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# ABSTRACT

This work aims to analyze the game *Dark Souls III*, created by Hidetaka Miyazaki. Miyazaki is best known for his work with the game development company FromSoftware. He gained widespread recognition for his influential role in creating challenging and atmospheric action Role-Playing Games (RPG). Miyazaki is particularly celebrated for his involvement in the *Souls* series, including *Demon's Souls, Dark Souls, Bloodborne, and Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. His games are known for their punishing difficulty, intricate level design, and rich lore, contributing significantly to the evolution of the action RPG genre. It is essential to remark that this work's main purpose is to explore some of the elements in the third entry of the series, *Dark Souls III*, which makes use of Environmental Storytelling as described by Mike Shepard (2014), which when employed correctly allow for foregoing the need to rely solely on dialogue or explicit narration; rather focusing on utilizing visual cues, ambiance, props, architecture, and other elements within the environment to convey information, evoke emotions, and immerse the audience in the narrative. Environmental storytelling allows creators to convey information in a more indirect and immersive manner, engaging the audience's curiosity and encouraging them to actively participate in interpreting the narrative. It can add depth and richness to a story by creating a more believable and immersive world for the audience to explore. Using the environment as the narrator itself. A major element is evoked when overlooking the game's narrative: goth, which will be analyzed in light of the theories like CARTWRIGHT (2005), LUCKHARDT (2020), CALLEJA (2011), among others. Thus, this work explores various theoretical aspects, delving deep into the writing, presentation, gameplay aspects and most importantly, the use of environmental storytelling in *Dark Souls III*.

**Key words:** Games; Narrative Environment; Dark Souls.

# RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar o jogo *Dark Souls III*, criado por Hidetaka Miyazaki. Miyazaki é mais conhecido por seu trabalho com a empresa de desenvolvimento de jogos FromSoftware. Ele ganhou amplo reconhecimento por seu papel influente na criação de jogos de *role playing* (RPG) de ação desafiadores e atmosféricos. Miyazaki é particularmente celebrado por seu envolvimento na série *Souls*, incluindo *Demon's Souls, Dark Souls, Bloodborne e Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. Seus jogos são conhecidos por sua alta dificuldade, designs de níveis complexos e atmosféricos, contribuindo significativamente para a evolução do gênero RPG de ação. É fundamental ressaltar que o objetivo principal deste trabalho é explorar alguns dos elementos do terceiro capítulo da série, *Dark Souls III*, que faz uso do *Environmental Storytelling* descrito por Mike Shepard (2014), que quando empregado corretamente permite o abandono do uso de apenas o diálogo ou a narração explícita; em vez disso, concentrando-se na utilização de auxílios visuais, ambientes, itens de cenário, arquitetura e outros elementos do ambiente para transmitir informações, evocar emoções e envolver o público na narrativa. A narrativa ambiental permite que os criadores transmitam informações de uma forma mais indireta e imersiva, despertando a curiosidade do público e incentivando-o a participar ativamente na interpretação da narrativa. Podendo adicionar profundidade e riqueza a uma história, criando um mundo mais crível e envolvente para o público explorar. Usando o ambiente como o próprio narrador. Um elemento importante é evocado quando se observa a narrativa do jogo: o gótico, que será analisado à luz de teorias como CARTWRIGHT (2005), LUCKHARDT (2020), CALLEJA (2011), entre outras. Assim, este trabalho explora vários aspectos teóricos, aprofundando-se na escrita, apresentação, aspectos de jogabilidade e, mais importante, no uso da narrativa ambiental em *Dark Souls III*.

**Palavras-chave:** Jogos, Narrativa ambiente, *Dark Souls*

# SUMMARY

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Born on November 17, 1974, Hidetaka Miyazaki is best known for his work with the game development company FromSoftware. He gained widespread recognition and critical acclaim for his influential role in creating challenging and atmospheric action Role-Playing Games (RPG). Miyazaki is particularly celebrated for his involvement in the *Souls* series, including *Demon's Souls, Dark Souls, Dark Souls II, Dark Souls III, Bloodborne, Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice,* and most recently, *Elden Ring*. His games are known for their punishing difficulty, intricate level design, outstanding atmosphere and rich lore, contributing significantly to the evolution of the action RPG genre. Miyazaki's unique approach to game design has earned him acclaim for his ability to create immersive and engaging gaming experiences.

From an early age Miyazaki would have his fair share of encounters with fantasy and science fiction books, which he frequently borrowed from his local library, including English language that he did not fully understand, allowing his imagination to fill in the blanks by using the accompanying illustrations. He would later cite that as a major influence on his design philosophy, now having players and readers be given just enough information so that his view would come to fruition, but leaving just enough out that could be filled by the consumer.

His first publication was *Armored Core: Last Raven* in 2005, already working for FromSoftware, receiving mixed and average reviews at the time; a trend that would continue for his next few productions. Working with an already established franchise; which has sold more than 3.5 million copies worldwide, the original *Armored Core: Last Raven* for PlayStation 2 has been a fan favorite because of its dramatic story and gameplay systems; it served to help establish Miyazaki in the field as a game designer. It would be a few years later down the line, in early 2009, when *Demon's Souls* would be first published by Sony Computer Entertainment in Japan, having its worldwide release in June of the following year. Serving as a sort of spiritual successor to FromSoftware's King's Field series, this new action role-playing game would score outstanding reviews from critics at first; however, it would not take long before a debate would sprout from Miyazaki's unique style. Selling an estimated 75,000 units, the company had prepared for an initial shipment of 15,000 copies, being completely overwhelmed by the game's success. At this time, critics had already begun pushing a discourse which would be closely related to future FromSoftware titles. From the Famitsu game magazine's editor Maria Kichiji a statement would declare that this game was not for everybody.

While critics attacked and debated over the difficulty levels of his game, Miyazaki had finally secured funding and trust from Sony's directors, and not only would he pour his heart

and soul on this project, but also his own money, being a major producer of the game. Development was not easy, suffering from similar and additional problems like *Demon's Souls, Dark Souls*; which was in on itself a spiritual successor to the previous game; refined its use of scenarios, items, songs and environment in order to create a more welcoming experience to newcomers, all the while still holding onto its roots. Late September of 2011, *Dark Souls* would hit the Japanese market, releasing worldwide just a little bit over a month after, Miyazaki's gamble would pay off, crushing the sales numbers, starting at 2.7 million copies sold in its initial release for the PlayStation 3, later jumping to just over 3 million copies the game would reach a jaw dropping 9 million copies sold once it was added to computer systems. Such a feat would only be surpassed by the third game on the *Dark Souls* series in 2016, which reached 20 million copies sold in that same year, and later by his new pet project *Elden Ring* in 2022, setting a record of its own merit for an entire new Intellectual Property (IP), at 35 million copies sold worldwide. The debate over difficulty and now accessibility raged on, and still does to this day, most having accepted that while the Souls games; what this genre would later be called; are difficult yet fair, and reward patience and willingness to fail, teaching players to learn from their mistakes.

