

*For That Is Our Curse: How the Dark Souls Games Create an Existential Experience*

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## ABSTRACT

The study of games has often taken the form of visual, communications, and literary theory. In the rapidly emerging field of game studies, however, I believe that a vital aspect of games and what they can teach us has flown under the radar of most formal study: existential philosophy. Games, in being interactive experiences that combine elements of narrative, visual design, and observer involvement, innately create a unique space in which philosophy can be applied and explored, whether it be through the game's intentional design or unintentional consequence via its medium. The *Souls* trilogy takes the medium of video games and creates a narrative which can only exist within them, providing the scrupulous observer with a unique existential framework through its insistence on difficulty that is worthy of being explored. Through this philosophical analysis, I show that the "philosophy of games" is a worthy study that warrants more academic research.

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## INTRODUCTION

You, a being known only as the Chosen Undead, walk slowly down to a small sunken building deep within the heart of the world. This place is called the Kiln of the First Flame, and it is here where the fate of the world hangs. You have fought beasts and persons of all shapes and sizes to get here, from great dragon slayers to a massive wolf, and even the gods themselves. Why do you walk towards this place? Because you have been told to, and what lies inside is more startling than the beasts that you have slain.

Entering through the fog gate that separates the boss room from the rest of the world, you find a single man with a large great sword cloaked in flame. A hauntingly beautiful piano piece swells in the background—a far cry from the heavy choirs of the rest of the game. The battle is difficult, leading to many deaths and more than a few tears in the struggle, but finally Gwyn, Lord of Light—a being who has sacrificed himself on the flame to continue his glorious Age of Fire—is defeated. Now, you are faced with a single choice in the silence of this dark room. Sacrifice yourself on the flame and continue Gwyn’s legacy, or walk away and allow humanity to rise in its prophesied Age of Dark.

The *Souls* trilogy started with *Dark Souls*, in 2011. The first and third games are led by creative director Hidetaka Miyazaki, who is the primary creator of much of what constitutes these games. Within the gaming world, the trilogy is known for its rather brutal difficulty and rich, but not obvious, lore. Silent by design, the games present the player with little to go off of narratively without extensive digging beyond just the few snippets of dialogue said by a small smattering of NPCs (non-player characters) across the games.

The combination of difficulty and near-silent narrative is what makes the *Souls* games so fascinating to study, even though such studies have yet to be done much in formal game studies. The player is working through a game known to create frustration with little to no narrative reward, yet, in the marriage of difficulty and lore, the *Souls* games creates what is a truly existential experience.

It is in this existential experience of these games that the analysis of this thesis lies. Although the field of game studies is a core part of the analysis of this trilogy, it is the games' use of existential themes and ideas that I wish to focus on here. Games frequently produce existential concepts in a player in ways that seem almost impossible to replicate through other means of entertainment due to a game's connection with the player through the controller. Unlike simply watching a movie or reading a book, the player becomes a part of the world as a character whose actions are dependent on those of the player. Instead of observing and relating to characters, the player becomes an intrinsic part of the character that they play, becoming deeply immersed in the fictional world that they have decided to explore. This unique aspect of games and their ability to tell stories was famously described by Janet Murray in her work *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, in which she writes:

Digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial and encyclopedic. The first two properties make up most of what we mean by the vaguely used word interactive; the remaining two properties help to make digital creations seem as explorable and extensive as the actual world, making up much of what we mean when we say that cyberspace is immersive. (71)

Miyazaki, through the design of the *Souls* games, has only heightened the immersive nature of his games, as even the lore feeds into the mechanics, meaning that the very actions of the player are intrinsic to the plot and its purpose. In an interview, he said, "When it

comes to [*Dark*] *Souls*, first of all I came up with the action RPG game system, and then applied the mythology” (qtd. in *Wired*). Although Miyazaki is typically reserved when it comes to speaking in interviews, here he states that the game came first, then the story. The difficulty of the game series is actually baked into the design of the mythology of the world, creating an interconnection between world and game in a way that is quite rare. Whether Miyazaki was doing it intentionally or not, by using the concept of game *difficulty* as the crux of the story, he heralded the very thing that existentialism has been contending with for over a century: meaning in the face of suffering. Nietzsche, Camus, and even Kierkegaard focused on this intrinsic question to the human condition, and Miyazaki has used this question as the very seed of the world of his games, creating a willfully chosen existential experience which asks the player to act, instead of simply being an observer to a world or passively allowing a concept to be fed to them through a book or a film.

One of the most incredible parts of all of this, however, is that one could play through all three games without ever knowing or realizing this. As much of the lore and dialogue is unnecessary for completing the game purely for entertainment’s sake, most players not interested in it will simply pass it by without even realizing that it was there. However, one must remember that this is true of many forms of entertainment. Even profound movies and novels that have been studied for decades can be glossed over by someone unwilling to look any further. The *Souls* games, although quintessentially games designed for entertainment, are also something worth exploring in the same vein as a movie or book that goes deeper than what it may initially appear to be. *The Lord of the Rings* is an incredible read, but it explodes with richness and ideas when read after the



*Silmarillion*. But, had the *Silmarillion* been exposition shoehorned into the original trilogy, it would have been a rather dull and bloated read. Like this juxtaposition, the *Souls* trilogy teases its richness, asking the astute player to dig deeper and find the beauty in its visuals and dialogue beyond being just a vehicle for gameplay.

This thesis is divided into three major sections, with the first two combining in a third to answer the quandary of meaning in suffering through the lens of the three games. The first section is an analysis of the games from the perspective of game studies. The focus is on how the games systems and key design choices feed into the player's psyche *and* the player's interpretation of the narrative, which is something that I find the *Souls* games to be intensely focused on in a beautiful, yet subtle, way. Difficulty is primary to this subject, but other systems also provide some insight into what the game is doing from a mechanical standpoint. Because difficulty is what Miyazaki used as his springboard for designing the mythos, then it seems reasonable to start with breaking down how this difficulty operates.

The second section of the thesis is devoted to an analysis of the lore and mythos of the game from an existential framework. Themes of suffering, perpetual cycles, and even the idea of sin are all intrinsic to the world and to existentialist thought. Specifically, I propose that the *Souls* games are analyzing an amalgamation of the perspectives of Nietzsche and Camus through the ways in which a player can experience the world of the games. As stated previously, many games create existential concepts inherently as immersion into a fictional world creates questions about being and escapism. The *Souls* games, in having suffering and difficulty at their core, present a unique perspective on these existential ideas and present the player with choices that have existential weight.

In the final section of the thesis, the lore and the mechanics are fused to create an analysis of the player character and how a player's psyche and the character itself are shaped by the nature of the games and their world. The protagonist is silent, as if asking for the player to step into this hollow shell of a former human and take on the oppressive and eternally bleak atmosphere, asking them what they think of it. Here, one's choice at the end of the game—to restart the Age of Fire or allow the Age of Dark—becomes the focus, as player and character act as one in the final moment of each of the games. The games are often cited as being nihilistic, but, I believe, through this careful analysis, we will come to find that the games are offering a more beautiful existential narrative. The suffering of the *Souls* games is not meant to turn the player away; it is meant to draw them in, pulling them into an existential experience with the strength to create questions about what it means to exist, to suffer, and to live.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE GAMEPLAY OF DARK SOULS

Traditionally, *Dark Souls* is considered a third-person action RPG, or role-playing game. In general, games of this ilk involve some level of character progression through levels and experience points, equipment slots for items to tune one's style of play, and an open or semi-open world. *Dark Souls* does not drift too far from some of the standard aspects of an RPG, giving the player a highly customizable character and a semi-open world, which means that the world has to be explored in a single order, but, as new areas are discovered and items are gained, players gain the ability to move through past areas and enter new areas within them. The most popular example of a semi-open world would be any of the early *Legend of Zelda* titles, which allow the player to explore additional parts of areas through the acquisition of items in each successive dungeon.

*Dark Souls*,<sup>1</sup> however, twists the formula of RPGs in a multitude of ways that made it unique among a fairly stagnant genre, even in 2011. Its twists to the formula are so iconic and well-received, in fact, that a sub-genre of RPGs called "souls-like" games developed out of it. This "souls-like" sub-genre has now gone on to inspire games in all sorts of genres beyond just third-person RPGs, including such diverse places as platformers, rogue-likes, and strategy games. These changes are also important in that they are a direct product of Miyazaki, who, as stated in the introduction, put the game mechanics before the lore. Thus, many of the shifts in design have implications beyond just how the player has to traverse the world and level-up; they are a foundation of the mythology

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<sup>1</sup> Although I am specifically talking about the first game in this section, all three games in the series carry on the twists which the first game implemented, along with some tweaks or changes that suit the style of the respective game.

which Miyazaki wanted to create for his games. Some of these shifts in design (from a more typical RPG) include:

- Limited health potions.
- Rare checkpoints, and no ability to save at any point in time.
- A leveling system that prevents a player from grinding<sup>2</sup> a character to a level that makes any challenge easy.
- Lackluster defensive equipment, meaning that one is almost always going to get hit for at least 20% of one's current health, with some enemies almost always having the ability to one-hit kill a character at any level.

