player to think. As the player progresses deep into the game they will likely discover that there are in fact two forces that struggle over the fate of the world - ones that wish to maintain the Age of Fire, and the ones that wish for its cessation by ushering the Age of Dark, or the Age of Humanity. The realization of the struggles comes late within the player experience and is what defines the experience. This subversive twist inverts the usual fantasy triumph of good over evil, as the player character reconciles with the much more nuanced nature of the world than they were initially led to believe. In passing dialogue it is heavily implied that Gwyn’s attempt at resisting nature has been the very cause of the decay and

² The lore, meaning the history and background of the games’ universe continues to be a subject of fascination to fans of the soulsborne genre with YouTube videos from channels such as VaatiVidya garnering millions of views.

destruction that has beset Lordram³. Thus the player characters' initial goals become twisted and their role in the world is invariably questioned. With this realization at hand, the player character is given two choices at the end of their journey: either ignite the flame and die with it or let the flame die and instead become the Lord of a new age. While the game seems to imply that the Age of Dark will bring in a more prosperous future, the strength they acquire ultimately at the end of their journey and how they will utilize it remains ambiguous at best. While the game would seem to imply that Lordram will head towards a more prosperous future, in the context of the narrative, much like that of the Age of Fire, the one for humanity too will end. as they inherently are unable to. Whether the player chooses to ignite the flame or to become the Lord of a new world, the outcome inevitably leads to the same conclusion. The players' choice thus is meaningless and amoral, as all will fall to ruin in eventuality. Aside from its narrative, many of the games' mechanics seem to suggest to the player a world completely devoid of existential value.

Within the world of *Dark Souls*, traditionally metaphysical concepts such as the soul are not assigned any intrinsic spiritual value but instead are merely commodities in the player's quest. Souls and humanity exist as a modicum to purely be exchanged for armaments or to enhance the player character and are obtained through slaying enemies. Upon death the player will drop all their souls and humanity on the ground in a puddle of blood and emerald haze. Despite souls being described as "the source of all life" by the game they are physical concepts used only for their transactional value, with them acting as the main source of "experience" in which the player uses to level up. That is to say that the player morbidly uses the souls of others

³ Gwyn serves as the final boss of the game, compared to the triumphant and godly beings the player faced before the Lord of Sunlight, now titled Lord of Cinder is a hollow broken man. The ease of the boss fight and the somber soundtrack serve as the ultimate anticlimax for a figure that has been built up throughout the entire game as the unequivocal ruler of the world.

they have slain to further progress their own power. Humanity, a rarer resource than souls, on a similarly macabre note can be obtained from slaying the interactable NPC and boss characters within the game. Humanity is utilized to stave off the undead curse, as when players die they will hollow, with many of the enemies that the player encounters being hollows themselves.

Hollowing is a process that naturally occurs within the game and occurs when the undead, humans, lose sight of themselves. The undead who are hollow are condemned to an eternally voidless and violent existence, with all undead being eventually doomed to such a fate. As such, players are encouraged to kill and farm for more humanity with the perks that being “human” brings. In fact, when players are “human”, having used their humanity to reverse the hollowing process, they may be invaded in game by other undead looking to steal their humanity for themselves. To be alive in this game is a violent affair with players constantly staving off hordes of the hollowed, with the majority of friendly NPCs, non-playable characters, that the player befriends falling to the process in eventuality. Within the game some NPCs can be “saved”, however in doing so the player will essentially force the NPC to never seek out their goals, and wallow in despair as triggering their quest for purpose is what causes them to hollow in the first place⁴.

