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“Why not help one another on this lonely journey?”: Undead, Ruins, Medievalism, and Depression in the Dark Souls Trilogy

Abstract

Hidetaka Miyazaki’s Dark Souls trilogy are video games famed for their difficulty and the dark, medievalist esthetic of the world. These stories take place in ruined worlds, and the characters who inhabit them are also ruins in their undead states. These ruined states function as metaphors for depression within these games, which is a theme felt by many of the players who have anecdotal stories of how these games provided comfort, not in spite of their dark and ruined landscapes – but because of them.

Keywords: Dark Souls, Dark Souls II, Dark Souls III, depression, medievalism, ruins, undead, allegory, video games

1. Introduction

When thinking of the Dark Souls trilogy, there are many vistas in the games that invite the player to gaze at during their doomed quest. The fallen magnificence of ruined cathedrals and castles, the infamous rot of the poison swamps, and the darkened, perilous corners of graves are all locations in these games. Most of them are marked out as gothic and gloomy, with suitably morose storytelling and difficult gameplay to accompany them. These dark images are not what might spring to mind when someone jokingly says these games “cured their depression.” Surely, such ruined spaces should invoke further feelings of depression rather than alleviate such feelings. However, the lingering in spaces both alive and dead only emphasizes the allegory for depression that the player’s undead character also bears, with these spaces and characters all existing with one foot in the past and the other in the present, persisting in a half-dead state. Rather than

offering a miracle cure to these states of ruin, these games instead linger in them, not for the sake of nihilism, but to illustrate their reality and, in doing so, present community and human connection as a way to navigate the ruins of a life beset by turmoil and depression.

The Dark Souls games center around an undead curse that has fallen over the world. The games and the curse are poetic and allegorical, with the undead curse providing an extended metaphor for mental health and depression. When someone fully succumbs to becoming undead, they become 'Hollow,' which occurs when someone forgets their purpose. Many characters who are on their way to becoming Hollow, or are 'Hollowing,' will start to look more undead than human, with their skin becoming stretched, their body losing mass, and their hair thinning (Dark Souls). Throughout the game trilogy, the precise visuals of the player's undead avatar change, even if the overall theme is consistent. The appearance of the player's avatar can change between human and Hollow, with characters sometimes commenting on the change, such as the character Lautrec saying, "Your humanity is really slipping" (Dark Souls). Humanity is both metaphorical and literal in these games, with the entire process of gaining and losing humanity being an allegory for depression. The player's character in each of these games is a ruin itself. They are marked undead physically by the Dark Sign, and can literally move between different states of decay, denoting whether the player possesses humanity.[1]

2. FromSoftware and a Brief History of Arthuriana in Japan

All FromSoftware games have a reputation for being difficult, both in terms of gameplay and in discovering the history of the game's world. Learning how to deal with both aspects simultaneously can be hard for first-time players. The gameplay itself can be described as "'kinaesthetic': it has its roots in game systems that reward speed and precision in interacting with the controls, as well as knowledge of game mechanics (such as a certain enemy's moves and weaknesses)" (Caracciolo 2). The player must actively learn how to navigate combat, which is made additionally harder since the game offers only a bare-bones tutorial on how to play. The difficulty of the combat is coupled with the plot and history since these games "refuse to hold the player's hand; instead, they craft a world that, while brimming with myth and history, appears remarkably reluctant to share its stories" (Caracciolo 3). These ruined worlds provide space for the imagination to fill in the gaps, even as

the player works to find textual clues in the environment and from the various characters scattered across the land. According to Caracciolo, this is an archaeological mode of engagement, which provides multiple layers of meanings and allows the player to interact with the games on multiple levels (9-10). Given that there is always something new to discover in these games, it comes as no surprise that there are large online communities dedicated to piecing together and sharing what they learned about history and crafting their own theories about what happened in these ruined worlds.

FromSoftware's games are overtly medievalist, beyond the Arthurian references such as the name Gwynevere in Dark Souls and Round Table Hold in Elden Ring. The very locations in the game evoke a long-forgotten medieval past that still haunts the world, providing clues as to that history while leaving the player's imagination to fill in the gaps. One player makes that medieval connection explicit on a Steam community page speaking about Dark Souls; they note that Anor Londo, an area in the first game, "looks a lot like Camelot, with a golden sunset" (DwarvenMECHcommando). Another user replies, "How can anything look like Camelot, when Camelot doesn't really exist?" (Pantheon). The area the users refer to is explicitly based on Il Duomo in Milan (Otsuka). However, having someone say a location in a video game looks like Camelot, an imaginary location, indicates the hold Arthuriana and medievalism have on the popular imagination.