The *Dark Souls* series had always been difficult games, games to beat and be proud of, and up until the announcement of *Elden Ring*, which would be written by Hidetaka Miyazaki with worldbuilding provided by the renowned fantasy writer George R. R. Martin, the author from the acclaimed *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels; the narrative and story beats of these games would take a backseat. Not counting with the most direct form of storytelling, the *Souls* Series story would not go unnoticed by the keen eyed, culminating in its most theatrical form in *Dark Souls III* in 2016; as the series came to a close at the time, which still has not received a proper sequel; world building, audio and visual cues, item placements and non-linear storytelling, are the primary way through which the story of these games are told.

*Dark Souls* embraced the core tenets of its predecessor while expanding upon its gameplay mechanics and narrative scope. Set in the decaying kingdom of Lordran, the game invited players to explore interconnected environments teeming with formidable enemies and intricate level design. The franchise's signature difficulty curve, characterized by punishing combat and relentless adversaries, became a defining feature that challenged players to persevere through adversity. The universe of *Dark Souls* is shrouded in mystery and steeped in lore, much of which is open to interpretation; however, there is a generally accepted sequence of events and figures that helped shape the universe as it came to be by the time the player takes control of their character.

In the beginning, there was an age of ancients, a world filled with archtrees and everlasting dragons. This age was characterized by grayness and unendingness. However, from the dark, the First Flame emerged, bringing disparity to the world. This disparity manifested as light and dark, life and death, heat and cold, beginning and ending. Among those born from the First Flame were powerful beings known as Lords, who claimed great souls and established the world as we come to know it. Gwyn, the Lord of Sunlight; Nito, the First of the Dead; the Witch of Izalith; and the Furtive Pygmy, who found the Dark Soul. They ushered in the Age of Fire and brought about the rise of various civilizations. Gwyn, in particular, extended the Age of Fire through his sacrifice, thus beginning the first of many cycles. This was then known as the linking of the First Flame, an act which claimed the life of the being who would do such a thing, with the benefit of extending the Age of Fire for an unspecified period, though soon it would be known that there were diminishing returns to this investment. In the end, the Age of Dark is inevitable, as is the rise of a new Age of Fire.

However, as time passed, the power of the First Flame began to fade, leading to the gradual onset of the Age of Dark. This transition was marked by the rise of the Undead Curse, which caused individuals to be reborn after death, losing a piece of their humanity each time. The fading flame became a focal point for conflict and manipulation, as various factions sought to either prolong the Age of Fire or bring about the Age of Dark. The universe of *Dark Souls* is one of cyclical rebirth, where the balance between light and dark, life and death, is constantly shifting. It's a world where the actions of individuals, such as the Chosen Undead, can have profound effects on the fate of the entire universe.

In the first game the player takes on the role of the Chosen Undead, an undead warrior who is prophesied to either prolong the Age of Fire or bring about the Age of Dark. Escaping from the Undead Asylum and arriving in Lordran.

*Dark Souls II* is set in the land of Drangleic, a kingdom plagued by a curse known as the Undead Curse, similar to the curse in the first game. The player takes on the role of the Bearer of the Curse, an undead seeking a cure for their affliction. The story begins with the Bearer of the Curse arriving in Drangleic, a land filled with ruins, monsters, and remnants of a once-great civilization.

Throughout their journeys, both the Chosen Undead and the Bearer of the Curse encounter various characters and factions, each with their own motivations and goals. These offer the player optional objectives and side quests, which can be taken or not, both leading to different outcomes, opening possible endings for the game or even ending the game outright. Choice and free will is heavily emphasized in game design, the player is given full control of where to go, when to go and how to get there.

All games start with a cutscene, which plays a short introduction to the world, including its beginnings and more recent events which help better paint the setting for the player's arrival. After this, the player is presented with the character creator tool, being able to freely choose between a male and female body; weight; skin color, ranging from real life human skin colors all the way to burning red or neon green; hair styles and eye colors. After this, the player must then choose their initial class. Classes in *Dark Souls* determine the starting Stats and Equipment of the player. There are 10 Classes in *Dark Souls* that the player can begin the game with: Warrior, Knight, Wanderer, Thief, Bandit, Hunter, Sorcerer, Pyromancer, Cleric and Deprived. Classes do not determine what weapons, items, armor, or spells your character is able to use, they only determine what your character starts the game with. As you progress through the game and raise your levels, your character can potentially take up any role regardless of class. In addition to choosing a class, players can choose a gift to begin the game with. All gifts can be found in the game later on but taking one here can let the player enjoy a benefit they wouldn't normally have until much later. The process of leveling up, raising a character's strength, is done by using Souls, which can be found in the world or by killing enemies. Stronger enemies drop a higher number of Souls; though it is very important to remember that the player drops all of their carried Souls on death, being able to reclaim them in full if they are able to reach the spot in which they first died without dying again. The cost of raising a level increases as your character's level increases; therefore, choosing an initial class can help the player better optimize their character later in the game. At this point, once all choices have been made, the game begins, placing the player's character in an area with a title screen with its name.

The *Dark Souls* games do have a deep tutorial, in fact choosing to not help the player much to understand the games' controls. Here we must mention the existence of the Message System present in all games of the franchise. The player is able to write down custom messages using preexisting word choices, which are shown in other player's game worlds. These messages range from helpful tips, sometimes leading a player to a secret, or even to traps which will lead players to their demise; meaning these messages must be taken with a bit of caution as they might be lies. The tutorial, so to speak, is presented this way, being used to successfully introduce the player to a system which while is not core to the game, is very useful. However, the tips given by the developers are very basic and are well known to most players, essentially telling the player how to move the character, the camera, how to attack, block and dodge. From here the player is let loose in a semi-linear interconnected stage world and allowed to explore on their own. The user interface (UI) is very minimalistic, displaying only a health bar (in red); mana bar (in blue); stamina bar (in green); the equipped weapon; the equipped spell; and up to two equipped quick slot items. When striking an enemy or being struck a damage number is

displayed, and once the player is facing a boss a large red health bar is displayed in the lower portion of the screen.

Image 1 - Basic display of user interface, red health bar, blue mana bar, green stamina bar on the top left. On the bottom left of the screen the player's equipped items. In the bottom right, the total number of souls carried. And centered on the bottom the boss' health bar and name.