The player’s decisions to help or abandon such NPCs, however, are not inherently judged by the game as in Lordran, there exists no inherent morality so to speak of . The player is given the option to kill any character they desire, with no protections for NPCs characters. Unlike in traditional RPG, role-playing games, NPCs, can and will be harmed if the player chooses to do so. In fact, upon death many of these NPC characters drop favorable items for the character,

⁴ There exists an NPC called Laurentius within the game that is one of the few in-game characters that shows genuine kinship and compassion to the player. Throughout the game the player will learn the secrets of pyromancy from the mage and by helping him Laurentius will consider you a close friend. Ultimately, at the end of his questline the player will encounter a delirious and hostile Laurentius who, unable to traverse the deadly Great Swamp, the area that he has begged you to find for him, has succumbed to the effects of hollowing.

which might even be alluring in the context of the unforgiving setting. Killing an NPC may remove the option to progress their quest or access their merchant shop, so there still remains a small deterrence to the act. However, in the wider context the game does not judge you, as there exists no solid karma system within the game. Players are not inherently “judged” for their actions and the world continues to move on as it did before with or without said NPC. Yes, hitting an NPC will make them aggressive towards the player character, but this does not mean that the game overall is telling the player to stop. A player can certainly find emotional attachment and kinship with the NPC characters and can form bonds with them, though ultimately the relationships are meaningless in the wider context, as they can kill them whenever they want with little to no consequence.

So why even bother at all in this existentialist nightmare world? Why even care about the game when its message is effectively “you do not matter?”

In what is now one of the foundational texts on absurdist ideology, Camus in his “The Myth of Sisyphus”, argued that the absurd condition arises from the inherent human need for true clarity within the world – that is a world bereft of any one true morality and knowledge. The absurd arises from the effective desires of man for understanding confronted with the disappointment of reality. For him, the realization of this condition begs but only one question: is suicide the only path for the actualized? No. On the contrary, instead of suicide, Camus argues that to reconcile with this truth and to constantly be vigilant of it is the path to fulfillment. One must revolt against the meaninglessness of the world. In recognizing and fulfilling the absurd, the absurd hero then is in defiance of the irrationality of the world – thus understanding their limit and within those boundaries striving to be. In the context of *Dark Souls*, the player may

find that the gaps in their knowledge of such a world is a detriment but a realization of the fact that incompleteness within itself is enjoyment.

In such a ceaselessly meaningless world players thus learn to appreciate the bounds of their knowledge and thrive within these boundaries. The unknowable nature of the world itself and the “tragedy” of the Dark Souls is not a tragedy in fact, but an experience to be savored. In her article “Enjoying the Uncertainty”. How Dark Souls Performs Incompleteness Through Narrative, Level Design and Gameplay”, Andriano Angelo Maria, an MA philosophy student at the University of Milan, posits that “we should interpret Dark Souls as a work designing the enjoyment of uncertainty”, as only in that context are we able to relinquish our notions of absolute control over the game itself. (Andriano) Andriano suggests that the game itself is to be interpreted through the Zen tradition, such that the individual detaches themselves from the nature of ambition. That is to say that when players relinquish their inherent ambitions within the ambiguous and incomplete nature of the game world, they are able to reflect on that and thus overcome the illusion of absolute control. While obviously this differs slightly from the absurd and the acceptance of an individuals’ place within the world, I nonetheless believe that this framework provides relevance to the interpretation of the game. Players themselves are not meant to hold absolute control over the forces of the game world as the game tells them time and time again, however the game itself still rewards player mastery and understanding even if their desire for strength is folly at its height. There is thus satisfaction to be found in that regardless of where it leads the player; the overcoming of a particularly difficult area; the defeat of a powerful foe or the quest for discovery within the world. Ignorance in the game world of *Dark Souls*, thus is a reward as it leads to the delight of discovery, as the very nature of the game design is built around mystery and secrets.