All of the above-mentioned systems combined to make *Dark Souls* like a strategy game, where patience and sound tactics are rewarded. Even the many bosses of the series, although difficult and typically taking many tries, have their weaknesses and patterns that players can eventually pick up on, if they are patient, and use to their advantage.

Although the first game has its kinks and poor design choices that lead to cheap deaths or sections more frustrating than they should be, by the third game and its expansions,<sup>3</sup> the core systems have been worked out into a fine-tuned orchestra of combat and exploration. It is consistently challenging, but rarely does it feel cheap or poorly designed. Unlike in the “hard” games of the early console era and arcades, the difficulty is not there simply to force a player to cough up more quarters, to expand an otherwise very short game into a long one, or to cover up poor programming. In the *Souls* series, and in

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<sup>2</sup> Players “grind” in video games when they repeatedly defeat enemies in the same area to level up farther than what one would by natural movement through a game.

<sup>3</sup> The second expansion for *Dark Souls III*, *The Ringed City*, is especially important and will factor into this thesis later.

many of the “souls-like” games after it, the challenge is intentional and finely tuned to evoke both frustration at an obstacle and the subsequent gratification of overcoming said obstacle.

But, it is not just *Dark Souls*’ gameplay systems that are interesting. In the last couple of decades, the effects of games on behavior has been studied, which has led to some fascinating discoveries connecting difficulty and other typical mechanics to some behavioral shifts. The behavioral shifts that the difficulty, oppressiveness, and unresolved nature of the *Souls* games brings to the table creates a response that can affect a player psychologically and physically, while also promoting existential ideas about the purpose of suffering and the nature of eternity. For, what is the point of completing a game which only brings one back to the start upon completion? The answer is more interesting and more potent for the study of games as a whole than it may seem at face value.

### **Live, Die, Repeat: Repetition and its Effect on the Player**

Although present in most games, the *Souls* trilogy takes the meaning of “trial by error” to a new level. The games are not meant to be beaten without dying; in fact, I would say that the creators expect most players to die to most of the bosses at least once, especially on a first play through. Although a “deathless” run of the *Souls* games is possible, it takes many hundreds of hours of practice and strategic planning to prevent such a challenge from coming to a swift end.

This repetitive cycle of moving forward, dying, moving forward a little more, and dying again can be frustrating if a player hits a wall. There are sections of the games that

can be brutal and that have very sparse checkpoints, leading to a significant amount of re-treading and retrying that can consume hours of time. For bosses, although the lead up is usually much shorter, this trial and error can lead to immense frustration as some of them seem nearly insurmountable due to difficulty or a player's build simply not being effective (for example, if a boss has a high magic resistance and the player has focused on magic).

As a famous example from the original game, there is a boss fight with two of Gwyn's most trusted knights. They stand guard in the city of the gods, preventing the player from getting to an item that they need to progress through the rest of the game. The boss fight can be excruciatingly hard, as it is a two-phase fight, with the first being against both and the second being against one or the other, depending on which one the player defeats initially during the first phase. Although very well balanced and a prime example of good boss design, they can be extremely frustrating for new players, as the path back to their boss room is fairly long (taking anywhere from two to five minutes, depending on if one stops to fight the enemies along the way and not including loading time), and one has no ability to fast travel (i.e., traveling to a previous checkpoint via teleportation) until after their fight.

The horrid frustration caused by the game, however, seems to disappear upon finally surmounting what one thought was insurmountable. The breath of relief, excitement, and joy upon finally defeating the boss that has kept one from progressing for hours is nearly unrivaled. Defeating them is a pinnacle of achievement; an overcoming of one of the greatest challenges in the game. I can still remember shaking as frustration turned to joy when I defeated them after nearly two hours of being stuck during my first

play through. That response, though, is not just mental; there are physical responses as well, such as the release of dopamine.

This cycle is fairly unique to video games as well. A film or a book is rarely able to replicate that intense shift from frustration to relief. The feeling of discovering that one's favorite character is okay upon flipping the page is a different feeling from, after hours, finishing a particularly complicated and frustrating puzzle, whether it be a cardboard one or one in a video game. Unlike sports, the relief is not typically jubilation, either. The emotional response of getting a game-ending goal is not the same as finally tackling the boss that has been an insurmountable wall.

Although his study was fairly small, David Melhart found common psychological themes between players and frustration when playing difficult games. He used traditional psychological theories and tests to gauge player reaction to frustration, and found that the frustration often fell into two categories. He writes, "The main identified reasons of frustration could be tracked back to an unordered or noisy informational system caused by either too hard or too easy challenges" (Game Studies). In simpler terms, whenever the game's design and the challenge do not match up, frustration ensues. Continuing on, however, he writes, "Interestingly, depletion of the rewards that the game can provide (in the form of new levels, story elements, challenges, etc.) led the participants to abandon the game, but the perceived loss of psychological need support did not" (Game Studies). Together, this creates an interesting space for the *Souls* games, where frustrating elements (typically bosses) are counteracted by this desire and need to move forward or overcome challenges. It is as though the game is taunting the player with every death, asking them whether they have the fortitude to try just one more time.

When asked about why players continued to play even when faced with a frustrating section, a common theme emerged that has some intriguing implications for how players see games. As recounted by Melhart:

In summary, players have a certain prior interest that initially supports their intrinsic motivation. Under frustrating segments, this object [the frustrating segment] becomes the focus of their extrinsic motivation, because they start to regard it as a reward if they manage to pull through. Their perceived locus of causality between their phenomenological self (Ryan & Connell, 1989, p. 759) and focus of their motivational structure shifts towards an extrinsic relationship. This can explain why players who have a genuine interest and intrinsic motivation towards the game on the contextual level are experiencing situational parts as "work", "suffering" and "necessary evil" to their gaming experience. (Game Studies)

As Melhart notes, players often find frustrating parts of games as something which must be worked through. The causality mentioned about the phenomenological self ties into the existential tendencies of video games. When players see themselves as part of the game system, the frustration becomes something that must be overcome, as to quit the game would be to accept a defeat on the level of self. Someone who plays simply for enjoyment or relaxation may be able to walk away, but in the world of RPGs where the player is presented with nothing more than a blank slate,<sup>4</sup> the divide between player and character is almost nonexistent. *The player becomes the character*, and therefore must

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<sup>4</sup> There are many RPGs which present the player with actual characters to play and arcs to follow (for example, the main characters from any of the *Final Fantasy* games). These are different from, say, fully customizing a mute protagonist in one of the *Elder Scrolls* games, where the "character" is nothing but a vehicle for the player to experience the world through. Typically, games with blank slates have a bare-bones main story that one does not have to do. The *Souls* games are unique in that, although the character is highly customizable, the narrative is still focused and does not allow the player to explore outside of its set path.



overcome the obstacles set in front of them. It is a necessary suffering, just like how life is according to many existential philosophers.

Jesper Juul, one of the preeminent game scholars, also noted this necessity. He writes, “However, while games uniquely induce such feelings of being inadequate, they also motivate us to play more in order to escape the same inadequacy, and the feeling of escaping failure (often by improving our skills) is central to the enjoyment of games” (*Art of Failure*, 7). Games create frustration because they make things personal. Outside of some rare occasions, one does not lose a game to luck; one loses because one messed up. It creates that sense of inadequacy that must then be destroyed by the player. In combination with the gambling-like cycle of risk and reward, the cocktail for an existential desire through the player’s need to overcome the obstacles, both for the rush *and* to prove themselves, becomes clear.

Juul also notes that frustration is an intrinsic aspect of playing games but that it is not necessarily a bad thing. Although Melhart’s study takes into account frustration from the purely psychological perspective, Juul twists this into the more philosophical, noting how games play off of our frustration. He writes, “Games, depending on how we play them, give us a license to display anger or frustration on a level that we would not otherwise dare express, but some displays would still be out of bounds, rude, or socially awkward” (*Art of Failure*, 9). In other words, frustration at inadequacy is something that is valuable to the player, bringing about change and learning through the experience of the game, whilst being rude and unsportsmanlike with others is considered more problematic. “This,” he says, “is the double nature of games, their quality as ‘pleasure spiked with

pain” (*Art of Failure*, 9). Frustration is good, but it is a painful kind of good: a good through suffering.

The frustration that comes with playing games is another unique aspect to them. This type of frustration comes with its participatory nature, which leads to a personal frustration, instead of a projected one. Being frustrated with a novel or a character in a film is different from being frustrated from a *failure due to one’s own actions*. There is a clear shift between how one becomes upset at the actions of a fictional character as compared to how one becomes upset at the actions of oneself. But, a game that is pathetically easy is boring and lacks any sort of motive; a game that is too hard leads to a frustration that prevents a player from being willing to continue on. When the balance is fine-tuned and intentional, however, the game has a permanent hook for those motivated to play, regardless of what external motivation it was. It does not matter whether one picks up a *Souls* game because of the story, because it was on sale, or because one wanted bragging rights for having beaten a hard game; once begun, the motivation turns inward and the compulsion to finish becomes personal on multiple levels, especially if one has spent time digging into the lore too.

