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Philosophy

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Dark Souls: Critical Thinking in Modern Gaming

Over the past few decades video games have rapidly established themselves as not only a valid form of art, but one of the only forms of art that allows user interaction. As with other forms of art, video games can be a medium to tell a story. And with their ever growing complexity and player interaction, the stories in these games become more mature as well. It is not uncommon for game developers to incorporate social commentary in their stories, and with any form of commentary comes critical thought. Now, when one hears the title “Dark Souls” the prospect of critical thinking is probably not the first thing to come to mind. Created in 2011 by developer FromSoftware, Dark Souls is a high fantasy action RPG set in the fictional land of Lordran. You, the player character, are the “Chosen Undead” who is destined to link the first flame to prolong the age of fire. Don’t worry, I will be explaining the story in more detail below. Even for those who have not played the game, Dark Souls is generally synonymous with brutal boss difficulty and unforgiving atmosphere. In layman's terms, everyone and their mother knows that the player is supposed to die in Dark Souls, a lot. However, simply writing Dark Souls off as an impossible seeming hack and slash game would be a gross disservice not only to the developers, but to the art form itself. Dark Souls serves as an excellent example of critical thinking through its depressing atmosphere, critique on human essence, and revolutionization of player choice.

Through the game’s grim atmosphere and player interaction, Dark Souls highlights the importance of critical thought. To provide some context of the world, a brief summary of the plot

is as follows. Keep in mind that Dark Souls is a high fantasy RPG so you will need to suspend your disbelief of major aspects in its world. In the beginning the world was dark and barren, ruled over by the ancient dragons. Then the first flame erupted. From the authority of the first flame came the souls of the Lords. The Lords were beings of immense, god-like power. They consisted of Gravelord Nito, The Witch of Izalith, Gywn Lord of Sunlight, and the furtive pygmy. In a clash of the ages the Lords challenged the authority of the great dragons. An earth shattering battle ensued, and with the aid of one dragon who betrayed his own, the Lords emerged victorious. With the defeat of the mighty dragons, Gywn Lord of Sunlight established a new dynasty, the Age of Fire. However, as with all dynasties, the Age of Fire was destined to end someday. The player character awakens thousands of years in the future, with the Age of Fire dwindling to a pitiful spark. Society has all but crumbled, and the few humans still alive wander the land aimlessly as hollowed undead. As your journey into Lordran begins you are tasked with linking the first flame, and restoring light to the world. The glorious triumph of the Lords all those millennia ago only serves as a grand tale to be told now. The world that the player encounters is a hostile, unforgiving environment where death and decay run rampant. Contrary to other titles in 2011, where hand-holding and beginner friendly tactics were implemented, Dark Souls provides no such humoring. Players often die in one to two hits, the level design is complicated, and when you rest at a checkpoint all the enemies you killed will respawn. Furthermore, you are handicapped with limited healing items, sophisticated enemy AI (artificial intelligence) for its time, and boss battles that will send even the best gamers into fits of frustration. The effect of this harsh conditioning is twofold. Firstly, it serves as a brilliant marketing strategy. If a developer markets their game as the hardest title on the market, and

players beat it, those players gain a well-deserved sense of elitism or superiority. Thus, they will continue to buy sequels, and promote competition within the community. I will admit that the Souls fan base suffers from this pretentious elitism, oftentimes resulting in toxicity, but that's another essay altogether. The second application of Dark Souls' rigorous atmosphere is its distinct tone. In the first minutes of gameplay the player experiences the hostility of Lordran. The fact of the matter is the casual gamer will simply quit, and if they should continue, they will experience the game in the same mood of hopelessness as its NPC characters. This is exemplified in a quote by the multi-media magazine *The Artifice*, "being alive in Dark Souls is a weakness, and existing at all is a pretty awful, meaningless trial. The individuals of Lordran, the Solaires and the Knights of Astora, are punished for their wills, and turned into the Hollowed, a meaningless, violent existence" (Caroll). This particular example is relevant to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was an existentialist who strongly believed in the practice of questioning everything. He prized man's subjective truth above all else, regardless of the world around him. Kierkegaard believed that the objective world is not trustworthy, and only through critical thought could man figure himself out. Lordran is a place dominated by uncritical thinkers who have allowed the depressing atmosphere to warp their lives into a "meaningless, violent existence." As lovable and iconic as they may be, the NPCs in Dark Souls all exist in bad faith. In contrast, you, the player character, are special. You're the chosen undead, and it is your duty to link the first flame. As Kierkegaard would advise, you are not the product of Lordran's depressing world; your destiny lies within your hands. Once you reject the objective world's bad faith will you be set free. This is a big reason why Dark Souls stands out to players. Although the

atmosphere is grim and dreary, you as the player has the option to reject that and push forward. Through your own critical reasoning you can beat the game, and ultimately conquer Lordran.