In the article “No Mastery Without Mystery: *Dark Souls* and the Ludic Sublime”, Daniel Vella, a lecturer Institute of Digital Games at the University of Malta who specializes in phenomenology in video games, suggests that the world of *Dark Souls* itself is built upon the appreciation of mystery. Vella states that the “topography of Lordran is structured in such a way as to constantly reveal to the player’s gaze areas for possible exploration that she cannot yet reach”. (Vella) Among many other things that spark within the player a wondrous sense of the sublime, the level design is perhaps the most important as it illustrates the scope of the game world⁵. Within Lordran players are constantly incentivized to explore as many things do not seem as they are. A succinct example of this would be the various shortcuts found throughout the game. Bonfires, the hub in which players respawn to, are scarcely found within the game world and as such players are highly incentivized to find different routes and passages within the game. Lordran’s world is a labyrinthian maze that winds up and down, however one thing remains consistent and that is its consistent interconnectivity. It is within this connectedness that players will continually discover connections and secrets within the game world. As the player is constantly assailed with new routes they will come to appreciate the mysteries that lurk within the world and are constantly on alert for new discoveries. The level design is but one example within the world, and the intricate nature of the world still lends itself to new discoveries of secret dialogues even towards veteran players. For example, one of the bosses, the dragon Kalameet in the game, initially may seem unbeatable without the aid of another character called Gough, however with enough patience the player is able to slay the black dragon with just arrows alone. In doing so they will be rewarded with bonus dialogue from Gough who praises

⁵ *Dark Souls* level design is perhaps its most remarkable achievement. Due to the nature of its interconnectedness players can almost go anywhere at any time. This makes the game immaculately replayable, as there is an infinite amount of variety in which the player can choose to progress. If they choose to do so, players can become overpowered early on through obtaining several late-game items early on.

them for their strength⁶. Even if these things are even just the slightest new discovery is enough to arouse within me a sense of fulfillment. The player learns to live with the mystery to thrive in the ambiguity of it, and even rarely is able to discover something new. “Even after extended play has resulted in mastery of the game, there remains at least an opening for the possibility of surprise and further revelation.”

In the revolt and struggles against the ceaselessly uncaring forces of Lordram that players find strength. Strength that not only is founded upon the satisfaction of the freedoms observed from the absurdist, free from the restrictions of hope for a better future, but from that of kinship found with the other players who toil in the uncaring universe. This strong sense of unified revolt is found within the game’s multiplayer mechanics.

Dark Souls for the most part is a single-player experience, with there being no co-op, meaning there are no cooperative player experiences. Instead within the game are mechanics that only appear when the player is connected to an online network that will aid the player in their journey through Lordram. The ways players interact with others within this game world is through what Marco Cariacelo, Associate Professor of English and literary theory at Ghent University, describes as asynchronous multiplayer. (ch. 4) Players do not interact with each other concurrently within the online system but instead they are either indirectly or directly connected to other worlds through the several multiplayer mechanics. Bloodstains are puddles of blood that, if interacted with, will show the player the last few moments of other players' actions before their death. In effect, these bloodstains will indicate to the player character to express caution in specific areas and to prepare themselves for a particularly difficult encounter. Phantoms are lingering spirits of other players that sometimes will pass through the world and cannot be

⁶ The player is discouraged from facing Kalameet head on as there is no traditional boss bar when the player faces the dragon without the aid of Gough. If the player enlists the services of Gough, the giant will fire an arrow that pierces the beast’s wings, which allows the player to face it on the ground as a traditional boss fight.

interacted with. These phantoms will maneuver much like the player and manifest themselves randomly around the game world as ephemeral representations of other players' gameplay. These Phantoms make the players feel as though the world they traverse in is lived and full of others just like themselves who simply are fighting just as they are. A glimpse of another player might just be the motivation an unseemingly undead needs to overcome their obstacles. Outside of Phantoms, players can also encounter the remnants of other players through statues found within specific areas: these statues are real snapshots of actual players who have been attacked and turned to stone by an enemy called the Basilisk⁷. Thus, similarly to the bloodstains, whenever a player encounters a large gathering of statues they can be sure to proceed with caution. One user on r/Dark Souls, a popular subreddit dedicated to the game states “The journey of an Undead is long and treacherous. It's reassuring to see glimpses of other bearers of the curse.” Additionally, players can also encounter shared “events” that indicate to them other players’ progress within the game. For example, in the main game players must ring two Bells of Awakening to progress further within the story, as such whenever a player rings a bell others in their network too may be able to hear its resounding echoes in their world⁸. The reverberations of the bell signifies victory, which is intended to stimulate the players’ drive to push on. All together these mechanics allow the many concurrent game worlds of each player to coalesce and create within each player a sense of collective despite the grim darkness of Lordram. When a player engages in online mode they know they are not alone as these mechanics indicate to the Undead that there are many much like them on a similar path. As Carriaclo puts it they “evoke a long history of struggles within the game’s difficulty”. (ch. 4)

⁷ Basilisks will curse the player and reduce their hit points. When players die to these enemies they turn to stone and their statue will be taken in the game’s servers, which will be utilized in other player’s worlds.