Source: Game UI Database

The combination of introduction through cutscene, character creator and minimal tutorial and UI serves to immediately tell the player that this game won't be holding their hand at any point. This may be concerning at first, though it quickly becomes empowering as players learn to live with their choices. Being able to reach a boss far ahead of time, and while they may be under leveled, they might prevail, being able to conquer such a challenge at an earlier point from which they would most likely be prepared for is a fundamental aspect of the game. Shortcuts, alternative routes and secrets are spread all around the game, directly rewarding the player for instance, for hitting a wall over one hundred times, to then be rewarded with a shortcut which takes them to a portion of the game which will still be inaccessible for hours of gameplay. One final core aspect of the game is the player's inevitable deaths. Usually many for most first timers, dying is seen as a canon event, with the player being undead, it will return, though losing a bit of its humanity, which can be seen as the player grows impatient and frustrated with their failures, or even by the physical appearance changes which takes hold of their character, looking more like a husk or zombie. Before moving to the setting of the third game, it is very important to discuss one final core mechanic of gameplay, invasions.

In the *Dark Souls* game, the concept of the multiverse is also canon, meaning every single player that has ever played the game is considered a canon event. Players may even

choose to enter other players' game worlds, be it by being invited there or forcing their entry. Invited players are shown as white spirits, neutral ones which choose to help someone. However, there are other types of spirits, with their colors reflecting their personalities. This system has evolved as the games were published, though below are all the final possibilities for their appearance and goals. Red spirits are aggressors, these have chosen to invade a random player's game world and have a single goal: to kill the host; this causes the host to lose their Souls, and the invader to be empowered in their own game world. Yellow spirits are helpers, these are players dedicated to help other players with Player *Versus* Environment (PVE) content, though they will usually protect their hosts from red spirits. Blue spirits are the protectors on demand, once a player is invaded by a red spirit a blue spirit may sometimes be summoned to protect them; their goal being to kill the invading red spirit, thus aiding the host with Player *Versus* Player (PVP) content. There are also blue-red spirits, these are zone protectors; being summoned to kill the host player at random when they arrive in specific areas of the game. Finally, there are the pink or purple spirits, which are seen as mad spirits; needing only to kill something, be it the host, or any other spirit. These interactions are promoted by factions which have rewards based on the success of a player's performance as a given spirit, on top of empowerment in their own world once their task is completed. Furthermore, these factions and interactions are directly embedded in the story of some side quests and are presented to the player as they progress through the game.

This takes us to March 24th, 2016, *Dark Souls III* releases to immediate critical acclaim, with the promise of concluding a saga which has been going on for nearly five years. Before diving into the game's presentation one final note must be made regarding the sequentially of the games. *Dark Souls, Dark Souls II* and *Dark Souls III* are direct sequels from one another. However, there is no clear consensus of how much time has passed between each game, with their protagonists often engaging in time travel as dimension hopping. It is generally accepted that each protagonist is not related to one another in any way, and that multiple Ages of Fire and Ages of Dark have happened in between each game with various lengths, this is due to the fact that every choice a player has ever made while playing any of the games is considered canon, including the different endings of the games. Therefore, each gameplay must be treated as their own story, though with many similarities, which again takes us to one of the most basic aspects of the game series, cyclicality. This is further justified by the chosen logo of the series and the mark which appears on the chest of any person affected by the Undead curse, a faint black circle which fails to complete itself.

*Dark Souls III* is set in the kingdom of Lothric, a land on the brink of collapse, with several visits to earlier game spaces. The player assumes the role of the Ashen One, an undead

warrior tasked with linking the First Flame to prevent the onset of the Age of Dark. The bell of Firelink Shrine has been tolled, which caused the ancient Lords of Cinder to return to life, tasking with uniting their lower individual strengths so that together, they may link the First Flame once more. These lords are: Yhorm the Giant, A giant humanoid, king of the Profaned Capital, who linked the First Flame in an attempt to save his city from the Profaned Flame; Ludleth of Courland: A small pygmy from Courland and a student of the art of transposition: the process of extracting and coalescing the essence of souls to gain incredible powers, who has most recently failed to link the Flame; Abyss Watchers: A legion of Undead soldiers tasked with fighting the Abyss wherever it takes shape, united in their souls by the wolf blood of Artorias to link the First Flame and do their duty one last time; Aldrich, Saint of the Deep: A cleric from Irithyll of the Boreal Valley who took pleasure in devouring humans, eating so much that his body became a sludge of darkness and was made to link the First Flame for his strength; Lothric, Younger Prince: A prince brought into the world by the royal family of Lothric for the sole purpose of linking the Flame, but his frailty, curse and suffering led him to reject his destiny. However, only Ludleth of Courland has heeded the call. Now with a second toll of the bells, the Ashen one, an Unkindled who failed to link the Flame in the past due to their own weakness is tasked with bringing the Lords of Cinder back to their thrones.

After the player makes their way through the initial section of the game, they enter an area named Firelink Shrine and are greeted by the Fire Keeper, a woman whose task is to keep the First Flame lit and seek those who would link it once more. Throughout the journey, the Ashen One confronts these powerful entities, battles through treacherous environments, and uncovers fragments of the world's lore. Every *Dark Souls* game bolsters multiple endings, which then loop back around to different points in the story in order to keep its canonicity, *Dark Souls III* has three endings: Link the Fire: the Ashen One sacrifices themselves to link the First Flame, continuing the Age of Fire; end of Fire, or Unkindled Ending: The Ashen One chooses not to link the Fire and instead allows it to fade, bringing about the Age of Dark; Usurpation of Fire: This ending involves usurping the flame and ruling over the Age of Hollows, or Age of Humanity, as the Lord of Hollows. As they progress, they learn about the cycle of linking the flame, the nature of the undead curse, and the impending collapse of the kingdom of Lothric. *Dark Souls III* explores themes of duty, sacrifice, and the cyclical nature of existence, offering players a profound and challenging journey through a world teetering on the edge of oblivion.

Thus, this work's main objective is to explore some of the elements in the third entry of the series, *Dark Souls III*, which makes use of Environmental Storytelling as described by Mike Shepard (2014). Which when employed correctly allow for foregoing the need to rely solely on dialogue or explicit narration; rather focusing on utilizing visual cues, ambiance, props,

architecture, and other elements within the environment to convey information, evoke emotions, and immerse the audience in the narrative. Environmental storytelling allows creators to convey information in a more indirect and immersive manner, engaging the audience's curiosity and encouraging them to actively participate in interpreting the narrative. It can add depth and richness to a story by creating a more believable and immersive world for the audience to explore.