The history of medievalism and Arthuriana in Japan followed the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854. Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur was specifically popular, and foreign teachers used it to teach Western literature and language, with various editions of Malory soon appearing in translation and many Japanese authors adding their own works to the Arthurian canon (Takagi 272). Lafcadio Hearn is one such teacher who had many students and a great love for Malory. He tried to draw similarities between the chivalric code of a knight and the bushido code of a samurai, to illustrate cultural similarities. One major difference in textual interpretation due to cultural background came during the Grail Quest, about whether Bors should save his brother or the maiden. Hearn followed Malory's reading, that saving the maiden was emblematic of Christian morality, while he recounts that his students saw Bors not saving his brother and thus dishonoring

his family as a moral failing (Takagi 272-73). Hearn's story illustrates a cultural difference about whether duty is first owed to personal faith or to family.

Sōseki Natsume, classic novelist and academic, was a fan of Alfred Tennyson, whose Idylls of the King he taught alongside Malory when teaching English. But Natsume also deliberately went back to Malory instead of Tennyson when writing his own Arthurian short stories. In those stories, "Natsume intentionally adopted the lavish, archaic writing style which was quickly becoming obsolete during the Meiji era" (Takagi 282). This deliberate evocation of a flowery and recognizable old-fashioned style of speech is intensely reminiscent of how the characters in the Dark Souls trilogy speak. The language is more evocative of a medieval past rather than being directly Old or Middle English. Gwyndolin's line, "If thou art a true disciple of the Dark Sun, cast aside thine ire, hear the voice of mineself, Gwyndolin, and kneel before me," understands how 'thou' and 'thee' and 'thine' are used, just as the Fire Keeper's dialogue in Dark Souls III correctly uses these pronouns as she says: "Speak thine heart's desire," or "May the flames guide thee" (Dark Souls III). The added formality to the speech makes these characters seem more mythic and embedded in this imagined past. The way that sentences are structured and the verbs used is also deliberately utilized to evoke this medievalist imagination, such as when Ludleth says: "Oh, thou'rt unkindled, and a seeker of Lords. … Look not in bewilderment as I say, I linked the fire long ago, becoming a Lord of Cinder. If substantiation be thy want, set thine eyes upon my charred corse. This sad cadav'r" (Dark Souls III), with 'corse' and 'cadav'r' being in the subtitles beyond simply how the character speaks. The voice acting was initially done in English, rather than first in Japanese and then translated into other languages. This is a deliberate choice to evoke something medievalist and, to where it was created, Other and mystical. The language used is not one-to-one Old English, Middle English, or Elizabethan English, but instead draws from archaic forms of English to further evoke an imagined past. Natsume studied the various forms that the Japanese language took, and his choice of writing his Arthurian stories in this deliberately archaic style "pointed at what was on the verge of extinction there and then – not in the Middle Ages but in his own era. He seems to have been aware that he was the very witness of the rise and fall of bibun-tai. This fading style also suited stories focused on romantic love in the faded, forgotten past" (Takagi 283). This nostalgia for a past, which is located more easily in fiction, is a connection across cultures.

Arthurian legend is medievalist and nostalgic from its inception, with the oral histories being mythmaking of a nearer past, whereas chivalric romance reimagines the past into something both familiar and tantalizingly different at once. Knights in full plate armor did not exist alongside Anglo-Saxons and Romans. Medieval romance is inherently longing for an imagined world that lingers in the Roman ruins already a part of the landscapes around the contemporary writers. That Arthur never dies and is taken to Avalon is the most nostalgic part of these romances—Arthuriana invites continuation with this ending.