By bringing the unique cycle of frustration and relief and the need for some kind of difficulty in a game to the forefront of design, Miyazaki has developed a series of games which, although labeled “hard,” are intrinsically games. The story of *Souls* series is one which cannot fit into any other narrative medium. The frustration, the grit, and the pain of playing the game is what makes the world breathe. Watching someone else play, or watching actors act among the ruins of a city, would simply rob the viewer of the oppressive and player-directed focus of the narrative.

But Miyazaki does not stop with just teasing out the frustration of video games and making it part of the story of his world. Another fundamental aspect of most games (especially RPGs) is the collection of experience, typically through slaying enemies. Experience, of course, is necessary to level-up one's character and to grow stronger in the game. Although typically brushed off as necessary, Miyazaki once again implements the necessity of experience collection both into the lore of the game and as a fundamental question to its nature.

In the *Souls* series, the currency of experience has a name which is probably more apt to experience points than just about any other: *souls*. Unlike the more spiritual side of the term, the use of the term *soul* denotes the strength of the character. The more "souls" one has, the stronger one is. A player may never notice the on-the-nose naming of experience as souls. Denoting how the player is slaying creatures and stealing their souls, their life essence, to grow stronger is, if one takes a moment to think about it, a bold statement as to the morality of one's actions.

Morality, however, is a curious question for video games. Most forms of media allow for some amount of escapism; that is, they allow one to "escape" reality and fall into a fictional world where present issues start to melt away. In a film or a book, although the viewer may find themselves immersed, they will recognize that what is being shown is a fiction. Outside of the most true-to-life documentaries, the principle of escapism between viewer and what is being viewed holds.

Games are similar, but they have the unique twist of active participation. Although a player can separate the actions, they are committing from themselves because a

game is fictional, the game dictates that the player must still proverbially “pull the trigger”—a literal sentiment, in the case of those using a controller. Although this intimate conjoining of fact and fiction for a player has been studied, the escapism of the fantasy of a game is jarred when the player is suddenly required to act in a way different from how they would in real life. If you force a player to shoot a dog, unless they do not find that objectionable, they will likely have this moment where they feel put off by the action that, although within a fictional world, they have “committed” through hitting the button.

The *Souls* games are not an exception to this rule. Although it is a violent game that involves players slaying hundreds of deformed, deranged humans, demons, and everything in-between, it rarely pushes the player into considering such violence as anything other than a necessity for the game. However, about two-thirds of the way through the first game, the series uses a boss to create a sharp contrast between the irreverent violence one may be committing and how the player may unconsciously feel about it.

The boss in question is Sif, an oversized wolf who loyally guards the tomb of her fallen master. She is a non-optional boss; that is, she must be defeated for the player to complete the game. Not only is her being a wolf a sharp contrast from the generally grotesque creatures which one has fought before, but also her programmed mechanics may force a player to stop and think about what *Dark Souls* is presenting as its ethical framework—if it is presenting one at all.

Most players will likely run into this room and do as they have done for the last twenty or so hours of gameplay: step into the arena and watch for a pattern before inevitably dying on the first attempt. However, as the player continues to surmount the task of

defeating Sif, her behavior changes. At about 20% health, she begins to limp, still desperately swinging at the player with whatever she has left in an attempt to continue to protect the tomb of her fallen master. Unlike nearly every other fight in the entire trilogy in which bosses become more powerful in a final bid to defeat the player, Sif shows signs of weakness and pain.

*Dark Souls* is not the only game to do something like this. Many games have emotional story beats designed to jar the player into recognizing the actions they have committed within the game. However, games which do this tend to do it to make the player feel remorse or have some other emotional response for their actions. In a recent, but already infamous, example, a character in *The Last of Us: Part 2* takes revenge on a character from the first game in the series; a character whose actions were directly influenced by the player.

*Dark Souls*, however, although clearly trying to create an emotional response in the player, does nothing to reinforce that response. No character will say anything about the player killing Sif, or about how she limped as she was being defeated. There is no emotional response from the player's own character, and the boss does nothing outside of fading into dust like every other boss in the game. As painful as this moment may be for the player, *the world itself pays no mind to the player's actions*. Unlike most games, the *Souls* games simply present the player with emotional beats and then leave the player to their own devices. Even though *Dark Souls* creates the response in the first place, the game acts as though it did not do it for any other purpose than to make the player uncomfortable, which is a far cry from the more common trend of games seeking out emotional

points to reinforce and constantly bring back up to the player (*The Last of Us: Part 2* being a perfect example of this). Any remorse or rationalization of the actions committed by the player in a *Souls* game will only be done by the player and will not be coaxed by the games in any way.

The world of *Dark Souls* has little to do with ethics, with the few characters who espouse some sense of virtue doing so in an attempt to subvert humanity's attempt to usher in their age by making Gwyn's Fire-linking seem like a path to salvation. Thus, *Dark Souls* presents a particularly amoralist (meaning it is not concerned with ethical questions; it is literally acting "beyond good and evil") framework in the style of Nietzsche, who also saw such virtuosity as a way of preventing mankind to rise into its true form.

### **The Death of Digital Demons: Nietzsche's Amoralism and the Player**

Through his trifecta of amoralist works—*Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—Nietzsche strikes at the heart of what many have called "virtues" and "morality." He sought to depose the kingship of a virtuosity that was designed around weakening the natural in man. Humility, equality, mercy, and the like are the virtues of a weaker people attempting to control the stronger around them, in his eyes. He writes, "There is no other way: the feelings of deception, self-sacrifice for one's neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial must be questioned mercilessly and taken to court.... There is too much charm and sugar in these feelings of 'for others,' 'not for myself'..." (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 45, his emphasis). This concept comes to a head

in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where the hypocrisy of morality between the strong and the weak is brought out (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 110-111).

The whole of his deconstruction of morals is centered upon a belief in man's core instincts. These core instincts are, of course, amoral; they do not recognize good and evil. As people inundated in a moralized society, we must return to this form by thinking "beyond good and evil." The instinct which he proposes as our primal nature is particularly striking and still stirs controversy today. He writes:

Suppose, finally, we succeed in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of the will—namely, of the will to power, as my proposition has it; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution to the problem of procreation and nourishment—it is one problem—then one would have gained the right to determine *all* efficient force unequivocally as—*will to power*. The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its 'intelligible character'—it would be will to power and nothing else.— (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 48, his emphasis)

The will to power, although something Nietzsche argued for as a *possible* defining characteristic of humanity in our world, *is* the defining characteristic of the world of *Dark Souls*. Characters pay little to no mind to ethical responsibility beyond how to continue to hold power. Gwyn sacrifices his own life to keep control of the Age of Fire and prevent humanity from rising. Covenants operate to subvert the will of humanity by directing it towards a false salvation. The player slowly destroys the lesser beings, and even the gods, in an attempt to grow stronger and to become something beyond the human and the divine altogether. Mercy is a word reserved for the weak, and it is not a word which should enter the vocabulary of the player or the character which they control, because the game itself will not show mercy either. Every time "You Died" flashes across the screen, the

game reminds the player that it is they who failed, they who could not conquer, they who are still too weak.

Sif, for all of her emotional punch and her mechanical theatrics, will likely not break the player. The game demands to be played, and to show weakness is to lose. Perhaps in perfect existential fashion, the player must, upon defeating Sif, now descend into the Abyss, a literal place below a now-sunken city, where undead human kings hold a shard of Gwyn's soul that the player now needs. A different phrase of Nietzsche's echoes eloquent, "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 89). But, this time, the player has not slain a monster—only a dog. It is not the slaying of monsters which has turned the player into one; it is the slaying of one of the few innocent creatures which stand in the player's path: a sacrificial lamb. Thus begins the player's descent, both literally and metaphorically, into unknown territory, where what they thought they knew may be upended for something different.

Both *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls III*<sup>5</sup> are designed in such a way that the player moves in this cycle of ascent and descent. In the first game, the player ascends the Undead Burg to reach a bell which must be rung, and then descends to reach the second. The player then ascends again to reach the city of the gods, before descending once more into the Darkroot Basin, where Sif, and then the Abyss, is encountered. In *Dark Souls III*, a

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<sup>5</sup> Although some of *Dark Souls II*'s material does factor into this thesis, Miyazaki was not the lead designer on it, and as such much of the material is faulty as to whether it can be considered canon. The material taken from the second game is only taken from characters whose views and statements agree with the sentiments and lore found within the first and third games.



similar cycle occurs, with the high points being grandiose cities and the low being poisonous bogs and labyrinthian catacombs.

