

Alyssa Torralva

Dr. Thomas Stone

ENGL 307

06 May 2023

Creating Depth Through Abstraction

Creating an open world game comes with many different challenges. Not only does the gameplay alone need to be fun and engaging, but you want to create a world that is enjoyable to be in. Something that gives the players a reason to explore and travel across its landscape. Many games have attempted this to varying degrees of success, but one game has managed to fully give itself to what a true open world looks like: *Elden Ring*. Named 2022's Game of the Year, *Elden Ring* is a game that follows the player and their attempt to claim an item known as the "Elden Ring." To do so, the player character must travel across The Lands Between to collect loot, kill beasts and monsters, and a host of other trials and questlines. The biggest thing that this game lends itself to is its ability to make its audience want to explore. Unlike other games, the world itself is filled with ongoing life and story quests, all of which continue to ask questions to its audience with nary a true defining answer. The gameplay and the mythos of the world of *Elden Ring* work harmoniously to offer the best open world experiences to date.

One of the aspects present in the game that differ from other instances is how it handles quests and minimap icons. When you have an active quest, instead of telling you exactly where to go, it will instead force you to listen to dialog in order to give direction. Very rarely will the game actually put something on your map indicating your intended journey. Through this, it

leaves the game extremely open ended, allowing the player themselves to decide the way to accomplish their goals. Additionally the map itself also doesn't mark locations like “this tower” or “that tower,” instead opting to give physical illustrations on the map itself. When a player opens the map, they are greeted by landmarks on the map that simply look interesting. This act prompts the player to explore at their own pace and to what they think may be worth their time to investigate. The failure that other games go about with this problem is marking everything on the HUD and giving the player so many choices it’s overwhelming. Brennan Keogh puts it best in his 2022 article about *Elden Ring* when he says:

The commercial game industry’s desire to fill games with *more* and *more* content and systems and stories and assets that hold the player’s attention (and, increasingly, wallet) for as long as possible has led to a raft of open-world games lacking in coherency or basic creative direction. New games in Ubisoft’s Assassin’s Creed and Far Cry franchises in particular are exemplary of a more endemic design crisis: game maps full of hundreds of markers pointing to different collectives and questions and achievements; layer after layer of disorientating menus for different superfluous crafting systems; sometimes three or even five different in-game currencies earned in different ways and used in different stores to collect broadly similar cosmetic items; narratives that increasingly make no sense unless the player has been watching a web series for the six months leading up to the game’s release. Today, the largest

blockbuster videogames—especially but not exclusively in the ‘open-world’ genre—are no longer buckets of homogenous content but oceans, with no discernible landmarks against which the player can orient themselves. (Keogh)

These choices give the player little choice in where to explore and why. With a world like *Elden Rings* being so expansive, this aspect of the game becomes crucial, as it allows the developers to hide and obscure information and lore as they see fit, as there's no guarantee a player will see everything in one playthrough.

The game's difficulty also plays a factor into the mythos of *Elden Ring* and other Souls-like games. By making the game more difficult, you aren't always allowed to access locations where secrets are hidden so easily. Defeating a difficult boss may halt your ability to explore and progress, requiring you to go back and level up or acquire better gear. Returning to Brennan Keogh's article, he writes, “While some see the obtuseness of FromSoft games as masochistic (or straight up bad) design, it also gives players permission to work together to figure out the game's secrets. Instead of the internet destroying the game's secrets, the internet becomes a central component to, collaboratively, excavating and understanding the game's secrets. No use of a walkthrough or request for help feels like cheating when the game is working this hard against you. Anything goes.” (Keogh) The sense of community present in Souls-Like games and in this instance, *Elden Ring* lend to a much more communal experience. It feels like stories and legends being tossed around a group of followers, imploring you to go and see for yourself. This word of mouth way of exchanging secrets and information to have us all better understand a world that's only giving us scraps to comprehend.

These myths we see forming come from a mixture of aspects including the story world itself, as well as the interactions of the storyworld to the player. As put in the journal article by Ekaterina Galanina and Alexey Salin, “As we see it, the universum of simulacra constructed by video games is the mythologized space immersing into which the player starts to identify the image of reality with reality itself. Myth in a video game creates a certain model of the world and a scheme of interaction between a person and the world.” (Galanina) The method of which the story worlds and its mythos and gods are given to the player are made mythical and large by how the player learns and experiences said mythos. Understanding the connection between gods of *Elden Ring* Marika and Radagon only works when the only way to actually see it is by using the Law of Regression on a statue, revealing the two characters to be the same person. A concept that still people are unable to understand as it contradicts with other information learned. We do not know it until we experience it. The journal continues:

