

Plagiarism Declaration and Assignment Cover Sheet

ESSAY COVER SHEET

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Course: Game Design

Course code: WSOA3003A

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Due date: 03/05/2021

Topic: MDA Analysis on Level Design within *Dark Souls*

Word count: 921 words

Plagiarism declaration

1. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and to pretend that it is one's own.
2. I have used the author date convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this essay from the work or works of other people has been acknowledged through citation and reference.
3. This essay is my own work.
4. I have not submitted this work, or a substantial portion thereof, for assessment previously.
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Dark Souls (2011) is an iconic name in the developer and gaming community, having gained a cult following and reputation. Games that had noticeable similarities to the series are described as beings “Souls-like”. The game is well loved for its interesting character, environment and sound design as well as the punishing nature of its difficult gameplay but one aspect of the game that stands out among the other RPGs of the era is its level design: the intersecting and interconnected nature of the levels in *Dark Souls* and the Souls series.

The intersections are not maze-like, within each level there is typically a single main path and then there are detours, connecting pathways to secondary areas within the level, secret areas as well as shortcuts to other levels at various points. In his blog post on Gamasutra Robert Boyd points out that even when presented with such a complex environmental or level layout, and the lack of a minimap, the probability of a player losing their sense of direction is very low (2011). The level designers of *Dark Souls* did not constrain the gameplay to the horizontal plane but also worked in the vertical. The player will often be climbing stairs, ladders or dropping off a high wall to collect an item or use a shortcut. When an area does not contain vertical gameplay or navigation the player will still find visual interest and appeal within the vertical environment. This design compliments the aesthetic of fantasy or a game as make believe (Hunicke et al, 2014). This aesthetic is the players suspension of disbelief combined with the gothic and medieval design language of *Dark Souls* which allows for the levels to be believable.

The design of the levels is not only about their interconnected or complex nature. The level design promotes exploring and through exploration it is used as a narrative tool as well as it functions to implicitly communicate strategy to the player, many games will choose to rather give the player tooltips either as a popup message, tutorial or through dialogue between the character and an NPC. *Dark Souls* takes the more implicit route and utilizes the level to communicate this. This will be down through environmental props such as a body riddled with arrows next to a window or an enemy who would normally use a longsword now has equipped a short sword to allow for manoeuvrability within a tight corridor. This should in turn inform the player’s equipment choice and strategy; this attention to detail in enemy and environment placement creates challenge without unnecessary suspension of disbelief and the breaking of immersion, this format rewards the attentive. Believable encounters within a relevant environment are useful tools to teach a new player to view the environment as a visual and strategic guide, to not expect there to be a tutorial on every mechanic within the game and to focus on the game as a sensation.

The environments inform the player of what the next set of challenges will be; an example of this from *Dark Souls* is when the player first encounters the “Hellkite Dragon” it flies past them, this explicitly warns the player that there is the potential of a boss fight ahead. Soon after the player reaches an archway which leads to a bridge with scorch marks, this is paced in such a way that the recent brief encounter with the dragon is still fresh in the player’s mind. The scorch marks indicate where the dragon will attack, and that the player should either run or attempt to bait out an attack. This is not a direct example of level design, it is a demonstration of the connection between pacing, environmental storytelling and level design within *Dark Souls*.

The navigation of the environment is structured so that experience and new players may both still play and experience the game as an exploratory challenge. The new players may focus on

An MDA Analysis on level design within *Dark Souls*

the narrative and immersive aspects of the environment and mechanics whereas an experienced player will make use of their mechanical skill and knowledge of the game to access shortcuts and secret areas. The levels in *Dark Souls* are constructed and designed in such a way as to allow for mechanical exploits in certain areas. Whether this was intentional or not remains to be decided but they still allow for the mechanical exploitation of their navigation.

The level design of *Dark Souls* promotes challenge, discovery, exploration throughout the different levels of player experience and skill. The levels go beyond being a space wherein the gameplay may occur and work as visual and audio tools with which the developers and designers are able to communicate objective, direction and intent to the players implicitly.

References

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