The descent as a metaphor becomes clear in moments like that of the battle with Sif. Every time the player descends, the ascent becomes less of a return to the light and more of a return to the illusion. In fact, it is possible for players in *Dark Souls* to discover that the beauty of the city of the gods—Anor Londo—is literally an illusion by destroying the illusion of a god and seeking out another god who has been tasked with keeping up said illusion. The Dark is the real part of humanity, and it is the false light of the gods which stands in the way of that Dark. As the player continues this cycle, they too become disillusioned, recognizing the light for what it is: a way of blinding someone from the reality of the situation. The player thus begins the overcoming of the world and the overcoming of the self. Upon slaying Sif, the player is beginning to give up that side of them that should feel remorse for such an act. The frustration and difficulty of her fight and the flash of “You Died” on each failure only makes the player want to slay Sif more as they slowly become calloused towards the innocence of such a creature. The game may not give feedback on the act, but it does not need too; the player and the character have begun to become one.

This act, perhaps, is the beginning of the whole of the work of the *Souls* games in bringing player and character into the same being. The overcoming of oneself through the character begins and continues with each strike, as every death leads to the calloused removal of oneself from the ethical implications of the actions being taken. But, the mechanics of killing for souls and items to progress is not where this existential descent

ends; the whole of this world's narrative brings into play the conception of existential being in every way that it can, concentrating all of its work into a single action: the linking of the flame, continuing the Age of Fire, or the rejection of it, allowing the Age of Dark. Each game gives the player both options, and each game presents a world in which one had to battle to become strong enough to make it. Every descent and every ascent ends in the same place. This is where the mechanics give way to the narrative, where the player's conscious effort melds into the subliminal storytelling of the world around them as they continue down the path they have chosen: an intrinsic part of what makes games, games. As noted by Marie-Laure Ryan, "In an abstract sense, of course, most if not all games create a 'game world,' or self-enclosed playing space, and *the passion that the player brings to the game may be regarded as immersion in this game-world*" (307, my emphasis). This single choice of linking the flame or rejecting it, made by the player acting within the rules of the game, applying their own will and passion, amalgamating mechanics and storytelling, player and character, reality and fiction, is the defining moment of the series, and the eventual conclusion of this thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE GODS AND THE WORLD CYCLE

“Oh, dear. Another dogged contender... Welcome, unkindled [another name for an Ashen character] one. Purloiner of cinders. Mind you, the mantle of Lord [of Cinders] interest me none. The Firelinking curse, the legacy of Lords — let it all fade into nothing.”

— Prince Lothric, upon entering his boss room, *Dark Souls III*

The eternal recurrence, which I will describe in more detail momentarily, is fundamental to the world of the *Souls* games, as seen in the ever-present choice at the end of each game. This concept, of course, is not new to existentialism; in fact, it may very well be one of its most famous ideas. Although Nietzsche is one of the first authors to develop it into what it is often seen as today, Kierkegaard was one of the first to link being with eternity in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where despair (the unwillingness to be oneself) becomes infinitely more tragic in the face of an eternal soul (something which Kierkegaard believed in, as a devout Christian). The *Souls* games radically twist the eternal recurrence formula, however, creating not only a critique of its heralding by authors like Camus and Nietzsche,<sup>6</sup> but also showing just how potent the very notion of *eternal* is in the face of other facets of being.

But, before we can get to Prince Lothric’s statement and character, we must rewind many thousands of years in the great epic of the *Souls* trilogy, returning all the way to the beginning of the very first game. In the opening cinematic, the unidentified narrator says, “But soon the flames will fade and only Dark will remain. Even now, there are only embers, and man sees not light, but only endless nights, And amongst the living are seen,

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<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard does offer a third perspective on the eternal recurrence, which is why I mention him; however, his concept is predicated entirely on belief in a good God, which simply does not exist in the *Souls* games, placing his perspective outside of the scope of this thesis.

carriers of the accursed Darksign” (*Dark Souls I*, opening cinematic). Within the opening seconds of the game, the Darksign is referred to as an “accursed” sigil on the undead.

The Darksign is one of the core pieces to the world of the *Souls* games, but it is only explained in detail in two points. The first is within the first game via a character that is not only easy to miss, but also speaks as particularly antithetical to the sentiments of the world which he inhabits. Darkstalker Kaathe, a primordial serpent,<sup>7</sup> speaks to the player about the “truth” behind the world, if they continue his quest line, eventually saying:

“Your ancestor claimed the Dark Soul and waited for Fire to subside. And soon, the flames did fade, and only Dark remained<sup>8</sup>. Thus began the age of men, the Age of Dark. However... Lord Gwyn trembled at the Dark. Clinging to his Age of Fire, and in dire fear of humans, and the Dark Lord who would one day be born amongst them, Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature. By sacrificing himself to link the fire, and command his children to shepherd the humans...” (Darkstalker Kaathe, *Dark Souls I*)

The Darksign is further spoken of in the *Scholar of the First Sin* expansion for *Dark Souls II*, which was released four years after the original game. The game expansion introduced the character of Aldia, an optional boss for the game and an NPC who frequently talks to the player while working through the material in the expansion pack. Although not much of a threat himself, Aldia’s dialogue is enlightening for those who listen.

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<sup>7</sup> The Primordial serpents are strange-looking snakes with dog-like faces with mysterious origins. Although they speak to the player in the first game, they are rarely spoken of and little is known about them or why they act in the manner that they do

<sup>8</sup> This statement is actually a poor English translation of the Japanese. The Age of Dark, according to the canon of the series, has never actually occurred; some kind of powerful being (Gwyn being the first) sacrifices themselves upon the flame before it fades away every time.

Upon meeting him in a different area before your final encounter with him, he says, “Once, the Lord of Light [Gwyn] banished Dark, and all that stemmed from humanity. And men assumed a fleeting form. These are the roots of our world. Men are props on the stage of life, and no matter how tender, how exquisite... A lie will remain a lie. Young Hollow, knowing this, do you still desire peace?” (*Dark Souls II*, when meeting Aldia in the Undead Crypt). It is only here that the player is given the truth: that it was not man, but Gwyn, the Lord of Light, who committed the First Sin of this world.

However, as Kaathe said, Gwyn did everything he could to hide his terrible act from the world around him. His children, who encompass many of the other gods, were set to turn humanity away from the truth. Churches, called Covenants, twisted Gwyn’s betrayal into a story of redemption for man, parading it as the way for humanity to find its salvation. Gwyn himself gifted humanity the Ringed City, a beautiful and massive acropolis where many of the great pygmy kings and their peoples were shepherded and told to wait for their time... Little did they know that the Ring was a prison, designed to hold them until the end of the world.

The religions of the game world can very easily be said to be an “opium of the people.” The churches are designed by the gods to prevent the humans-turned-undead into realizing that it is the gods that have betrayed them. This becomes especially interesting in the third game, in which an underground church, known as the Sable Church, becomes a target for religious condemnation and attack. The Sable Church is a church of man, which seeks to turn humanity to their coming savior, the so-called Chosen Undead, who will bring about the Age of Dark once and for all. In the secret ending of *Dark Souls*

*III*, one can actually attain this, and it is perhaps the only truly good ending for the entire series, and the only one which has any semblance of resolution.

However, it is unclear whether the bringing about of the end of the Age of Fire will remove the accursed Darksign from humanity. It may very well still be true that they will live, die, become undead, and die over and over again until they turn Hollow (a condition in which the human is nothing more than a shell with no soul). Thus, humanity may be trapped in a true cycle of despair, desiring to die and yet being unable to do so. They may be committed to a meaningless infinite recurrence until madness finally consumes them, which is at least some respite from the otherwise infinite horror. The Darksign's curse is not the madness which it brings, but the unalterable eternity that it places upon humanity. The madness is a lucky gift—a by-product of a constant death and rebirth. Humanity was meant to be finite, and the gods placed upon them the infinite.

From a purely philosophical perspective, the Darksign takes a very intimate look at Nietzsche's eternal recurrence through turning it into a literal aspect of the world. The eternal recurrence acts as an allegory in the end of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (although it also appears in his other works) by which someone is to act under the pretense of an eternal return (332). The eternal recurrence is a doctrine of joyful fulfillment; it postulates that, to live life to the fullest, one must do things which one would willingly do an infinite number of times. Unlike the Christian style of eternity, whereby one passes from a single mortal life into a single eternal life, the eternal recurrence is an infinite cycle of mortal lives (in thought, at least; it is not truly literal and is not meant to be taken as a religious eternity either).