⁸ The Bells of Awakening are a core part of the first half of the game. To ring these bells the player must traverse an arduous journey and slay two powerful bosses.

Outside of the passive, the game also has more active ways in which the player can aid others or even just give them a sense of enjoyment along the way. In online mode, players are able to utilize the Orange Guidance Soapstone to write, rate and view messages. These messages appear in the form of esoteric orange glowing passages scattered throughout the game world and are limited by a specific list of key words along with the games' syntax. Players use several base template phrases, such as "Be Wary of [...]", and are able to fill in blanks with specific words from the list. Within this system players are not able to directly tell others what to do but instead slightly nudge their fellow Undead on the correct path. These small little messages may not mean much initially but in the context of a lonely single-player experience, they can have a resounding effect on the player. Messages can come in the form of useless tips within the game such as enemy weaknesses or indications of illusionary walls that reveal hidden paths. They can also come in the form of appreciation for the game with ones simply reading "Gorgeous View" with a high appraisal rating. Similarly, players may find messages saying "I did it!" after a tough boss battle. These sorts of messages suggest a shared appreciation and struggle in the game, which echoes to the player that their experience is not singular, but communal. While at first glance this sort of constrained communication, as Carriaclo describes it, may seem lacking, on closer inspection it actually allows the player to reach an even larger audience. Carriaclo states that such constraints allow for "full interoperability of the messages across languages", as an English players' message would still appear similar when translated into German. (ch. 4) The rating system itself acts as a self-moderated mechanic, and from my experience with it, many of the helpful messages that lead players to secret areas are usually the most highly appraised⁹. Additionally, this sort of restrictive system limits the amount of toxicity present within the game, and forces all players to act more imaginatively to convey their intentions through messages.

⁹ Messages preceding mimics, an enemy that disguises itself as a reward, are also commonly highly rated.

Owing to these restrictions many creative players have added humorous comments within the game. From the crass “but hole” to the more complex jokes such as “Try Rolling ” in front of a deathly high ledge, these messages provide a surprisingly nonsensical relief from the games’ otherwise serious monotony. Just a minor message can make the experience much more wholesome, as it gives the player a direct, albeit constrained, tether to the community.

Outside of the game sphere the inherent ambiguity and difficulty within the game sparks within players a many strong collaborative effort. This tends to lead many players to collaborative online efforts. Anderson Larell, Assistant Professor of Digital Media Arts at the University of Saint Thomas, describes the engagement between players outside of the game as “extra ludic elements”. In that players’ narrative experiences with the game and the stories they tell outside of the virtual world, affect their understanding of not only the game but also “what it means to belong in the community”.(sec. 4.5) As *Dark Souls* itself does very little in the way of explanation or “hand-holding” for the player as fans would put it, the players find themselves drawn to the online sphere for information on certain subjects. The difficulty of the game for example would lead many to converse and find themselves gravitating towards guides and tutorials. The difficulty of the game too would lead individuals to seek out assistance in the form of detailed explanations for certain questlines, as without even so much as an indication any NPC questline may suddenly end abruptly.