## 2 ENVIRONMENT AS A CHARACTER

Telling stories has always been deeply ingrained in human culture, being the primary way through which we have passed along teachings and wisdom. With the advent of technology however, we have been able to include the listener directly as part of the story, allowing them to not only influence decision making and thus possibly changing the outcome of a given story; but also to place themselves in a character shoes and be faced with choices and decisions which must be made to achieve a certain goal. This started in 1979 with *The Cave of Time* by Edward Packard, being the first of what would come to be known as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series as well as defining a new genre. Later down the timeline, video games allowed for much more expansive stories to be told, and with the passing years games have only become more and more complex, providing players with multiple storylines in a single game that sometimes can count with a total of twenty-six (26) different unique endings as is the case with *Nier: Automata* in 2016 by Takahisa Taura and Isao Negishi. Furthermore we can even observe as television series and movies have already dabbled with the concept of including the viewer in the narrative, as we can observe in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* from David Slade in 2018; being a 90 minute movie if the default choices are made that can extend to upwards of 312 minutes in original footage that has been recorded, or even further as the movie is in on itself cyclical, therefore without ending.

However, there are a few things that should be noted before we proceed any further, mainly how not all games have stories to be told. Sometimes they serve only as minor distractions or forms of escapism, great examples being games like *Tetris* (1984), *Flow Free* (2012) or even *Candy Crush Saga* (2012). For the purposes of this analysis however, we will focus on games that not only have stories but use multiple tools to advance and tell their stories. As stated in his 2004 paper, Jenkins affirms that "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces. It is no accident, for example, that game design documents have historically been more interested in issues of level design than plotting or character motivation.". This only serves to show that the environment in which the player finds themselves is given much more attention to detail rather than what we will usually find in a

book or movie. And while character driven narratives exist, in the world of video games, the player character is often shallow and simple when compared to their counterparts in other media. This, however, does not qualify simply as a bad thing, as with a swallower character the player is allowed to imprint themselves onto the character they are playing, which improves immersion and investment.

As the final installment in the critically acclaimed *Dark Souls* series, *Dark Souls III* masterfully integrates elements of Gothic aesthetics throughout its world, gameplay, and narrative. From its haunting environments to its eerie music and menacing enemy designs, the game immerses players in a dark and foreboding atmosphere reminiscent of Gothic literature and art. One of the most striking aspects of *Dark Souls 3* is its meticulously crafted environments that evoke a sense of Gothic grandeur and decay. From the towering spires of Lothric Castle to the crumbling ruins of Irithyll of the Boreal Valley, each location is steeped in Gothic architecture and atmosphere.

But I want to take the Gothic elements and reconsider them in light not only of the buildings of the Gothic cityscape, but of these spaces and how they interact with the protagonists in a bodily sense. The notion of supposed safe havens is central to my discussion of these cityscapes, which leads to an exploration of concepts of boundaries (Cartwright, 2005, p. 99).

As explored in another work by Cartwright (2005), we can observe in the previously mentioned locations of *Dark Souls III*, use of light and shadow further enhances the Gothic atmosphere, casting eerie shadows across decaying walls and dilapidated structures. Dark, winding corridors and dimly lit chambers evoke a sense of dread and anticipation. The player is welcomed, almost beckoned to explore, all while that odd feeling that something is amiss permeates through their mind, with macabre imagery such as twisted statues, grotesque gargoyles, and decaying corpses adding to the game's sense of unease and foreboding.

The hauntingly beautiful score of *Dark Souls 3* further enhances its Gothic atmosphere, with composer Motoi Sakuraba's evocative compositions setting the tone for the game's exploration and combat. The music is characterized by mournful melodies, dissonant chords, and ominous undertones that mirror the game's themes of despair and perseverance. The use of choir vocals and orchestral arrangements lends a sense of grandeur and majesty to the soundtrack, evoking the solemn grandeur of a cathedral or the echoing halls of a forgotten kingdom. At the same time, the music is often punctuated by sudden bursts of intensity, heightening the tension during boss battles and other pivotal moments in the game. One of the most iconic pieces of music is not only a climactic showdown but also a poignant reflection of the game's themes of struggle, perseverance, and the cyclical nature of existence against the final boss of the game, The Soul of Cinder. Greeted by a haunting and melancholic melody that

echoes throughout the battlefield. The music begins with somber piano chords and ethereal choir vocals, creating an atmosphere of solemnity and introspection. This initial motif sets the tone for the battle, evoking a sense of melancholy and resignation as players confront the ultimate challenge before them. As the battle progresses, the music gradually builds in intensity, incorporating elements of orchestral arrangement and electronic instrumentation. The rhythm becomes more driving, the melodies more urgent, as players engage in a desperate struggle against the Soul of Cinder's relentless onslaught. The music mirrors the ebb and flow of the battle itself, rising and falling in tandem with the player's actions and the shifting dynamics of the fight. The orchestral arrangements and choir vocals evoke the solemn grandeur of a cathedral or the echoing halls of a forgotten kingdom, adding a layer of depth and complexity to the music that resonates with the game's gothic aesthetic by use of brooding melodies, haunting vocals, and atmospheric soundscapes that evoke feelings of melancholy, longing, and existential angst.

Before we define Environmental Storytelling, we should work on each individual term. Environment usually refers to the surroundings or conditions in which living organisms exist and interact. It encompasses both the biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) factors that influence an organism's life. In video games it refers to the space in which the player character finds themselves and "the virtual environment is incorporated into the player' s mind as part of her immediate surroundings, within which she can navigate and interact." (Calleja, 2011, p. 169). Storytelling is the art and technique of conveying narratives, often through spoken word, written text, visual imagery, or performance. Effective storytelling typically involves elements such as plot, characters, setting, conflict, and resolution. These elements are crafted and arranged in a way that engages the audience or reader, evoking emotional responses, sparking imagination, and conveying messages or themes. Thus, by combining these two definitions directly we could infer that Environmental Storytelling is a narrative technique employed across various media forms wherein thematic and narrative elements are communicated predominantly through the spatial, visual, and material aspects of the environment. This technique eschews direct exposition or dialogue, instead relying on the deliberate design and arrangement of settings, objects, and ambiance to convey implicit aspects of the narrative, such as backstory, themes, or character motivations. It fosters an immersive and participatory engagement with the narrative, inviting audiences or participants to actively interpret and construct meaning from the environmental cues presented.

While scholars engage in discussions concerning narrative and game environments, there lacks a specific term to encapsulate the concept under scrutiny. Calleja addressed this lacuna by proposing a theory of incorporation to rectify the imprecise usage and

misappropriation of the term immersion. Consequently, its penetration into academic discourse remains relatively limited, thus it has primarily circulated within the realm of game development and related industries.