The *Souls* games, especially through the Darksign and the world cycle, take Nietzsche at his word. A human within this world, once undead, will be cursed to do the same actions<sup>9</sup> until the madness sets in; or, perhaps, it is not madness *setting in* so much as it is madness *from the task of* committing to such choices. Being faced with a choice that one would be required to choose over and over again is tragic and will only lead to overthinking. In the case of the game, this takes the form of the player choosing to go back into a boss room after each death. Over and over again, the player is defeated, but the possibility of winning, even in the context of just a game, consumes them. But, as frustration sets in, the player and character begin to lose their humanity in attempt after attempt, for, is one addicted to gambling not losing a piece of their humanity upon each pull of the slot lever? Thus, is it really the effort of resurrection which robs a human of their humanity, of a piece of their soul, or is it failing at an action *ad infinitum*?

However, the Darksign being a literal interpretation of the eternal recurrence does move past Nietzsche's intent, to an extent. His concept was symbolic and, as noted before, designed to produce willful action in a person. The "curse" of the Darksign, although literal, is heightened by humanity's *inaction*. The cycle of life, death, and rebirth, combined with the necessity of choice, becomes tragic when one becomes consumed with it. But, if one were to simply accept this notion and to live to the fullest within the framework, then one has, perhaps, prevented the insanity which afflicts humanity. In the *Souls* games, the Hollows are those which have died so many times that they have lost their humanity. The player character also loses Humanity both literally and figuratively,

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<sup>9</sup> An undead still has will and can choose to do something else, but it is the "same actions" in that an undead is simply trying to survive for a second time, with another death seemingly inevitable.

as Humanity operates as a resource which the player can consume to return to a living form and is dropped (along with current souls) upon a death, but never goes Hollow. This insistence on acting and moving through the game on the part of the player, via the character, prevents the character from going Hollow. But, if the player were to quit, then the character is now left in an eternal regression, with nobody left to will them forward.

Being willing to act in the face of such horrors has at least two connotations within existentialism. The first is what was described above; that is, accepting this fate and acting within whatever framework one must. The second, however, sees this as an act of rebellion against the Absurd, or absolute meaningless. Built on to the end of Nietzsche, Albert Camus continued work on the idea of the eternal recurrence and the search for meaning. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Camus was unwilling to accept that there was anything with actual meaning; he came to the conclusion that it was man's permanent curse to desire meaning within the meaningless. This mode of thought became known as absurdism. Although Albert Camus pioneered this thought process with much of his work, *The Myth of Sisyphus* stands out as his most prominent—and perhaps the most famous—work on the subject. The actual myth of Sisyphus, of course, is about a man cursed to roll a rock up a hill that always ends up rolling back down for eternity. The parallels the myth shares with the *Souls* games are not exactly hard to spot, as one perpetuates a cycle of death and rebirth across an entire world within a game that is unbeatable from a narrative standpoint.

Camus offers a second critique of the promise of eternity and further strengthens the “accursed” nature of the Darksign. He was quick to point out that something that is eternal must have little to no meaning, and that eternity is no consolation for someone



seeking meaning. He writes “To work and create ‘for nothing,’ to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance building for centuries—this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions” (114). Absurdism compounds the flaws with the eternal recurrence that the *Souls* games pull out, purporting that the Darksign not only forces humanity into a loop of actions that lead to insanity, but also a loop that has no meaning. With each loop, a part of the human soul is taken from the person, as if it is only the desperate search, the desperate *hope* for meaning that can keep humanity alive. Again, it is a lack of acceptance of what is placed upon humanity that is harming it the most. Even absurdism is a livable belief, if one is willing to accept it.

It is here where the words of Prince Lothric begin to come abundantly clear. Interestingly, however, Prince Lothric is among the gods, a being born of Gwyn’s wife and who owns part of Gwyn’s soul because of it. The kingdom of which he is heir was obsessed with creating a bloodline strong enough to produce people who could rekindle the First Flame and reinitiate the Age of Fire each time it was necessary. Lothric, however, under the tutelage of a scholar who was skeptical, rejected his duty. From the mouth of a demigod come the harrowing words that the world cycle is meaningless and that it would be better for humanity to rise; and yet he still makes the task of defeating the player in what is one of the hardest boss fights in the third game.

It is possible to consider Lothric a nihilist, but I think it is more accurate to pin him as the absurdist, as one who recognizes the meaningless of the world around him, but who still turns to rebellion against his destined path and fighting those who continue on the path he rejected. He has recognized the world, and especially the Age of Fire, at its

face value, and instead of perpetuating the rekindling cycle that stands antithetical to the world order, he accepts that it is necessary for the world to move on into the Age of Dark. Perhaps he does not fight the player because it is his duty so much as to prevent the player from making the wrong choice at the end of the game by rekindling the First Flame.

Lothric may also be representative of one of the first *Übermensch* of the world of the *Souls* games. Although the concept will become more imperative in the final section of this thesis, Lothric shows the first signs of the mode of thought. Zarathustra, from the book which bears his name, is Nietzsche's titular *Übermensch* character. Throughout the book, he is constantly at odds with many of the things which the people of Nietzsche's day (and even the people of today) hold to be valuable: pity, piety, luxury, democracy (in the sense of mob rule, not just the political system), and guilt. Zarathustra is a maker of his own rules, declaring vehemently at the beginning of the book that "God is dead!" (124). The death of God is Nietzsche rebelling against the value systems perpetuated by the Christian faith. The death of God, however, becomes a literal idea in *Dark Souls*. Gwyn has literally sacrificed himself to perpetuate an age of gods, and although he did not die for his love and pity for man, like the Christian God did, according to Zarathustra, Gwyn did die out of a love for his kingdom, and a pity for his own kin (202).

Lothric, then, is declaring something not so different from Zarathustra. He has declared Gwyn dead, along with his descendants. He has declared the Age of Fire a cycle uncouth, much like how Zarathustra views the virtues of Christianity as uncouth for man. Finally, he gives no pity for the player's plight, willfully trying to kill the player every time they attempt to move on. Lothric's only failing as an *Übermensch* is in his failure to

live and to laugh; instead of loving his freedom from the cycle by seeing its failure, he has fallen into a deep cynicism and nihilism—the antithesis of what the *Übermensch* is meant to be. Perhaps he opens the door for another to take his place as the *Übermensch* of the *Dark Souls* lore.

Lothric is not the only one who talks to the player about their actions when it comes to the world cycle. Aldia speaks to the player character in *Dark Souls II*, saying, “All men trust fully the illusion of life. But is this so wrong? A construction, a facade, and yet... A world full of warmth and resplendence. Young Hollow, are you intent on shattering the yoke, spoiling this wonderful falsehood?” (*Dark Souls II*, when meeting Aldia in Dragon Shrine). Here, Aldia takes a separate perspective from Lothric, saying that, although man is supposed to rise, man is also happy in the Age of Fire. The prosperity of gods has led to a different kind of prosperity in men. As cruel as Gwyn was to place some of the more powerful people into the Ringed City, much of mankind did come into its own while he and his descendants ruled. When the Age of Fire dims, so too does this prosperity. This paradox is quintessentially absurd, because it is a lie for man to continue in his prosperity under the sin of the gods, but it is also this lie which is keeping much of mankind content. This is the choice which the player must make and is presented with, as the gods will tell one to link the fire to continue this prosperity, while most of the human people one comes in contact with are telling the player to reject it. And yet, the cycle continues regardless, and the meaninglessness of the choice perpetuates ever onward.

In fact, the cycle perpetuates all the way to the collapse of the world. In the final expansion for *Dark Souls III*, we see the final resolution—if it can even be called that—of the series and its world. In this final expansion, the player gets to visit the Ringed City

in all of its beautiful, and yet horrifying, glory. It is only now that we see Gwyn's initial attempts to prevent the age of dark, seven years after the first game.

However, the Ringed City itself is not what interests us here. Instead, it is the boss which ends the expansion and, symbolically, the series as a whole. His name is Slave Knight Gael, and he was met briefly in the first expansion of *Dark Souls III: The Ashes of Ariandel*.

The Slave Knight is tied to a young maiden in the typical knight and ward fashion. His lady is a magician, able to paint worlds into existence. She has sent out Gael to seek out the material that she needs for her painting: souls. In his pursuit, Gael has gone mad, and has committed himself to recreating the entire Dark Soul (remember that one gains the "souls" of another upon defeating them) within him as the paint for the next world, which, in layman's terms, means he has committed mass genocide against the human race to create a new human race in a different world. As a player, one does not discover this truth until one touches a magical artifact in the Ringed City which launches the player forward in time, to the very end of time itself. Here, one meets Gael killing the last of humanity off, reforming the Dark Soul within him. Evidently, however, the world cycle continued ever onward, and here, we find that humanity never received its Age of Dark. We stand as his final conquest, or his comeuppance at the very end. The player and Gael are all that is left of humanity.

Of course, as it is a game, the player is able to go back to their own time after defeating Gael. Or, perhaps it is no coincidence, for what can the player do to shift the path of the world? Again, the choice becomes both paramount and meaningless. Allow the world to ascend into its Age of Dark, and Gael will still seek humanity. Rekindle the

flame, and Gael will still seek out humanity. One could kill Gael in the present, but the world cycle continues, and eventually it will be nothing but ash and dust.