Furthermore, Dark Souls' morbid critique on human essence demonstrates the importance of critical thinking. As mentioned before, many aspects of the game reinforces that you will die. Plain and simple. From the atmosphere, NPC interaction, and the fact that a special edition of the game was released in 2012 titled *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition*, it is blatantly obvious the gameplay has trial and error in mind. However, it's not all about dying, rather far from it. The appeal is best explained by Hidetaka Miyazaki, president of FromSoftware and lead director of Dark Souls, "I have no intention to make the game more difficult than other titles on purpose! It's just something required to make this style of game. I've really been pursuing making games that give players a sense of accomplishment by overcoming tremendous odds" Essentially, Miyazaki's David versus Goliath gameplay rewards the player in a way no other title has come close to. The player cannot abandon hope such as in the case of certain NPCs. Just as the mighty Lord Gywn and the other Lords created the Age of Fire, you must overcome the darkness and bring about a new age of light. This is again stated in the magazine *The Artifice*, "Thus, the player character, faced with an absurd, meaningless existence, without essence in a world without justice, explores Lordran, amasses power by killing those the player deems worthy of killing, and eventually discovers an option to change Lordran" (Caroll). Just as Kierkegaard's philosophy can be applied to the world of Dark Souls, Jean-Paul Sartre's outlook can be applied to its player character. Sartre was a French existentialist philosopher who focused on human essence. He believed that simply existing was not enough to live a fulfilling life. One must find meaning in their existence, and make something of themselves. In Sartre's famous quote,

“Existence precedes essence” this can be juxtaposed to getting a tattoo. When you get a tattoo you already know what design you want before it is inked into your skin. However, when dealing with one’s essence, or humanity, you are born before you know what to do with yourself. Only after years of developing in society, and maturing, will you realize your purpose in life. For some people it may take their entire lives, and tragically for others they may never learn their purpose. Sartre argued that determining one’s essence is essential to living a fulfilling and happy life. This translates to Dark Souls in that you as the player character have no choice but to find yourself. You do not have the luxury of simply going hollow and fading into the nothingness of the abyss. In other words, if you don’t meet your destiny head on, no one else will link the first flame. Consequently, there will never be an age of light, and Lordran will continue to exist in its state of perpetual decay. Only by discovering their authentic self will the player character set off this chain of events, and hope to bring Lordran back from the brink.

Finally, Dark Souls takes advantage of critical thinking to elevate player choice to revolutionary heights. I intentionally saved this point for last as it concerns the ending, or endings of the game. Similarly to how other games from this decade suppressed difficulty, they also stifled any means of player choice. For example, games would offer extremely linear level design, repetitive gameplay, and uninteresting NPC interaction. Throughout the entire game the player would have their hand held and explicitly told what to do. Dark Souls would turn this boring formula on its head. Honestly, the various levels of ambiguity in the game would span an essay in itself, but I’ll keep it concise. When you start the game you are treated to a cinematic cutscene detailing the beginning of the world, which I have summarized above. However, as soon as that ends there is scarcely any other implicit direction in game. It is the player’s