Computer games may be the least adventurous in the domain of narrative theme and structure, but, as millions of game addicts have proven, it is the most successful in terms of turning users into characters. The secret to the narrative success of games lies in their ability to exploit the most fundamental of the forces that move a plot forward: the solving of problems. The player pursues the goal specified by the game by performing a series of moves that determine the destiny of the gameworld (RYAN, 2004, p. 349).

Video games make use of clever devices such as posing small, incremental puzzles and problems to motivate the player to remain engaged with the product while, according to Ryan (2004), make a lesser use of narrative devices that focus strictly on the plot. This serves to show how the player's character is in fact the center of all attention, no matter which story is being told. And thus, the second most important aspect of such a story is then the space in which the player's persona finds themselves. Furthermore, Luckhardt (2021) states that "Very broadly said, narratives, be them of literary nature or otherwise, rewrite the rules of reality to reflect parts of ourselves. Without relatability making a world and its story work is much harder (LUCKHARDT, 2021, p. 28).", this serves as another reason why the employment of Environmental Storytelling could be seen as such an integral part of video games' choice of narrative devices. As per what defines us, if not the environment in which we find ourselves?

## 3 THE STORYTELLERS OF *DARK SOULS III*

The explorable lands of *Dark Souls III* take the player character from long forgotten and forsaken castle halls all the way to deep and barren wastes of once great capitals at the heart of the world. Throughout these places, the player is presented with very striking and different locations, all with their unique motifs and themes. In this section of the present paper a few of these locations, their aesthetics and game design choices contribute to possibly being named the Environmental Storytellers of *Dark Souls III*. They shall be explored and analyzed, taking in account when and how they employ the Environmental Storytelling narrative device and how they tie in with one another.

Skipping ahead of the initial zone; Firelink Shrine, which shall be explored further down in this chapter; the first major location the player's persona finds themselves in is the Lothric Castle. Starting in a small room on its walls, the player is presented with a great fallen kingdom, complete with overgrown vines and crumbled structures as well as hollows which seem to be praying.

Image 2 - A top-down shot of Lothric Castle.



Source: RagDollRat on YouTube

Before diving into the castle design itself, as it will come up later in the gameplay, as the player must return to it and climb further up its walls, we must explore the Sun's aspect. In the beginning of the game there seems to be nothing special to it, it shines bright and mighty in the background, the castle being completely lit by its splendorous light, bathed in Gwin's Age of Fire. Though slowly and steadily, every time the player makes significant progress in their quest; by slaying one of the Lords of Cinder, and placing their ashes back on their thrones in Firelink Shrine; an eclipse appears to be forming.

Image 3 - Lothric Castle in the beginning of the game, as the Sun stands shinnying proud as a beacon of light and hope.

Source: Дужюр on Steam

Image 4 - Lothric Castle in the end of the game, as the Sun is now eclipsed, setting a gloomy and dark atmosphere as well as mimicing the Darksign.



Source: Peakpx

This change is a minor and subtle one, and usually unnoticed by mane players, though should they visit the first location in which they arrive at the High Wall once the game nears its end, by backtracking, the eclipse still holds. Such a design choice helps us visualize the passage of time, the worsening of the situation, as the Age of Fire continues to near its end. Throughout the walls, courtyards, bridges and even rooftops, many slain dragon bodies, soldiers, and knights can be found, piled at every twist and turn of the way. As per usual, there is no safety

18

to be found here bar the Bonfires, there is only war, death and decay, even the mighty dragons corrupted by a tar like substance, the same which the player would have found in their first great battle at the beginning of the game. The dragon bodies tell us that wherever we are, this place is mighty and powerful, or at least it used to be until very recently, as slaying such beasts is no easy feat. The streets lie filled with bodies which dawn different looking armor and flags, a sign a battle has taken place, a fight for survival as the First Flame slowly fades.

As an Age of Fire slowly approaches its end, a very striking effect takes place over the world, the resurgence of the Darksign. It is a dark, circular sigil branded upon the flesh of Undead beings. It is bestowed upon those who are cursed with the undead curse, a condition that prevents individuals from dying a permanent death, condemning them to a cycle of resurrection known as hollowing. Seen as both a mark of shame and a badge of honor, signifying the cursed nature of the bearer and their inevitable descent into madness and despair, it represents the erosion of one's humanity and the gradual loss of self that accompanies the curse of undeath. It is a physical manifestation of the existential dread and hopelessness that permeates the world of *Dark Souls*, serving as a constant reminder of the cursed nature of existence. The circular design of the Darksign suggests a cycle of repetition and futility, echoing the eternal struggle between light and dark, life and death. Here we are able to draw a parallel between it and the ever-eclipsing Sun, both underscoring the transient and impermanent nature of existence condemning individuals to an endless cycle of resurrection and descent into madness. Similarly, the gradual dimming and eclipsing of the sun's radiance reflects the overarching sense of decay and hopelessness that pervades the game world, signaling the impending collapse of civilization and the looming threat of the Age of Dark.

The towering spires, flying buttresses, and intricate stonework of Lothric Castle immediately bring to mind the grandeur of Gothic architecture. This style, prevalent in medieval Europe, is characterized by its verticality, pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and elaborate ornamentation. Lothric Castle's soaring towers and sweeping arches echo the majesty of cathedrals like Notre-Dame de Paris or Westminster Abbey. Alongside that we may observe a sense of decay and dilapidation. Crumbling walls, overgrown courtyards, and ominous shadows cast a sense of foreboding over the castle's once-grand halls. This theme of decay serves not only as a visual motif but also as a narrative device, reflecting the decline of the kingdom of Lothric and the impending apocalypse that threatens to consume the world. Its design reflects the themes of decay, despair, and existential dread that permeate the game world, serving as both a setting for epic battles and a canvas for storytelling through environmental design.

Escaping from the guiding light of the Sun, which has taken the player through the decrepit and cursed Undead Settlement, the swamps and grounds of Farron Keep, we now arrive

at Irithyll of the Boreal Valley. The immediate contrast between this kingdom and Lothric is clashing, for there is no Sun here, only the calming light of the Moon and its lonely reflection upon the welcoming lake. Unlike the warmth of the Sun, here we are greeted by a landscape of snow-covered streets, towering spires, and moonlit vistas, evoking a sense of otherworldly grandeur and desolation. A city bathed in the pale light of the moon, casting everything in a silvery glow that enhances its surreal and haunting beauty. The streets are lined with ornate, gothic-style buildings adorned with intricate carvings and frost-covered gargoyles. Ice and snow blanket the cobblestone pathways, muffling the sounds of footsteps and adding to the eerie silence that pervades the city. Tall, slender trees with twisted branches reach towards the sky, their skeletal forms casting long shadows across the landscape. In the distance, the imposing spires of the Irithyll Cathedral pierce the night sky, their intricate architecture a testament to the city's former glory.

