

Plagiarism Declaration and Assignment Cover Sheet

ESSAY COVER SHEET

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Plagiarism declaration

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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.
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*Dark Souls* (2011) is an iconic name in the game design and gaming community, responsible for the creation of the “Souls-like” genre it has given rise to multiple clones and inspired many more game developers. It has gained a reputation of being incredibly difficult, this alone allows us to attribute the aesthetic of challenge to the game (Hunicke et al, 2004).

This is thanks to its well thought out design as well as cult-like following. FromSoftware approached the level design of *Dark Souls* with a different mindset from the norm. Games at this time contained secret areas and possibly shortcuts in their levels but nothing like the complex layout of the levels of *Dark Souls*. The game was staged in set of non-linear, interconnected areas and levels; the narrative of each area is both self-contained and plays a part in the wider global narrative. Items collected inform the player of this wider narrative as do the interactions with the environments and NPCs. The collection of these items and their descriptions creates the aesthetic of Fantasy, or games as make believe. The narratives that many items tell can be experienced throughout the world; characters, places and symbols that reinforce the story. If a player wants to fully experience the narrative, then they must explore the levels in detail and find all the necessary items and NPCs.

The level design and the routes that experienced players will often take are not always intuitive, at times it seems like a certain route is merely an exploit of the mechanics implemented instead of clever design to reward the most experienced of players or to seem like a fluke to those less experienced. An example of this would be an item sitting on a ledge at the bottom of a cliff, this ledge may be accessible if a player follows a certain path, but other players will roll off the edge from a certain, landing on terrain that seems more decorative than functional to negate any fall damage and continuing till they reach the item. This interaction between navigation and mechanics that borders on exploits works to create and reinforce the aesthetic of discovery and challenge; rolling at the wrong time can end up with your avatar dying in a bad position that is hard to get to or it can reward you by getting the item you sought. At times this “exploration” or movement and use of mechanics can only be seen as exploits but at times it appears to be part of the level design which enables these interactions and therefore cannot be described as exploits but shortcuts.

Shortcuts in *Dark Souls* are both well-hidden and implemented as a part of the navigation, players may find themselves having to backtrack to a previous area and instead of tracing their footsteps a previously locked door can now be opened. The implementation of conditionally locked doors, either requiring a certain key or ones that can only be opened from a certain side minimizes frustration and challenge. Minimizing challenge that is frustrating is a core goal of many developers, allowing your player to bypass a fight that they now see as tedious is good design. The connection between areas in *Dark Souls* is not haphazard or jarring, it fluidly and reasonably joins areas. You do not transition from a small town into a throne room by opening a door unless the door is in the side of a castle, you enter the dungeon and will then have to fight your way up to the throne room.

By organizing the levels in this way FromSoftware keeps their players immersed, at times you will be surprised that the elevator or door leads to a different area than you were expecting but that merely surprises the player instead of removing their sense of immersion. When designing a level, it is incredibly important to make sure that the player feels immersed. They may question some aspects such as why an enemy or trap was placed in such

a way and feel cheated but with a game like *Dark Souls* the playerbase expects an unforgiving system.

The interconnected nature of the levels is not the only well thought out aspect of design, the placement of bonfires, enemies, bosses, and NPCs also lend a hand in creating the immersion. Enemies feel like they fit into and have adapted for their environment. Bosses either aesthetically oppose the environment or have similarly adapted into it, NPCs are not randomly encountered but are thoughtfully placed as are the bonfires. A player begins to pick up a rhythm for the bonfires, while there is not a strict pattern for their placement a player can learn when to expect another one. At times, these expectations are subverted to add challenge as well as to let the environment feel seamless.

All these complex details may seem just that, complex but the layout is very rarely confusing. The shortcuts and environments lead the player to the next section of the game, which does not need to play in a linear or pre-set fashion, even if a player chooses to start in a different area, they will still be able to access the others without exploiting mechanics or cheating such as giving themselves a key or item that can only be found in a currently inaccessible area. The level design has made allowances for the challenge to be maintained but not punish a player too much for progressing too the 'wrong' area or navigating the areas out of the narrative order.

## References

FromSoftware (2011) *Dark Souls*. [Digital] [Multiple Platforms] Tokyo: Namco Bandai

Hunicke, Robin & Leblanc, Marc & Zubek, Robert. (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. AAAI Workshop - Technical Report. 1.