Japan is part of the wider academic conversation around medieval literature, and modern Western works continue to be translated, just as Japanese media is translated for other audiences. As a child, Hidetaka Miyazaki enjoyed fantasy novels, both Japanese and from further afield. An interviewer notes how Miyazaki would "reach passages of text he couldn't understand, and so would allow his imagination to fill in the blanks, using the accompanying illustrations. In this way, he felt he was co-writing the fiction alongside its original author" (Parkin). This cooperative storytelling works directly alongside Caracciolo's theory of 'narrative archaeology' to show how the player of Miyazaki's games is invited not just to play the game, but to partake in imaginative play. In an interview, Miyazaki cites Conan the Barbarian, Boorman's Excalibur, and Frazetta's art as direct inspirations for the dark fantasy worlds he creates ("Souls Survivor"). Even for works such as Demon's Souls,[2] he was inspired by Arthuriana. In the same interview, Miyazaki states,

> *It's only my personal taste, but I'm very much drawn to things like King Arthur and Beowolf [sic], and also the Nibelungen [sic], because they're classics. They show the good and evil in the human psyche and you're made to breathe the unvarnished stench of humanity … [Medieval tales] are not trying to put on airs. ("Souls Survivor")*

Medieval stories are often less concerned with explicitly signaling a character's interiority, so the 'lack of airs' to which Miyazaki refers offers a nod to how human the characters can often be despite that. The characters in Dark Souls can sometimes function in a similar allegorical way, offering unvarnished good and evil deeds for the player to interact with as they choose. In romance, there is often a focus on the environment and material culture, both of which are part of the way that FromSoftware tells the stories of their dark fantasy games.

3. Multiple Endings in Dark Souls Games

The first game in the Dark Souls trilogy sets up the concepts of Hollowing and the overarching theme that the ruling elites (the gods in game world) will consume those without power to maintain it. Prophecies in the game tell the player that they are the 'Chosen Undead' while telling them: "[Y]our fate is to succeed the Great Lord Gwyn. So that you may link the Fire, cast away the Dark, and undo the curse of the Undead" (Miyazaki Dark Souls). It seems straightforward enough, and the character who shares the prophecy sends the player to retrieve a magical item, which, if they have it in their possession and try to leave without giving it to him, he says, "No reason for pause at this point," not giving the player a chance to reflect (Dark Souls). The writers use the player's expectations for video games against them, because if the player hands over the item, they miss one of two endings for Dark Souls and miss the character who disrupts the narrative of the prophecy. If the player withholds the magical item, after defeating a certain boss with the item in their inventory, they will meet a twin of the character who shared the prophecy. This character describes the history of the world to the player, saying that while Gwyn and his cohort possess the Lord Souls, "[the first human] found a fourth, unique soul. The Dark Soul. Your ancestor claimed the Dark Soul, and waited for Fire to subside" (Dark Souls). This first human ancestor waited for the fire to burn itself out. Fire is a physical manifestation of the power the gods hold over the world, but as the introductory cinematic to the game says, "with fire came disparity" (Dark Souls). No fire can last forever, but it can be prolonged; this very literal physicality is the same rule that the First Flame must also obey. Gwyn fears the Dark, and he "resisted the course of nature. … Gwyn has blurred [the humans'] past, to prevent the birth of the Dark Lord" (Dark Souls). That Gwyn has 'resisted nature' hammers home that he has subverted nature to prolong his own life and that the unchanging dominion of the gods as the ruling elite is unnatural. It becomes known as the First Sin, referenced in the second game's title. This subjected humans to the undead curse as prophecies spread about the undead 'linking the fire' and killings themselves as kindling upon the First Flame. This metaphor feels overt in drawing attention to how the ruling class will consume everything from those they rule over to keep hold of their own power.

Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin looks at part of the world after the undead curse has descended further. This game allows the player to see how individual kingdoms rose and then fell again as the curse affected the world, with the base game and each of the three DLCs included in the Scholar edition focusing on a fallen kingdom, king, and queen. These ruined kingdoms are replicated in how each king is a ruin of himself; many of them are bosses the player must defeat.[3] The player is offered a chance to win a crown of their own and inherit the kingdom of Drangleic, the first kingdom in which the base game takes place. The player is asked to choose between becoming the next ruler and abandoning the throne. In this game, the path of the king allows for an assumed normativity: if the player has retrieved three ancient crowns, they become human and the undead curse is lifted, but only for them.

