

# Dark Souls (and Other Games) Overview & Analysis

## Introduction

I would like to have my game take strong inspiration from *Dark Souls*, both in story and mechanics. I should probably specify 'Soulsborne' games rather than *Dark Souls* specifically, however, I have, unfortunately, yet to play and study *Bloodborne*. That leaves out at least the 'borne' part of 'Soulsborne', so I'll just be referring to the *Dark Souls* games as 'Souls' games/titles.

In this document, I'll be examining – albeit informally – the different aspects of the Souls games (drawing more from *Dark Souls 3* considering it's my most familiar of the titles) that I would like to draw inspiration from or study further to use in my own way in my game. I may also reference other games that do things differently to the Souls games that I would prefer to use over a native Souls mechanic.

## Story

The Souls games all show different stages, eras apart, of a cyclical story of futility and fatalism. There is a constant goal in *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls 3* of 'keeping the fire going' and 'linking the flame' (like all those who came before you). The 'fire' and the 'dark' are seen as opposites throughout the series. Like sun and moon, fact and fiction, good and evil. However, in *Dark Souls*, one of the founders of fire itself, Gwyn, has become a weak husk of his prior, powerful self, due to him giving his body up as kindle for the flame, to keep it, and the Age of Fire, going. This feeling of a fire diminishing to the point it becomes just a smouldering pile of ash is even more explicitly shown in *Dark Souls 3*, where the opening cutscene details how the Lords of Cinder, those who have previously linked the flame, are awoken to do it again, yet refuse to do so. It is in this refusal, that the lowly 'ashen' (undead humans) are brought from their graves to subdue the Lords and use them, including themselves, as more kindle for the flame. The player can choose, in both games, to link the fire and keep this futile, diminishing, Age of Fire going, or to refuse to give themselves up to keep the flame alive, snuffing it out, and beginning the Age of Dark.

Apologies for the, I guess, 'spoiler-y', and lengthy (yet not detailed enough in the slightest) summary of the overarching Souls story. This theming of futile struggling and having to let go, and the inevitability of things just... dying out, is something I want to include in my game. However, I feel like the fact that the Age of Dark in the story isn't necessarily a negative thing, and is just like the Age of Fire, but without warmth, isn't exactly what I want to use. I'd prefer to use a setting such as the one in *Ender Lilies*, where the curing of the affliction brings a harrowing nothingness with it instead of a calm rest, though, a mix of both is likely what I will end up going for. I will discuss how my story is intended to be constructed later in this document, as it ties to other points I would like to bring up before then.

## Genre

The Souls games are all dark fantasy, 3D, action RPG games. Some may even go as far to say that the Souls games are 'souls-likes'. Obviously, this *awfully vague* and open subgenre title was created because of the distinct style of Souls games, calling attention mainly to high difficulty and emphasis on environmental storytelling (and colloquially, dodging and having a stamina bar). Considering my Capstone Project is a 'tile-based RPG', having Souls inspiration, and being so ensnared by those games, the idea of making a 2D game inspired by the Souls games came to me naturally.

Most games on the market labelled as '2D' and 'souls-like' are **metroidvanias**, which I would somewhat like to include elements of in my game (though, after only having one year to develop, and requiring a small demo rather than a full game, it may be difficult, nay, impossible to properly implement metroidvania mechanics of interlinked game areas). The other thing about these 2D souls-likes is that they are almost always vertically 2D, focusing on platforming based on height. This is not what I want for my game. I want my game to be 2D in the sense that it has a top-down view, like that in *RPG Maker* games and *The Binding of Isaac*.

The Souls games also have no difficulty settings. This simultaneously gives the impression that the games and other souls-likes are hard, and you can't do anything but press on. This is appealing to me; however, I realise it may not be for everyone, especially those with handicaps. Although I don't wish to make alternate difficulty levels, I would like to add a feature that telegraphs enemy attacks before they happen, like a phantom strike before the enemy does the strike itself, or a red swing-box or AoE box, like the big boss attacks in *Genshin Impact*. This would likely be displayed as a difficulty level, despite not actually changing anything about enemy AI or placement or the like, and for the purposes of a demo, would likely be turned on automatically.

## Mechanics

The core loop in the Souls games is rolling (dodging) and attacking. Rolling takes stamina, attacking takes stamina, blocking takes stamina, almost every inputted action takes stamina. Even casting a spell takes stamina. Stamina is clearly very important to the souls-like formula. Different weapons and equipment can be found throughout the world too, requiring different stats and having different move-sets and damage/protection values. Equipment also has durability. Armour did have durability in *Dark Souls*, yet that was scrapped and only weapons had durability in *Dark Souls 3*, yet this was still tedious and unfun, so in *Elden Ring*, durability was completely removed, which is something I wish to have true for my game as well. Another aspect of weapons (and not armour) is that they can be upgraded using materials and the following important resource. Souls, not to be confused with what I've been referring to as Souls up till now, is also fairly important – it's the currency in the game. Every enemy you defeat gives you a set number of souls based on how strong they are, and all sold and bought equipment is dealt by the exchange of souls. This is a factor I would also like to include, having a sort of currency that can be used to trade with vendors, and can be used to upgrade your stats and weapons.