Image 5 - Irithyll of the Boreal Valley, showing a great city bathed in the light of an eclipsing Moon.



Source: arrgghhtype on Steam

Image 6 - Anor Londo as seen in *Dark Souls III*, a lonely chapel stands front and center in the dark of night.

Blending elements of Gothic, Baroque, and Renaissance styles, the towering cathedrals, arched bridges, and elaborate facades evoke the grandeur of medieval European cities like Prague and Vienna, while the icy landscapes and ethereal lighting add a fantastical twist that is quintessential to the series. The city's frozen landscape serves as a metaphor for the desolation and decay that plagues the world, while its haunting beauty speaks to the allure of the unknown and the mysteries that lie hidden beneath the surface. The motif of moonlight holds particular significance in Irithyll, reflecting the influence of Pontiff Sulyvahn, a powerful sorcerer and ruthless leader who rose to prominence by exploiting the chaos of the fading fire, seizing control of Irithyll and bending its inhabitants to his will. Sulyvahn's association with the moon and his manipulation of the city's residents underscore the themes of corruption and betrayal that permeate the *Dark Souls* universe, highlighting the moral ambiguity of its characters and the consequences of their actions.

Once the Pontiff is defeated, the player must climb the rooftops and then use an elevator bridge to reach Aldrich, Devourer of Gods, who resides in Anor Londo, the city of gods. This location has been visited previously in the *Dark Souls* series, during the events of the first game.

Image 7 - Anor Londo as seen in *Dark Souls, a proud and well cared chapel once visited by many during the golden age of Gwin.*

The architecture of Anor Londo is a testament to the wealth and power of its former inhabitants, with its towering buildings adorned with intricate carvings, majestic arches, and delicate filigree. Marble statues of gods and heroes line the streets, their impassive faces gazing down upon the city below with an air of timeless wisdom and benevolence. At the heart of Anor Londo lies the Anor Londo Cathedral, a massive structure of gleaming white stone that serves as the seat of power for the city's ruling gods. Its towering spires reach towards the heavens, while its stained-glass windows depict scenes of divine triumph and celestial splendor. Within its hallowed halls, the echoes of a bygone era reverberate, whispering tales of gods and men, glory and betrayal. Once a thriving city of gods, a place of opulence and divine splendor, now crumbling and decayed, its streets overrun by monsters and hollows. The warm, golden light of the setting sun has been replaced by a cold, pale glow that bathes the city in an eerie, otherworldly atmosphere, serving as a haunting reminder of the passage of time and the inevitable decline of even the mightiest civilizations.

Going back to the start of the game, however, we must explore the most striking and significant pair of locations in *Dark Souls III*. Finding themselves rising from a grave in the initial cutscene, which is exactly where they pick up the game. An empty and decrepit graveyard welcomes the players with a few corpses around and absolutely no ceremony or grand entrance as is customary of many titles. This serves to set the initial tone of the game, death and the game's disregard for reverence or the wellbeing of the player.

Image 8 - Firelink Shrine at the edge of its cliff on the right side of the picture. On the left, Gundyr's arena and the graveyard from which the Ashen One had just awakened at the start of the game.

Image 9 - The inner sanctum of Firelink Shrine, depycting the five thrones of the five Lord of Cinder as the coiled sword is found in the Bonfire in the center of the room.

Only a few steps are needed in order to be welcomed by the first of many great vistas in *Dark Souls III*, with Firelink Shrine finally gracing the players with an objective. Its central position as the player finds themselves at the edge of a cliff can be interpreted as the game acknowledging the player's need for a safe haven in this hostile place. In the foreground we are to find a massive mountain range, with Firelink Shrine being front and center in this picture. A clear path takes us there, and no obvious one leads away from it, thus we must venture forth. By wandering around, the player will then find a great circular arena with a knight in its center, blocking the path forward with a Coiled Sword stabbed through his body. This arena is filled with empty graves which are covered with overgrown vines. Drawing from the intro cutscene,

which helps to paint the picture of the player character servings as the last hope for the Age of Fire, we might be able to see this place as the origin location for many that tried what we are now attempting, a direct hint at the cyclical and repeating nature of the series. Iudex Gundyr now stands between the player and their need for safety and accomplishment, though it will not become aggressive, or even move at all, should the player not interact with it. Only by removing the sword from his body will he then stand and fight, this serves as the player's introduction to the concept of bosses and great fights into the game. The Coiled Sword placed centered in a fire pit, called a Bonfire, is the most recognizable in world, and not, references of the *Dark Souls* games; it represents safety and warmth, a place to rest in between great battles and suffering; the welcoming and soothing flame which derives from the First Flame helping to calm the players body and soul amongst it all. Though as it is staked through an enemies' heart, it clearly shows the opposite idea, here it serves to calm and pacify this beast, once removed and now in the player's hands, a Bonfire must be found so that it can be used for its original purpose. Here the Fire is used as a symbol of power, even though it fades, it still presides over all; and its word is law, Iudex Gundyr  a mere servant which is not worthy of continuing down the path to be the Ashen one serving as the Judge, as his title suggests.