This endless abyss of mankind's desire is an ultimate form of absurdism. Humanity, in Nietzschean fashion, cannot escape its own suffering, nor can it escape the fate that has been thrust upon it by the gods. Camus follows up this train of thought, bringing in a more potent shot of absurdism, saying, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world.... The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter—these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable" (28). This is the travesty of the eternal recurrence: an endless cycle of fundamentally meaningless choice. No matter what one would choose to do *ad infinitum*, the suffering cannot go away. Thus, it is an insult to injury that the player is referred to as the "chosen" undead, as they are referred to in this way without telling the player what it is, necessarily, that they are destined to do. In the first game, characters will remark that one is chosen to ring the two "bells of awakening," which are meant to awaken the undead and herald the chosen undead. But, after one does so, they meet Kingseeker Frampt, a primordial serpent like Kaathe, who then tells the player that they are destined to rekindle the flame: an outright lie and betrayal of their kind, and yet something one may be none the wiser to. The prophetic inclinations are a falsehood, a betrayal of man's desire for choice and meaning. As if suffering were not enough insult to injury, as if being stuck in an endless loop were not terrible enough, the player is thrown into a fake prophecy that robs them of their choice to do something via their own will. The only choice is to rebel, and yet rebellion simply leaves the world cycle in order. In the words of Camus, "one

must imagine Sisyphus [or, here, the chosen undead] happy” (123). In terms of this world being a game, however, it initially seems as though the only way to rebel against its narrative is to quit: a fundamental rejection of its very nature as a game meant for entertainment.

Thus, Gael’s maiden is also indicative of another failed *Übermensch*. Although it is Gael who exists as a roadblock regardless of the choice the player may wish to choose at the end of the game,<sup>10</sup> it is the Maiden whose ideals reflect upon him. She is the quintessential rebel against the Absurd of the game world in which she exists. Faced with the horrors of her world, she chooses to reject it and works to create a new one, proverbially “quitting” her world, disregarding whatever ethical quandaries may be present in the actions of her knight.

In rejecting the world in which she exists, the maiden desperately clings to hope and pity. Nietzsche regarded these two emotions as those most difficult for a person to give up on their way to ascendency, and she clings to them with all of her being. The maiden factors into this as well, as she, too, has given in to hope (wanting to create a new world) and pity (believing humanity is bad in its current place) in her work on the painted world.

Thus, the two failed *Übermensches* serve as the final trials of the player. Lothric, the last boss before the Soul of Cinder, and Gael, the last boss of the final expansion, do everything to turn the player from their path. Although the maiden is the true second *Übermensch*, it is Gael, who embodies her virtues, which the player must face. They are

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<sup>10</sup> The player must beat the expansions before completing the game, as the game resets upon completion.

brutal, difficult, and offer an invariable perspective different from the one the astute player has hopefully been creating. One, the embodiment of nihilism, and the other, the embodiment of hope and pity, come together to be the stepping stones for the player's final move to the First Flame and to their becoming, which is the topic for the remainder of this thesis.

Perhaps rebellion against the Absurd is not in quitting, but in playing in spite of all of the circumstances which make up every movement of the player. Rebellion was Camus' response to absurdism, and here it seems to be in full force. In his own words, "One of the only coherent philosophical positions [other than the absurd] is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity" (54). It is up to the player to find meaning in the meaninglessness of their motion through a game, in a story designed to oppress a player's hopes and break a player's spirit. Nietzsche, too, finds this action acceptable, although he sees it as a form of acceptance of what fate has brought humanity, instead of a rebellion against it. In Nietzsche's view, one must accept what the world is and live fully through it; in Camus', one must reject the truth of the world (its meaninglessness) to seek meaning anyway. The difference is in whether reality, the world, the natural is one's ally or one's enemy. Embrace the world and live life to the fullest, or live life to the fullest in spite of the fundamental nature of the world. These two differing viewpoints culminate in the choice that has been referred to before and that always acts as the capstone to each game in the series: link the flame or walk away. Based upon the mechanics, the lore, and the intent of the player, however, the true choice, and the games' resounding resolution, is clear.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE PLAYER-CHARACTER

As each game winds to a close in the series, the player must come face to face with their one choice: the gods would have one rekindle the flame and man would have you step away to allow the Age of Dark, but neither path seems concrete.<sup>11</sup> Every game presents its cycle, and every player is presented with the same choice to begin it again or to attempt to break it. As a mute shell of a human being, as nothing more than a manifestation of the weaponry and combat expertise which one possesses, your character seems disinterested in any of the acts occurring. Whether it be the slaying of Sif in the first game, or the death of a young woman in the third, the character never responds. The story is simply experienced—not interacted with. The player may move the character forward, but the story occurs as it will no matter what the player does. Even in quitting, the cycle will continue with those that remain. The player is insignificant, “chosen” only because they have stepped forward, as is the case in the first game, or because others before you refused to fulfill their duty, as is the case in the third.

What, then, is the proper response of a player? Or, perhaps more accurately, what is the response that the game desires from the player? Is it simply a choice, or is it something more? The *Souls* narration is not designed to fill in the gaps between the mechanics; it is both its mechanics and something more, something far deeper. The choice is not meant to be an event which simply fulfills the needs of the plot of the game; it is a choice designed to be personal, to affect the player who must make the decision. It is in this

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<sup>11</sup> Although this is always the choice, each game does present it in a different form. The first game is explicitly sacrificing oneself or walking away, while the third game presents the options in a slightly different manner.



choice that player and character become one, combined in both action and thought. The second soul found in the character becomes part of the player as the two come together in one final decision, where the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

It is likely that many, if not most, players have missed the potency of the game-ending decision in each entry in this franchise, but is that the fault of the game, or the fault of how we *think* about games? The player who looks at games as nothing more than entertainment will inevitably miss the details of the story underneath in much the same way that one who watches movies for spectacle will never get more out of the narrative than its face value. Perhaps it is intentional that the choices of the *Souls* series seem to have both significance and none at all, and that whether one sees the significance is related to how one views games. Not everyone can stare into the Abyss, for not everyone can prevent themselves from becoming a monster by looking too deep. The character's soul becomes strong through slain enemies and strategic combat. What enemies must the player slay to make it to the same place as the character which they control?

### **The Precipice: When Two Become One**

*Dark Souls* is an existential game at heart, with difficulty and suffering its heartbeat. Its pounding heartbeat is not just designed, however, to crush the player; it is designed to get them thinking. Although the Kiln of the First Flame is a place deep below the earth in *Dark Souls*, it finds itself at the very edge of the world in *Dark Souls III*, as the fire linking cycle has literally started to rot the world away. As one enters the kiln for the final time in the third game, the Darksign hangs in the sky, scarring the sun itself.

Here, one does truly stand at a precipice: a precipice at the edge of the world, of all that is known. Here, one faces the Soul of Cinder, an amalgamation of every other being that has ever sacrificed itself on the flame to rekindle it. In combat, it uses the four primary build-types of the first game: a pyromancer, a miracle user, a knight, and a wizard. In its final moments, it even takes on the aspect of Gwyn, striking at the player with familiar combinations as the sound of his piano piece plays into the otherwise pulse-pounding orchestral theme of the fight.

This is it. This is the final choice. The lead up from the first game through to the end of the third has led up to this final moment. As the Soul of Cinder falls under the player's weapon, what will they choose? Here, the precipice is only symbolic of the choice that must be made at the foot of the First Flame.

There are three actions which can be done upon reaching this point in the game, represented by the two choices. The first is to link the flame, setting the world back into the cycle of the Age of Fire. The second is to walk away, allowing the Age of Dark to rise, and allowing the player to ascend to the mantle of Dark Lord. The third is to do either without any further purpose; that is, the player makes the choice arbitrarily, feeling nothing for the decision which they have made.<sup>12</sup>

Each of these actions represents a different existential end in the heart of the player who has listened to the heartbeat of the world. Every design decision and narrative point brings the player to this position where they must choose with no further input from

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<sup>12</sup> *Dark Souls III* technically presents four possible endings: linking the flame, destroying the flame, succumbing to the flame, and usurping the flame. Succumbing to the flame is the one action not spoken about here because it falls under the same category as linking the flame, philosophically speaking.

the world around them. Even the ambient music stops upon the defeat of the guardian standing in the way of the player, whether it be Gwyn or the Soul of Cinder. All that is left to breathe is player and character.

The first choice—linking the flame—is the choice of someone who has ignored what has gone on around them. This is the choice of the player who plays simply for entertainment, but it is also a denial of that which the player and character are expected to become. As has been explained throughout this thesis, the obvious path of linking the flame is a lie; it is the opposite of what any human character should do. It is a willful rejection of their true mantle as Dark Lord of humanity.