The main and initial idea for my game was a system where the currency was 'vitality' or, put simply, HP. So, when you trade with vendors, they receive your 'vitality' for their goods, and defeating enemies gives you more health. Defeating enemies for currency and trading using that currency is certainly not a souls-like concept, it's the most basic reward system there is for obtaining in-game currency, but just the title 'souls' and the lore behind this currency has inspired me to make my own unique sort of currency, so I must credit the Souls games for that at least.

One thing I don't wish to include from the Souls mechanics is the plethora of different weapons and equipment you can find and use. My approach to this would be using your vitality to upgrade parts of your consistent 'equipment' like that in *Little Witch Nobeta*, where you can upgrade your personal magic power directly, so you don't have to find different weapons with higher stats or upgrade your wand. The best way to describe both this fact, the vitality/life essence currency and taking it from enemies once defeated, and the story theme of inevitability and a dying, diminishing world (look back to the **Story** heading), was to make all my characters some sort of 'demonkind'.

Demons in many stories drain the life of creatures as their own nourishment, with sharp claws and thick skin. So 'upgrading your equipment' could be putting your life essence into making your claws bigger and making your skin tougher. The dying world point could also be addressed as the amount of

‘vitality’ in the world being finite and running out as, to simply exist another day, some vitality is lost to keep motor functions occurring and the like. This bundled with some of the world’s inhabitants going crazy and killing anyone they come across to harvest their vitality is quite a bleak – yet entirely appropriate – setting for the game I want to create.

## Music

The music in the Souls games is amazing. They’re orchestral tracks with feelings of grandeur and appropriate transitions for when the boss reaches their second phase. And although I would like to have good music in my game, especially for the boss fights, the music itself isn’t what I’m focussing on, so this section’s title is slightly misleading.

Despite how awesome and centre-stage the music can be in the Souls games, it doesn’t really *need* to be present for the boss fight. One could play the boss fight muted or with their own music in the background and have an equally difficult time as if they had the native music blasted into their ears. This, in my opinion, is slightly wasteful. Especially considering how the bosses telegraph their attacks to a beat.

The fights in Souls games are made fair by virtue of the ‘telegraphed attack’, so it’s almost never the fault of bad RNG that the player dies. Rather, each attack follows a beat, like a metronome, and if you learn the timings of these beats, no matter how poor your equipment is, you can dodge and attack in the known openings and defeat the boss with a little (or for some, a lot of) patience. Some of the harder bosses, such as the Dancer of the Boreal Valley in *Dark Souls 3*, still follow a beat, but instead of a basic 4/4 beat, follow a complex beat such as 9/8 or 3/4.

I would like to take this idea of musical beats and telegraphed attacks and link them to an even greater extent. In my game, I would like the background music of the boss battle to dictate the beats at which the boss attacks, like that in *Cadence of Hyrule*, so my main study/research point for this Capstone Project is to see whether accompanying music to the same rhythm of the boss attacks can improve player performance via how confident they feel in fighting bosses in it, to how many attempts it takes to defeat the boss. The phantom strike from the **Genre** section could also be used to a good effect here, giving a lead-in beat before the actual attack. This ‘phantom strike’ idea was actually used in *Dark Souls 3*, but had a more literal meaning.

In the Pontiff Sulyvahn fight, once the Pontiff reaches his second phase, he summons a literal phantom of himself to attack you. However, the interesting thing is that the attack the phantom performs is always the attack the real Pontiff will do shortly afterwards. This works like a telegraph for the Pontiff’s next attack, but it does damage (although less) itself. I don’t want to include this type of ‘phantom strike’ but the idea is nice to examine, as that sort of telegraphing may be exactly what I end up wanting for the lower difficulty option to have.

## Conclusion

I don’t actually have a conclusion. But, I have a summary: -

My game will have a fatalistic, futile story about a dying world where the characters are demonkin, having their vitality as a currency to trade with vendors and using it to improve themselves on account of increasing the daily depletion amount. A lot of the souls-like mechanics will be kept, but mine will be a top-down 2D souls-like, with no durability or different equipment to upgrade and find/swap out. As for difficulty, there will be an option for a helping phantom strike to play out before the actual enemy attack, and all boss attacks will follow the beat of the song currently playing. The main thing I wish to be studying with my game is whether bosses, whose attacks are bound to a musical rhythm, are easier to fight against with the background music dictating said rhythm.