Image 10 - Iudex Gundyr standing idle as the coiled sword is removed from his heart to awaken him.
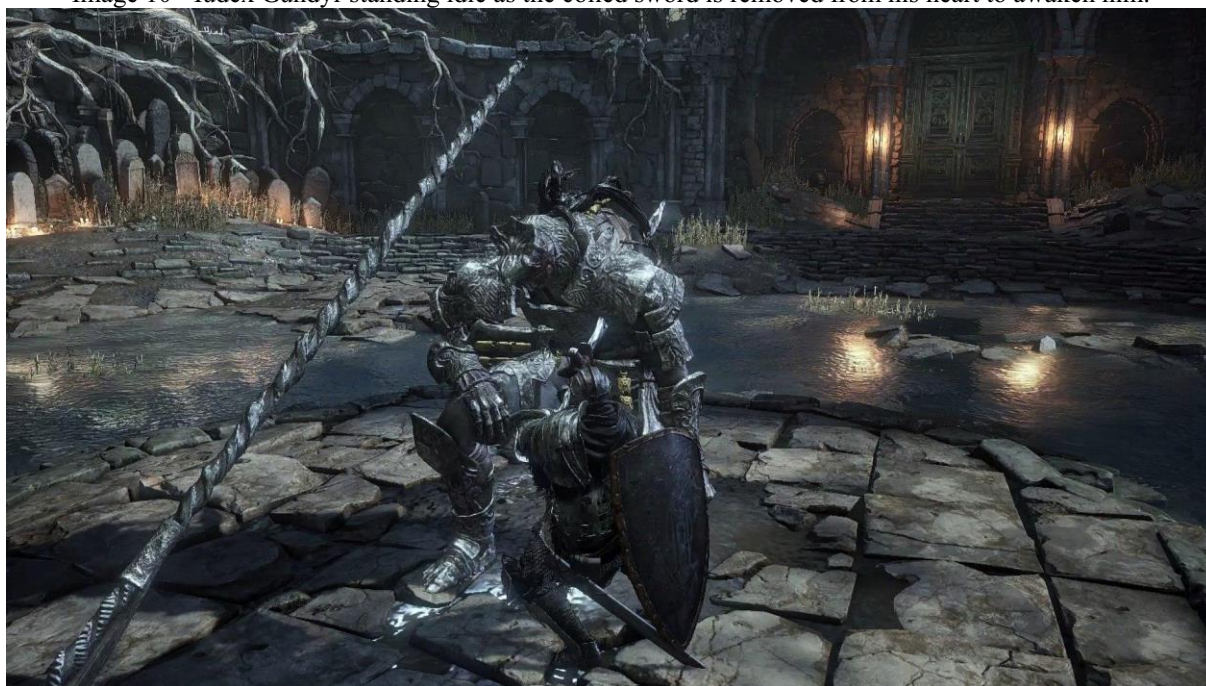


Source: Game-eXperience.it on DailyMotion

Inside the shrine we can find a Firekeeper, a blind woman tasked with tending to the First Flame and all its Bonfires, the one responsible for tolling the bells and awakening us at the start of the game. By placing the Coiled sword in the central Bonfire, the player is finally able to venture forth and teleport themselves to the Walls of Lothric Castle, which have already

been explored earlier in this chapter. As the game progresses, and through a secret passage which is found in the very back of Lothric Castle's Gardens; after the player has fought and triumphed over Oceiros, the Consumed King; as well as strange serpent men, and stricken a wall that looked like any other; the player is then able to access the Untended Graves. This location is a one-to-one recreation of Firelink Shrine; however, we clearly find ourselves in an Age of Dark.

Image 11 - Champion Gundyr now stands ready for battle in this alternate timeline. This version of Gudyr stands ready for battle and is blessed with red glowing eyes, depicting a much fiercer and dangerous opponent.



Source: IGgy IGsen on lparchive

Image 12 - The inner sanctum of Firelink Shrine in this alternate timeline, 'Dark Firelink Shrine'. This version of the shrine is much darker, with nearly no light to be found and an empty Bonfire with no Coiled Sword at its center.

Here there lie very few enemies, much fiercer and dangerous than the original starting location of the game; Grave Wardens and Dark Knights roam the blinding dark expanse. The Ashen one here is a being outside of their own time, as this is accepted to be a flaw in the timeline of the universe, with the player character being able to visit what Firelink Shrine once was; or by another interpretation could come to be should they fail their quest; and as a being of an Age of Fire, we radiate light, serving as the only source of it in the whole area. Here, the player must not be judged, rather they must face Champion Gundyr, a much tougher fight than before, with no Coiled sword resting at his heart. By choosing to analyze this as a past event, Gundyr here is clearly a being similar to the player character, a champion which must heed the tolling of the bells and seek to link the First Flame. Though upon defeating him and reaching the inner shrine, we do not find a Firekeeper, no lit Bonfire and empty thrones. This is the tragedy of Gundyr, awakened to late to save his own era, or too early for another which is still to come; then choosing to serve as the Coiled Sword's sheath, he would have held his post at the arena to one day serve as the judge for the following Embers; another way the player is referred to.

The dichotomy of Firelink Shrine and the Untended Graves is clear as water, one serving as a place of hope and comfort, with little to no danger to the player, well-lit and an area in which they are able to have human interactions with NPCs and most important of all, rest easy. While the other serves as a hopeless world, drowned in darkness and suffering, danger lurking at every corner with little disregard for humanity and one's pain. The time travel theory that surrounds these two locations only serves to confirm the cyclical nature of the world; however,

we could then interpret this as our first instance of dimension hopping that is independent of the invasion system. Here the player might have found themselves in a different dimension or universe, one in which Gundyr bears no Coiled Sword, there is no Firekeeper and no Bonfire; a place in time in which all have failed, and the Age of Dark has taken place with no Sun or Moon to be found.

Untended Graves' lack of a celestial body in the sky is curious to say the least, for even in the darkest places the Ashen One finds themselves, should the sky be visible, one can always be found. This is clearly not a simple design choice to incite the feeling of uneasiness or alien locale, rather it is one of many of the hints which have been pointed out that the Sun, and even the Moon, are directly connected to the First Flame. Before we move on to this, however, it would be interesting to discuss in more detail the secret ending of the game, the Usurpation of Fire.

By making the correct key decisions throughout the game, ones which hold a central theme, the boosting of one's strength at the cost of both their humanity and the flame itself, a player is able to unlock this path. Upon defeating the final boss, and presented with the choices, once this ending is chosen, the usurpation takes place, with the player character stealing the First Flame in its entirety to themselves, only to be consumed and killed by it. As their body falls to its knees, the last remnant of the Sun's hollow visage can be seen, darker than ever, through the everlasting eclipse before the scene fades to black. As it reopens however, the golden orange aura of the Sun is gone, replaced by a cold white glow in its place; rising, the player's hands seem to carry the empty dark Sun to its pinnacle before walking off. Here the outline of the Sun is no longer fading and incomplete as it once was by the final battle of the game, rather it proudly completes a very well-defined circle around its dark center. From the initial assumption and interpretation of the Sun's crest, this would be the completion of the Darksign, marking humanity's Dark Soul as triumphant over every other in existence, as the Age of Fire comes to an end; at least for the time being.

At the outset of *Dark Souls III*, the Sun is depicted as a radiant and comforting presence in the sky. Its warm, golden rays bathe the dilapidated landscapes of the game world in a soft glow, offering a sense of guidance and hope to the player. This initial portrayal of the Sun reinforces the traditional symbolism associated with light and illumination, serving as a beacon of optimism amidst the encroaching darkness. However, as the player delves deeper into the game's narrative, subtle changes in the depiction of the Sun become apparent. The once bright and radiant orb begins to dim, its light growing increasingly feeble and wan. This gradual fading of the Sun's radiance mirrors the overarching sense of decay and despair that pervades the world. As the player encounters more formidable challenges and confronts the bleak realities

of the game world, the Sun's diminished presence serves as a visual reminder of the encroaching darkness. Perhaps the most striking transformation occurs during pivotal moments in the game's storyline. At certain junctures, it may be partially or completely eclipsed by ominous clouds or obscured by dark, swirling mists. These dramatic visual effects serve to heighten the atmosphere of tension and foreboding, signaling significant shifts in the narrative and the player's journey. The eclipse of the Sun symbolizes moments of crisis and upheaval, where the forces of darkness threaten to overwhelm the fragile remnants of light and hope.