This action within the game also perpetuates the endless, meaningless cycle of linking the flame. Although the player has made a choice, their choice only perpetuates the Age of Fire for a little while longer, before, inevitably, the flame fades again, and another must take the mantle. Thus, this action may be characterized as that of the nihilistic, as an acceptance of meaninglessness in the face of everything that has come before. The player takes the game to have no inherent meaning, and thus feels nothing upon perpetuating the suffering of humanity through the linking of the flame. This is the rejection of player and character becoming one, of allowing the game to affect the player in any meaningful way. It is not absurd, as there is no attempt at a rebellion against the game itself: the game was still played by its rules and for its purpose as a game. It is only a rejection of the mantle which the game wishes to place upon its player and character in tandem. This is the worst choice of the player, and the definitive “bad ending” for each game.

The next choice—to walk away and assume the mantle of Dark Lord—is the choice of the overcomer, or the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche spent a great deal of his work trying to get people to a place where they would wish to overcome themselves, that is, getting people to where they would reject and overcome the things that society has inun-  
dated into them. Most famously, this meant overcoming the notion of morals, but the second aspect of this overcoming is the willingness to live fully as oneself. In *The Gay Science*, he describes it as *amor fati*: the love of fate. He writes:

I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them - thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer! (157)

This notion of the love of fate, or what can be considered a charge to “live life to the fullest,” is another apt response within the final choice of *Dark Souls III*.

In simple terms, this act can be seen as “it is the journey that matters, not the destination.” In defeating enemies and growing stronger, the player is finding meaning in themselves through the character and the overcoming of the obstacles which the world is attempting to throw at the player and character. The player is becoming stronger, just as the character which they control is growing stronger. This act can also be done by players who do not spend as much time digging up the lore, but I believe that it becomes more impactful in those who do. A player who recognizes what the game is trying to do will reject its attempted resolution out of spite and as a willful act against the “desires” of the false leaders of the game. A player who plays simply for entertainment may also find

themselves making this leap as they give in to the natural instinct of growth through the destruction of others in a type of psychological projection into the game world.<sup>13</sup>

This act is a declaration of will at the highest level, denying the very gods and the game's attempted will altogether. This is accomplishment through gameplay: an overcoming of oneself via the overcoming of a game, as the player suspends morals and beliefs to become something of an *Übermensch* within the game. The player and character do become one here, as the character takes his rightful place, and the player recognizes the overcoming of the obstacles which stood in their way. The player has slain countless enemies to grow stronger, but it is a growth for themselves, and not for that of what the characters of the game wish. This can be seen in the gatekeeping style of many of the better players of the game. Although it has now evolved well passed the *Souls* games, the "git gud" mentality is that of a "if you are bad, it is on you." This, although not something which Nietzsche's *Übermensch* would ever do, does establish the notion of overcoming the game as a rite of passage. These are players who have accomplished the feat fully, and now have the ability to look down upon those who have not.

The final action is that of the Absurd. In the act of overcoming, the player is still operating within the confines of the game; that is, the player accepts the story that has been given them, the role they are to play, and the rules that the game expects the player to follow. There is no malice against the game, nor is there any frustration with the fate

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<sup>13</sup> Return to Melhart's study earlier in this thesis on page eleven for a more in-depth discussion of this psychological projection.

that has been given to the player; that would, of course, go directly against the very notion of *amor fati*. The player is instead acting within the game to the fullest extent, not allowing themselves to disconnect from the reality being presented them.

The absurdist, however, rebels against this process. An absurdist rejects the attempted meaningfulness of the game and its story, taking it as something that has no meaning as a self-contained world within a game. Although a pure rejection of the ability of player and character to connect, it is a player exercising their knowledge of the absurd through a game. As Camus often pointed out, few people want to accept the possibility of the absurd, and those who do can never let go of that statement. Thus, players who operate on the level of the absurd are those who are aware of its possibility and are projecting this notion into the game. Perhaps the games' world *is* meaningless, but is not our own world too?

The notion against the absurd is that of rebellion: to strike against the possibility of meaningless in the desperate search for meaning. Camus writes, "Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity" (54). In a game, a player facing the absurd is granted a boon in the ability to reject the absurd through the game itself. If games, as entertainment, are fundamentally meaningless, then it is a rejection of that presumed meaninglessness that gives the game its meaning.

Unlike the other two actions which can be done at the end of each game, this action affects how a player will end up playing through the game. Each game in the series allows for a massive amount of customizability. The players who play in the absurd often

come up with very strange and silly-looking characters, rebelling against the more serious nature of the games and their story. Additionally, many of these players will create absurd challenges for themselves or find ways to cheat the game by exploiting glitches. Although a hard game on its own, a rather large community of players exists seeking to increase the challenge of the game through voluntary means, whether it be through using bad weapons, playing through the game at level one, or even using unconventional controllers (famously, Rock Band controllers and a dance pad have been used to beat the games). Why would one seek to do this? Because it is only the challenge which makes the game have meaning: a meaning through suffering.<sup>14</sup> The game itself is meaningless, but the player may rebel against this through attempting to make it harder and more challenging, increasing the level of suffering a player may experience. Thus, the player feels accomplished upon beating the game in an even harder state, which makes up some sense of meaning, even if it is still just a game.

Camus compares this rebellion to the likes of performers in theatre. “The everyday man,” he says, “does not enjoy tarrying. Everything, on the contrary, hurries him onward. But at the same time nothing interests him more than himself, especially his potentialities. Whence his interest in the theatre, in the show, where so many fates are offered him, where he can accept the poetry without feeling the sorrow” (77). This is indicative of the person who takes the first action mentioned in this section, who runs from the pos-

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<sup>14</sup> Speed running and challenge running is common to a lot of games, but it is generally done in games considered easy on their own. The *Souls* games are unique in that they are a particularly hard set of games with an intense narrative, but yet speed runners have still made the game arbitrarily harder.

sibilities in front of him, unwilling to face the possibility of the sorrow. The absurd person, however, is different from this. Camus continues, “The absurd man begins where that [the above man] leaves off, where, ceasing to admire the play, the mind wants to enter in. Entering into all these lives, experiencing them in their diversity, amounts to acting them out” (77). Is not the equivalent in a game of acting in a play to play one’s character in every combination of weapon, style, and look? Is it not to cease to admire the game by rejecting its attempt at power through storytelling and instead experiencing the game as just a vehicle for escapist entertainment? The player has accomplished something in the reaction, but the answer to “why play at all” is not discovered through ramping up difficulty or creating arbitrary challenges.

But, which of these actions, with the player recognizing what they are doing, do the *Souls* games wish the player to make? After all of the toil of designing the game and its story, after all the toil on the part of the player to reach the end, what is the choice which Miyazaki himself would wish for players to choose? Although this is not something which Miyazaki has stated, I believe that the lore, the mechanics, the psychology of the player, and the notion of the choice itself point to a single, proper choice. This proper choice, although intrinsic to Dark Souls, is then something which continues onward from it, into the landscape of games and gaming as a whole. The *Souls* series, as dark and oppressive as it is, is also clarifying, perhaps, why we often seek games like it at all.

### **To Leap into the Abyss: Player and Character as *Übermensch***



The path to the “good” ending of *Dark Souls III* is not a particularly easy one. The quest line is obscure, requiring the player to do specific tasks in a proper order, with a single mistake breaking the ability to finish the quest line without a reset. It is no coincidence that the best ending is also the hardest to get, and that one must have an intimate knowledge of the game to find each piece of its puzzle. In *Dark Souls III*, the ending is referred to as the usurpation of Fire. It is not just a rejection of the linking of the flame; it is the consummation of it within one powerful enough to take it into their form. Yuria, a young woman from a city of mankind and the primary person to this quest, says, “The Age of Fire was founded by the old gods, sustained by the linking of the fire. But the old gods are no more, and the all-powerful fire deserveth a new heir. Our Lord of Hollows, it shall be, who weareth the true face of mankind” (Yuria, after completing the ceremony, *Dark Souls III*). The old fire of the gods has faded, and it is time for the dark soul of man to claim its place.

Although, as mentioned of in a previous section, there is no true way to put finality to the series, there is a way in which player and character gain a finality to their meaning via the overcoming of that which has made them stumble: the First Flame and the linking of the Fire. The symbolism of consuming the power of the gods as a human being, stamping out the last remnant of them into the ashes around the player, is both poignant and a near-perfect encapsulation of the ideology of Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s titular *Übermensch*.

From escaping the Asylum for Hollows in *Dark Souls* to fighting the amalgamation of all of those turned to cinder in *Dark Souls III*, the player, who has experienced the entirety of the cycle, unlike his character counterpart, has progressed immensely. The

sweet innocence of not knowing what the future may hold upon rejecting or linking the First Flame at the end of the first game is replaced by a perfect clarity by the time one reaches the end of the third. If the first game qualifies as the leap into the Abyss, started by the slaying of Sif and consummated in the actions of the player at the end of the first game, then the third is the player's ascent into the mountain, back into humanity with a renewed sense of understanding. The gods are dead, and those who are not will be before one reaches the flame. A player who does not complete both the first and third games will miss out on its final, punctual notes.

