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***Dark Souls*; or, Throwing Stones in a Glass House**

It is not controversial to say that Hidetaka Miyazaki with From Software's *Dark Souls* is in many ways a tribute to the classic action games of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The game takes many of its beats from games like Konami's *Castlevania* or Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*, both in its gameplay style and the presentation of its story. There is a certain withholding of pertinent information in both gameplay and story which evokes a feeling of discovery akin to that of those classic games. The theme of discovery is obvious with the open world of *Dark Souls* but what may not be as obvious is the discovery inherent in its story. *Dark Souls* is a game that very much presents itself as a traditional video game with a traditional video game narrative. *Dark Souls* does this on purpose. It evokes the gameplay and narrative structure of classic games, but provides just enough to suggest there is something else going on. By allowing the player to subvert the very narrative structure *Dark Souls* appears to emulate, it creates a much deeper narrative that requires exploring the game's world to fully experience.

Dark Souls begins with a cutscene, one that sets up the basic history of the world; a world originally drenched in grey, ruled by immortal grey dragons. Gwyn (along with several named boss characters) would lead the charge to eliminate the dragons and usher in a new age, an age of fire. However, fire burns out, and before it does someone needs to relight the flame. A prophecy tells of a chosen one who would undertake a pilgrimage from the asylum to relight the first flame and prolong the age of fire. This is, of course, where the player comes in.

This exposition, which I add is just a rote chosen one fantasy tale, is told solely in this cutscene. However, the role it plays in *Dark Souls*' narrative has a direct analogue in that of classic games, the manual. Looking at the English manual for the original *Castlevania*, the very first section under the introduction reads as so; “Good Eeeevening! Step into the shadows of the deadliest dwelling on Earth. You've arrived at Castlevania, and you're here on business: To destroy forever the Curse of the Evil Count” (Konami, 4). Ignoring the difference in scope, the idea behind this passage and the opening cutscene of *Dark Souls* is the same, to introduce the narrative to the player and give them motivation. Going even further, after some 'how to play' information, the *Castlevania* manual provides a monster manual of sorts, giving cute drawings of the game's enemies and more importantly the bosses. This was a common practice of the time, open most NES manuals and you'll find a who's who of the creatures you'll be fighting on your journey. This is interesting to note because in its opening cutscene, *Dark Souls* does the very same by naming the most noteworthy boss characters. This structure is in opposition to a more contemporary game narrative structure, which is far more progression based, akin to that of traditional storytelling. Details are slowly revealed over the course of the narrative. Older action games and *Dark Souls* work differently; they give the player a small info dump then let them loose.

This comparison is important because *Dark Souls* very explicitly evokes this space of classic games, so it can subsequently tear it down if the player chooses to let their self delve deeper into the space. *Dark Souls* chooses to hide its narrative in plain sight, obfuscated only by a lack of attention paid by players assuming the game would have less narrative than it does. The thing that casts the first stone at the proverbial glass house is the dichotomy between Kingseeker Frampt and Darkstalker Kaathe. You meet Frampt early in the game—after completing the first

two areas that you are pointed to—and he tells you a good deal of information that you already know. The quest at hand and your role in this quest as the chosen undead who will prolong the age of fire and end the curse of the undead. He tells you go to Anor Londo to receive the lordvessel so you can open the door to the first flame and fulfill your duty. Thinking that *Dark Souls* is a standard game there is no reason to question anything that Frampt is telling you. “Go to Anor Londo by way of Sen’s Fortress” he says, and you do. You get the lordvessel and fulfill the subsequent steps and find, oddly enough, Gwyn’s lifeless husk whom you have a prolonged fight with. You link the fire and burn to a crisp. Roll credits.

It would seem to an observant player that Frampt left out a few details. Not once does he mention your untimely charring at the hands of the first flame you took it upon yourself to re-light. Nor does he mention the fact that Gwyn left the kiln in ashes and himself a lifeless husk blindly attacking whomever comes near. It may also occur to an observant player that *Dark Souls* is an open world game. After giving Frampt the lordvessel from Anor Londo, he tells you what to do next, to obtain the parts of Gwyn’s soul held by his former confidants. One part is held by the Four Kings of New Londo. Four humans who morphed into appalling forms and dwell in the abyss under the ruins of their city. However, there is nothing stopping the player from tackling the Four Kings prior to obtaining the lordvessel and being told by Frampt to defeat them. If the player were to do just that, something interesting happens.

Out from the abyss emerges Darkstalker Kaathe, a second primordial serpent, and Kaathe has some interesting things to say. The fire was dying out, this we knew, but its end would usher in the age of man, which Gwyn feared, so he sacrifices himself to prolong the fire. Kaathe wishes to end this futile cycle and usher in the age of man by extinguishing the fire for good. Presuming the player discovers Kaathe on a subsequent playthrough, the entire narrative structure of the

game they thought they knew has collapsed, and a door has opened to something much deeper, and if the player chooses to continue digging. What continues to emerge is a story that is very atypical, one involving a great deal of environmental storytelling, with countless details embedded in the areas that the player explores. A tale of intrigue between gods and the family of Gwyn, many things implying a narrative much larger in scope than just about the player and their quest.

By subverting the common tropes of the games that *Dark Souls* tries to evoke, it not only subverts the frivolity of those tropes, but the frivolity of the action in games in general. To put it in terms as expressed by Jesper Juul in his book *Half-Real*, *Dark Souls* presents itself as a game mainly of progression, as many video games are. By subverting that progression, one uncovers evidence of a much larger embedded narrative and a rich, living world that does not care about the player or their quest. *Dark Souls* is a game that continues to stand without the player, a game that hurls stones at the glass house that is the very medium it prescribes itself to.