Ultimately, the portrayal of the Sun in *Dark Souls III* transcends its role as a mere celestial object and assumes deeper symbolic significance within the game's lore and mythology. It represents not only the cycle of life, death, and rebirth but also the eternal struggle between light and dark, hope and despair. The changing visage of the Sun reflects the cyclical nature of existence in the world, where moments of triumph are inevitably followed by periods of tribulation, and where the flickering ember of hope endures in the face of overwhelming adversity.

The final location to be explored here is the Kiln of the First Flame, the last location prior the the Downloadable Content (DLCs) of the game being released, as those served as a way to finally put an end to the entire Dark Souls storyline, a true final ending which puts to rest a few questions regarding the nature of the universe, how time works and it's cyclical nature.

Image 13 - Kiln of the First Flame as seen in *Dark Souls III.* The picture shows a vast arena, filled with destroyed armor, weapons and battle gear. Faint embers lie all around the waste as the last remnants of the Sun seem to bleed down onto the Earth as the Darksign takes over it.



Source: jstab on Pinterest

Image 14 - Concept art of the Kiln of the First Flame to be depicted in *Dark Souls III* granting a greater view of the area. Here the world seems to fold in on itself with portions of Lothic, the Undead Settlement, Farron Keep Irithyll joined together in a messy mangled version of themselves.



Source: Dark Souls Wiki

Serving as the climactic setting where the player confronts the game's final challenges and determines the fate of the world, this haunting and evocative environment is a desolate, otherworldly landscape shrouded in darkness and ash. Jagged spires of obsidian jut from the scorched earth, casting long shadows across the barren landscape. Flickering flames dance on the horizon, their eerie light illuminating the charred remains of fallen heroes and forgotten gods. The air is thick with the smell of smoke and sulfur, and the distant sound of echoing footsteps adds to the sense of foreboding and unease. The first and most prominent motif here is that of fire, which symbolizes both destruction and rebirth, chaos and order. The flames that flicker throughout the landscape serve as a constant reminder of the cycle of light and dark, life and death, that lies at the heart of the game's mythology. Another being ash, which represents the inevitable decay and dissolution of all things. The landscape is blanketed in a layer of fine gray dust, a testament to the passage of time and the toll that the prolonged Age of Fire has taken on the world. The juxtaposition of fire and ash serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the cyclical nature of existence and the eternal struggle between light and dark. Evoking images of the underworld from classical mythology, such as Hades or Hel, where the souls of the dead are said to reside. The concept of fire as a purifying force and a symbol of divine power can be traced back to religious traditions around the world, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism. The Kiln's design also bears similarities to otherworldly realms depicted in works of fantasy literature and art, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Mordor* or H.P. Lovecraft's

*Dreamlands*. Combining a dark and forbidding aesthetic, with the sense of ancient mystery and dread, creates a sense of immersion and unease that is characteristic of the *Souls* series.

The Kiln represents the culmination of the player's journey, the ultimate test of their strength, resolve, and understanding of the world around them. At the heart of the Kiln lies the First Flame, the source of all light and life in the world. The player's decision to either link the fire and prolong the Age of Fire, extinguish it and usher in the Age of Dark; or even to usurp it as previously mentioned; has far-reaching consequences for the fate of the world and its inhabitants. This choice encapsulates the central themes of the Dark Souls series, including sacrifice, redemption, and the inevitability of change. This final locale serves as a final nod to the players, who have sunken countless hours into an experience that is to many, torturous at best if not cruel, greeted by a strong and powerful soundtrack which echoes the struggles and adversities of the world, before transitioning into a song reminiscent of the first game's final battle. As the piano keys strike to the leading chords of the violins, it all comes crashing down, the closing of an era and the beginning of another. A new cycle, which will undoubtedly repeat itself further down the line as is in customary *Dark Souls* fashion.


## 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of human communication and culture. It's how we share experiences, convey meaning, and understand the world around us. Whether it's through oral traditions, written literature, films, or video games, storytelling shapes our perceptions and emotions, offering insights into the human condition. This is a complex art, requiring a deep understanding of narrative structures, character development, pacing, and thematic resonance. Narrative devices such as plot twists, foreshadowing, symbolism, and dialogue are essential tools that storytellers employ to engage their audience and evoke emotional responses. Crafting a compelling narrative involves weaving together these elements seamlessly to create a cohesive and immersive experience for the audience. Interestingly, while storytelling is revered in traditional media like literature and film, it's often overlooked in the realm of video games. Many players and even some game developers prioritize gameplay mechanics, graphics, and technical prowess over narrative depth. However, this overlooks the immense potential that narrative offers in enriching the gaming experience. Video games have the unique advantage of interactive storytelling, where players become active participants in the narrative. This interactive element can deepen immersion and emotional engagement, allowing players to shape the story through their choices and actions.

In reality, narrative and gameplay should complement each other, creating a harmonious experience that resonates with players on multiple levels. By recognizing the importance of

storytelling and embracing narrative devices, both players and developers can unlock the full potential of storytelling in video games, elevating the medium to new heights of artistic expression and emotional resonance. In this paper the environmental design of *Dark Souls III* has been explored to exemplify how this can be done to perfection. Each and every pointed aspect has a clear effect on the narrative of the game, which lacks the traditional narrator or character interactions, relying on context and environmental cues for its storytelling, taking on a uniquely enigmatic and immersive form, deeply intertwined with its gameplay mechanics and world design. The game's story lies in its subtlety and ambiguity, presenting the player with a richly detailed world steeped in lore and history, but much of this lore is conveyed indirectly, requiring players to unravel the mysteries of the world themselves. This approach fosters a sense of discovery and exploration, as players delve deeper into the game's world, uncovering hidden secrets and piecing together fragments of the narrative. From the crumbling ruins of Lothric to the haunting echoes of forgotten battles, every aspect of the game's design contributes to its narrative tapestry, immersing players in a world teeming with history and myth.

In the end, *Dark Souls III* serves as a testament to the power of environmental storytelling in gaming, showcasing how a meticulously crafted narrative can elevate the medium to new heights of artistic expression and emotional resonance. As players traverse the treacherous landscapes they become not just participants in a game, but explorers of a world brimming with mystery, wonder, and untold secrets.

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