If there were a character who could be god in this series, although he would never accept the title nor the mantle, it would be Zarathustra. In fact, it is him and his teachings which convey the final points of this great epic and tragedy of life and the eternal recurrence. In his words, "And life [literally a personification in the book] itself confided this secret to me: 'Behold,' it said, 'I am *that which must always overcome itself*. Indeed, you call it a will to procreate or a drive to an end, to something higher, farther, more manifold but all this is one, and one secret'" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 227). Here are the beginnings of the discussion of the eternal recurrence: that life must continue to overcome itself and its own failings. It is not an overcoming of other things, but an overcoming of the self. Life is not meant to be looked at as a problem to be surmounted, but the process by which one overcomes those things which hold us back, whether it be cultural norms, morality, or religion. This sentiment is echoed through the games, as the player's failure to defeat bosses and progress is no fault of the game and its obstacle, but a failure of the player to be strong enough. "You Died" is flashed upon death, not "game over," after all.

Further into Zarathustra's teachings, the ties between the finale of *Dark Souls III* and Zarathustra become tighter, as Zarathustra says, "Before God [we are all equal]! But now this god has died. You higher men, this god was your greatest danger. It is only since he lies in his *tomb that you have been resurrected*. Only now the great noon comes; *only now the higher man becomes—lord*" (398, my emphasis). The words of Zarathustra perfectly echo the words of Yuria as she speaks to the player about the usurpation. Although the character of *Dark Souls III* is but an ash of one who once believed in the linking of the flame and who has been resurrected from their death upon it, the *player* of *Dark Souls III* is one who has seen the cycle from the beginning. The player is the one who killed the gods in the first place, who has allowed for the rise of this Dark Lord. Here, player and character are united in a final goal, as the eternally recurred player, the one who has been through the cycles, unites with the character who will end up overcoming the cycle of the gods for the cycle of man. Eternity does not die; there is no indication of that in the games. The Darksign continues to strike at man, but now the gods are no more, and eternity is theirs.

However, the transformation of player and character into *Übermensch* was not complete until the introduction of Gael in *The Ringed City*. It is important to note that, although the player faces Gael in a place far into the future, Gael must be defeated before the player finishes the main game. Remember, the *Souls* games do not have a post-game; after the credits roll, the player can play with the same character from the very beginning of the game at a now-higher difficulty.

Gael is the embodiment of the final task for the upcoming *Übermensch*. Gael, described as a *slave knight*, serves his maiden unquestionably. He seeks the Dark Soul for

her painting, clinging on to *hope* for a better future in a different world, and a *pity* for the destitution of mankind around him. These two virtues—hope and pity—are those which Nietzsche felt were the hardest for any person to overcome and are the final stepping stones to becoming an *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche speaks directly against the acts of Gael through Zarathustra. In the very beginning of the work, Zarathustra says, “Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hope! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not” (125, his emphasis). Although Nietzsche’s words were directed towards the religions which believe in an eternal paradise, in a world where such an afterlife is denied by an eternally recurring soul, is not seeking to escape into a different world the same? Hope in another world is a sin against the earth, a sin against mortality. It robs life of its living meaning when one looks beyond the present to a *hope in some future end*. This is not to say that all hope is bad; on the contrary, hope for a present shift, for a personal overcoming and the attempt of it in others, is still open to anyone. Thus, the hope of the player in seeking the overcoming of themselves through the usurpation of fire is no sin, but Gael, in seeking an escape, has sinned.

Pity, like hope for the wrong thing, is a dangerous false virtue. Not only does it often manifest as a virtue in those who use pity as a way to become self-important, but also it can rob others of their own overcoming. Zarathustra, once again, speaks out about it directly, saying, “Verily, I do not like them, the merciful who feel *blessed in their pity*: they are lacking too much in shame. If I must pity, at least I do not want it known; and if

I do pity, it is preferably from a distance” (200, my emphasis). Although it may not seem as though Gael pities humanity, his demeanor and the actions of his lady beg to differ. His pity is to slay humanity, to take its life so that a new one can be created. As servant to a creator, Gael operates with the pity and hope of his master. For Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, it was pity which is the most difficult thing to be overcome. The majority of the final part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* involves Zarathustra fighting against the desire to pity the men who are attempting to overcome themselves and failing to do so. Zarathustra continues in this same chapter to recognize that true pity is only to help someone in getting up and to do nothing else but make sure they do not self-destruct in whatever state they find themselves in. He says, “But if you have a suffering friend, be a resting place for his suffering, but a hard bed as it were, a field cot: thus will you profit him best” (202). It is better to be given nothing than to be coddled to the point of never wishing to overcome something.

As has become customary with much of the narrative of this game, although Gael’s actions are a part of his own world, they have their place beyond it. Like the possibility of linking the flame to allow the gods another age and to allow humanity some luxury through that, Gael is enticing the player to a desperate hope. In this case, the hope is that of another world entirely, but it is an affront to what the player has done through the game. The same goes for his embodiment of pity, as he sees the player as one who is suffering and in need of an external salvation, when, in reality, it is the *player* who has overcome all of the adversity to get to this point. It would make all of the work done to get to Gael at all a moot point if one were to just allow him one’s death so that this “new world” could be made. To run away to a different world in hope of finding something better robs

the meaning from all of the self-overcoming that the player has done through the character. Although Gael stands as a final task for the character, to prevent an ultimate genocide in the name of hope, it also stands as the player's final consummation into the *Übermensch*, as the final hope for an escape from the world of *Souls* games is struck down. It is poignant that the player is never offered a different consolation with Gael; the player must either beat him or simply never finish the expansion, thereby failing to eliminate the final threat to them upon becoming the Dark Lord. After all of the toil, after the work of the game in the moments before this one, I doubt that any player would have any desire for a different consolation. The work of the *Souls* series culminates in this fight, one versus one, the coming *Übermensch* versus the slave gone mad.

Many a player sought out *Dark Souls* as a game: as an escape from the reality that they exist within. These players were then faced with a world which held up a mirror to their own reality, showing them the darkest nature of the gods, of eternity, and of humanity itself. The player, however, continues on, overcoming obstacles and challenges as a way of fulfilling and overcoming themselves: an escape from reality into a digital scape where they could overcome in a way impossible in the "real world." As hours are logged, the players become calloused to the violence, and accept the suffering and frustration as necessary to their overcoming. By the time they reach the end of the third game, the overcoming is complete, and they find themselves rejecting hope, pity, the gods, and a meaningless, horrific eternity. A player has traded a soul for a soul; they have traded one reality and a chance at overcoming for a different reality and its own overcoming. The player and character are but one in the same, but the question remains: who is the player, and who the character?

If Zarathustra were a real person, playing the game alongside a player, I wonder what he would say? I believe it is only appropriate to cap this thesis with a statement from the character who has already left all of his shackles behind. What would Zarathustra have to say to the player who finally reaches the end, who has delved deep into another world?

## CHAPTER FOUR: ZARATHUSTRA'S CHARGE

What will you do, young player, as you take your place in this world of another's design? Have you escaped that which troubles you here? Have you not run from your troubles to seek others, to seek a different kind of suffering? A suffering that allows for an *overcoming*?

What will you do, young slayer? Wilt thou give in to thy natural instincts, to the caged animal shackled within you by modernity? Wilt thou kill with reckless abandon, with no need for thoughts of morality? Why think of the death of a digital man? Why think of the death of a digital god!

Thou hast entered into the eternal cycle of Lordran and Lothric to escape the eternal cycle of one's own accursed immortality. Thou wilt slay beasts and man as thou exercises strength over the weaker, over the pathetic and wasters of souls. Thy destiny is set, for the path is certain; wilt thou rebel? For what should one rebel against? For to rebel from thy destiny is to return to the reality which thou hast so desperately tried to escape.

The pathway is painful and full of frustration, but would thou have it any other way? Is not ease and convenience that which robs souls of the possibility of greatness? Allow the natural man inside of you to break his shackles. Allow him to grow and to overcome that which reality will not allow you to. Slay the gods which can be slayed and place oneself among their corpses as a god oneself.

What wilt thou choose, player? Wilt thou allow the cycle to repeat? Hast thou found the illusion of grandeur alluring? Hast thou succumbed to the irrational, to the divine? Or wilt thou overcome even destiny and step away! Rise, rise and take thy place as *Urbemensch*! Become what thou cannot become! Let absurdism have its place in your



heart as you become a god of the meaningless, a god of that which can only have meaning in its ability to escape from meaninglessness!

Is this not thy task, player, to overcome thyself through another? Are you not giving away thy natural instinct to that which has none outside of you? Dost thou control the character, or does the character control you? But who is the character, the man who plays to escape reality, or the character whose reality is a game? For what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, *but lose his own soul*? Thou hast lost thy soul in one world for another, but which soul hast thou lost, and which world hast thou gained? That is up to thee!

Thus spoke Zarathustra.

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