The peculiarity of constructing mythologies in video games is that the Spectator becomes a co-creator of the virtual world taking part in shaping and naming things, in constructing meanings, in telling stories and disclosing the plot of a video game. The choices one makes and the actions one performs impact the very existence of the virtual world itself and the existence of the subject in it. The mythological space of a video game allows the player to be fully involved in the process of creating the new world. The borderline between the part and the whole disappears, the part becomes identical to the whole (the Spectator becomes a part of the world,

and the world becomes a part of the Spectator). The virtual world of a video game is mythological, it is potentially open for continuation, changing, existential replay, speaking, transformation, etc. (Galanina)

Putting an emphasis on player-world interaction becomes a focus of *Elden Ring's* narrative structure. Little is spoon fed to the player in terms of lore, and most if not all of the legend surrounding The Lands Between exists in the spaces between gameplay and dialog so delicately placed we hardly recognize it's there until we go looking for it.

The nature of *Elden Rings* expertise in secrecy continues to give a deeper lack of understanding of functions and mechanics of the world itself. In fact some of the lore given to the player only barely scratches the surface of what information there actually is, and often is never fully answered. For instance, there exists a creature called the "Cemetery Shade." The only information learned about these beasts comes in the form of a weapon, the mantis blade, dropped by a lesser variety of this enemy. The splash text accompanying the weapon is "A curved sword with a blade at both ends wielded by the Cemetery Shades, the insect-ridden grave keepers." Beyond this, and the creature's physical appearance of this darkened shaded enemy with glowing eyes and what appears to be a spider or crab latching on, nothing more is known. The fact that this information is purposely scrubbed away gives the audience speculation as to what they're purpose is within the world. As put in Daniel Vellas journal article, "In practice, however, *Dark Souls* sets out with the express purpose of unsettling these preconceptions, deploying a range of formal techniques and mechanisms designed to arrest the player's judgment and prevent her from arriving at a stable cosmic understanding, preserving a sense of mystery and gesturing towards a

whole that escapes the player's conceptualizing grasp." (Vella) *Elden Ring's* ability to muddle the water and obscure your understanding of the lore and world deepens the grander mythos.

Especially by leaving things vague, and leaving no defining answer, the questions to these absent answers stick in your brain and leave you wanting and craving more of the world. Believing that just maybe the answer exists somewhere.

There is so much that *Elden Ring* offers in terms of story and worldbuilding that it's near impossible to describe every single facet of it without going insane. Questions lead to answers lead to questions lead to more questions. For instance, sorceries are a type of magic that scales with intelligence as it is something that is learned. You learn to form blades of energy, or toss giant boulders at people. Regardless of the type of spell, each of these were inspired by the constellations above their head. While interesting by itself, it grows deeper once you realize that these sorceries actually hold connection with cosmic horrors beyond the stars. Entities such as Astel the Naturalborn of the Void is one such entity. A being of connected cosmic orbs ending in this long floaty tail. A human skull with an eye shifting and moving about where the brain should be, only visible through its broken bone. Large limbs that threaten to grab you and seem like twisted representations of humans. These entities are the progenitors of magic, or so it would seem. But then you can go even further, as some sorceries, specifically the blood sorceries, also scale with Faith. This is interesting in that Faith normally scales with Faith based "incantations," which are listed separately from sorceries, though still magic. Incantations are given based on a god, and a person's faith in that god grants them stronger casting. This now offers an interesting line of thought, if sorceries are inspired by the stars themselves, and these sorceries hold connection to eldritch abominations, then why is this one in particular asking to be worshiped?

This type of mechanical-narrative synergy allows for these thoughts to be drawn and made. Mechanics actually mean something to the narrative of the game, and it allows for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the storyworld as a whole. Never are we getting the full story of an event or god, instead we get fragments and interpretations infected with bias and falsehoods. These contradictions present within the story give greater credence to the believability of the world's history.

The creation of these metaphysical worlds can be challenging and wrought with issues. Overbearing producers and directors will always be a problem. But *Elden Ring* manages to take the open world genre to an unmatched level of complexity. Myth only works when it is given the ability to breathe. Leaving aspects of lore vague enough to where its audience is able to draw conclusions and meaning through it are how you end up with a product that revolutionizes a genre. The world of *Elden Ring* is one that should go down as one of the best examples utilizing myth to tell a story ever.

Works Cited

Keogh, Brendan. "Elden Ring and Designed Obtuseness." *Overland* (2022).

Vella, Daniel. "No mastery without mystery: Dark Souls and the ludic sublime." *Game Studies* 15.1 (2015): n-pag.

Galanina, Ekaterina, and Alexey Salin. "Mythology construction in virtual worlds of video games." *Proceedings of 4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts, SGEM 2017*. 2017.