The purposeful ambiguity of the game also forms within the fandom a large appreciation for the lore aspects of the world. Lore-building is oftentimes a collaborative affair as due to the nature of the games’ ambiguity and withholding of information from the player, it is a project that develops over time. Players find themselves in discussion and revelation of details within the story, as their discoveries mean not only a relatively unified appreciation for the game but also

the building of something larger than themselves. Popular content creator, VaatiVidya, embodies this strong collaborative effort and is evocative of the larger fan project of conquering the story of the soulsborne. His videos, in short, put out high-quality videos that go in depth about the implications of many of the item descriptions within the game, weaving the many disparate stories together. On many of his videos, within the comment section is a varied discussion on the many subjects of lore within the game. Vaati leaves his videos up to viewer interpretation, and does not present his theories as solid fact with his description advising viewers to “be critical”, as such the comment sections are diverse in their range of views. Oftentimes, one may see someone pointing out a detail that Vaati has missed. In fact, we can see the very evolution of understanding from fans with new discoveries within the game through Vaati’s evolution of videos, with his original Prepare to Cry series of Dark Souls Lore, even getting updated with his Prepare to Cry Remastered videos. Perhaps the biggest testament to Vaati’s work is his book “Souls Arts: Presented by Vaati Vidya”, a book that collects speculative art of the many mentioned but unseen worlds of *Dark Souls*. Within the game many places such as Carim, are mentioned through descriptions and described by NPCs that hail from such lands. Information given to the player is scarcely given, esoteric and fragmentary yet despite this obstacle, in Souls Arts, Vaati presents us with impeccably fan-submitted illustrations that imagine a world outside of Lordran. Each illustration is a shrine to not only the creativity of their artists but also their love for the souls world. From the jolly lands of Catarina to the unspoiled ruins of New Londo the book is a homage to the talented artists and writers that crafted the world of Lordran¹⁰. In the gaming world that many may consider toxic, this sort of constructive dialogue between players is

¹⁰ Catarina’s description, “ a land known for their festivity, drinks and the joviality of its people”, is found in the character creation menu within the “Jubilant Catarina” face. New Londo, is found within the game as a ruined state, which was initially a prosperous city ruled by the Four Kings, a boss in the game, who fell to darkness.

rare. The unknown nature of *Dark Souls* spurs within the community a creative itch for the immaculately crafted world, as in Lordran, beauty is found in the reality of futility.

In the shared struggle between players and the game world we may find friendship along our journey. Instead of the crushing isolation of individuals, the game world and the one outside of that welcomes players to create value in relationships. Existentialist Martin Buber, in his seminal essay on existence, describes this experience of choosing to embrace kinship as one of grace. By instead of looking at others as simply an object to proceed with your goals choosing to reveal vulnerability and ones' naked self. Buber calls this the "I-You" relationship, and to him it is an awakening of the individual to the fact that they are not, in fact, insular entities but ones that are always living with connections to those around them. The realization of meaninglessness of reality is not an actualization that isolates, but rather is one that connects. (Kevin) One must realize that they much like others toil in the same world, with the same vulnerabilities and to lay ourselves bare before one another as a collective is to embrace the human condition. The world of *Dark Souls*, thus is then a small encapsulation of this idea, as the players' tribulation against the constant violence of Lordran, they may find solace in their shared hardships with their souls laid bare to other players. Regardless of a better future for the world they are fighting for, what matters is now and the bonds they may form along the way.

In our tumultuous times with the impending threats of global warming and the grim predictions of our future perhaps the nature of *Dark Souls* can offer solace to these anxieties towards the future. Even within the bowels of the cruel nihilistic nightmare that is Lordran, kindred spirits gather and find connection with another. For the game tells us that what matters is not the future, but the now and the moment in which we live. Like Sisyphus, humanity and the "Undead" within the game toil relentlessly to roll a boulder up a hill they know they cannot ever

reach, however to acknowledge the truth is to reject and lorde over it. *Dark Souls* not only embodies this on a personal level with the player, it also created a shared experience among many players and within this shared openness between others that a meaningful community is born. To understand that our current state is meaningless, to relinquish our visions for the future and to connect in our shared vulnerabilities is what the game reminds us to do. One must not despair at the grimness of the future, but instead revolt against the disparity and much like the undead of *Dark Souls* find happiness within our shared pains. To quote Camus, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

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