responsibility to traverse the world of Lordran for themselves, and to determine where to go next. Small bits and pieces of lore are provided through NPC dialogue and collectable items found throughout the world, but none of these are handed to the player. As a matter of fact, the player could beat the entire game and not know what the hell they just did if they completely ignored their surroundings. This unique delivery is what's known as environmental storytelling, something that FromSoft prides themselves on. And for good reason, not only does this cryptic narrative appeal to the community, but it forces the player to immerse themselves in the world if they want to learn more about it. Connecting back to the main "goal" of the game, to link the flame, a keen player who has explored Lordran to its fullest will come to discover a secret goal. Through the process of interacting with secret NPCs and discovering hidden lore, the player will come to realize an unsettling truth. Gywn, Lord of Sunlight, is not the benevolent figure the tales of old portray him to be. Yes, Gywn and the other Lords did indeed defeat the dragons and establish the Age of Fire. However, the moral grounds of the situation were not so black and white. The ancient dragons who reigned over the world before did not embody darkness and evil. Likewise, Gywn and the other Lords did not exemplify light and goodness. I will admit I am not a Dark Souls lore expert, yes those do exist, but I know one thing to be clear. Gywn and the other Lords removed one dominating authority, the dragons, only to establish themselves as the Gods of the new world. Upon learning this revelation you can probably guess what the secret goal is. Instead of linking the first flame and perpetuating Gywn's age of fire, you can choose to let the embers fade, and eventually die out. With the age of fire snuffed out the player character ascends to the title of the Dark Lord and reigns over darkness. Contrary to popular western culture, ascending to the Dark Lord does not mean you become an all powerful evil overlord such as

Voldemort. Rather, the player breaks the cycle of fire and allows the world to begin anew, free of the old Lords' will. At this point I would like to introduce the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Similar to the philosophers mentioned before, Nietzsche prided living authentically and self discovery above all else. In particular he found society to be oppressive towards the individual. He was extremely critical of his fellow philosophers who detested their current state and dreamed of better times. Nietzsche argued that fantasizing over the past or dreaming about the future was abusing the art of philosophy, "the belief in a better world to come is the source of this sickness." To counter such unhealthy living he proposed the Übermensch, the concept of an individual who doesn't fraternize with daydreaming, but takes his life into his own hands. In the gaming article *PopMatters*, Nietzsche's philosophy is applied to Dark Souls, "If the player chooses to become the Dark Lord, they become like Nietzsche's Übermensch and choose their path to become their own truth and meaning for the world. This is Nietzsche's nihilism in its fullest form, as the player's choice is dictated by their own belief in right and wrong and not by any universal morality imposed upon them" (Kersting). Once the player embraces their own truth, channeling Nietzsche's Übermensch, they are no longer shackled to the will of the Lords. The player can choose to reject the prophecy and forge their own destiny. They have the option to become the Dark Lord and let the fire fade, forever. Once the player defeats the final boss, Lord Gywn himself, they will decide their own destiny. If they choose to link the first flame the fire cutscene will play. The player will light the bonfire and become engulfed in flames. On the other hand, they can choose to exit the boss room. Upon doing so an alternate cutscene will play, with the player being heralded as the new Dark Lord. This level of player choice is one reason why the Souls games have garnered such a massive following. At no point in the game are you

told which ending to pick, and no bias for either side is displayed. The choice is entirely left to the player. You can simply link the flame and submit to Lordran's will, or you can finally break Gywn's cycle of fire and begin a new age free of the old Gods.

Video games, like any other form of entertainment, are made for the consumers' enjoyment. I know I called video games an art form in my introduction, and I firmly stand by that statement. Games are a valid art form, and the only one that allows such levels of user interaction. However, these days game developers have oversaturated the market with heartless cash grabs and rehashes. They insult players' intelligence with hand holding gameplay and hyper overt storylines. These developers deem the players too stupid to learn their games, and feel the need to force feed content to us. I believe this is why the Souls series has become so successful. FromSoft respects their players' intelligence and doesn't rely on cheap cash grabs for revenue. Yes, on your first playthrough you will die, a lot. However, that is the appeal to these games. As Miyazaki stated himself, "I've really been pursuing making games that give players a sense of accomplishment by overcoming tremendous odds." Dark Souls tests your ability to think critically about your surroundings, and not just through tense gameplay. The vast majority of Lordran is shrouded in mystery, which the player may choose not to unravel at all. For the aforementioned reasons Dark Souls serves as an excellent example of critical thinking through its grim atmosphere, commentary on human essence, and revolutionization of player choice. Although the Souls series has officially come to a close with the installment of the third game, FromSoft has produced worthy spiritual successors such as Bloodborne and Sekiro in their stead. As with the Souls games, these titles are every bit as difficult and meticulously well crafted. My only hope is that these games outgrow the stigma of being challenging for challenge's sake.

Dark Souls encompasses so much more than testing players' reflexes and skill, something I hope has become clear to you. With that being said, don't give up, skeleton!

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