There is no bad ending. Despite this, “the morality that underlies these endings is not [binary]” (Caracciolo 97). The choice to ‘link the fire’ or ‘become king’ upholds the status quo and the stagnation of the dying world. Over the course of the game, the Bearer of the Curse is guided to meet with King Vendrick, the ruler of Drangleic. If the player keeps performing the ending of preserving the status quo, Vendrick is one of the characters given some awareness of this endless repetition and receives additional dialogue. He wearily says, “I fail to see your design, young moth” (Dark Souls II). A moth flying into the flame is what the ruling elite of the world seek to turn humanity into. The metaphor is unsubtle, pointing to how the willing immolation does nothing to help the undead who are killing themselves. The gods trick them into willingly living in and upholding a system that can only end in their death. The game’s subtitle evokes biblical allegory, although the ‘first sin’ in Dark Souls II is not eating forbidden fruit, but the King of the Gods’ own act in branding humanity as ruined undead to prolong his own life. The first sin is not a personal drama, but instead a wrong that the king of the gods inflicted upon humanity. This issue is communal and focused on how the humans who are outcast as undead find community.

The “Scholar of the First Sin” from the game’s subtitle is Aldia, brother of King Vendrick, who seeks a way to lift the curse from all of humanity. If possible, through Aldia’s solution, “the binary of Fire and Dark is rejected, and instead the player is seeking an alternative, a way past this binary that would also put an end to the Undead Curse” (Caracciolo 98). Aldia tells the player,

Once, the Lord of Light banished Dark, and all that stemmed from humanity. And men assumed a fleeting form. These are the roots of our world. Men are props on the stage of life, and no matter how tender, how exquisite … A lie will remain a lie. Young Hollow, knowing this, do you still desire peace? (Dark Souls II)

What he is referring to is a systemic overhaul. The Lord of Light is Gwyn—the king of the gods featured in the first game. Working for a system instead of changing the system makes it extremely difficult to bring about lasting changes. Aldia asking if the player desires peace and does not want to fight for themselves and others like them is asking them to take up that fight for their fellow outcasts. The 'first sin' he demystifies is all of humanity becoming subject to the consumption of a god. The Bearer of the Curse is an outcast and truly someone with no past or future, beyond that which can be created if they follow Aldia's advice to build a future for all the undead.

If the player rejects the path of the king and instead seeks darkness and a way to lift the curse from all humanity, they accept the inner darkness. Being undead literally upsets the natural order. It is neither living nor dead, existing wholly outside a boundary. The binaries presented in these games, as the choice between suicide for the greater good and becoming a tyrant, are revealed by Aldia to be a false dichotomy put in place by the tyrant who cursed humanity. The second game has a larger theme about accepting one's own inner darkness. If one wishes to change oneself meaningfully, one must first know oneself. This is the narrative the player can learn to reject as well over the course of all three games. The first game in the series establishes the choice, the second posits a way to find a choice outside of this supposed binary, and the third finally offers more than the binary choice for an ending—the player can work with the character who is their closest ally and friend to extinguish what is left of the First Flame.

4. Depression as Allegory in Dark Souls

Video game studies are a relatively new field, so the scholarly work on FromSoftware games which are being produced is an even fresher area. These works are still highly outnumbered by reviews, blog posts, video essays, and other online works discussing the storylines of these games and players' reception. The themes of these games run counter to a lot of the grand morals and heroics

of much fantasy; they still possess heroism, but it is in the difficulty and darkness of these games that they address a lot of very negative human emotions alongside hope. One video essay, “How Souls Games Save You,” seeks to address the statement in the title, with the essayist saying that before playing, “the theme that constantly intrigued me the most was people who reported being genuinely changed for the better for having played [FromSoftware games]” (00:04:41-47). It is a common enough sentiment that another video essay begins: “Yes, this is the cliché title, Dark Souls saved my life” (“Dark Souls Saved My Life” 00:00:00-02). Saying these games ‘saved one’s life’ or ‘cured one’s depression’ is a common phrase players say that is tongue-in-cheek while expressing a deep feeling the player got from these games; I also speak of these games in the same manner. It is imperative to note that these sayings are anecdotal and not medical, and examine the feelings of players and the theme of depression rather than a clinical diagnosis of depression.

Many extensive studies focus on the effects video games can have on health, both physical and mental. “Depression, Anxiety, and Stress in Young Adult Gamers and Their Relationship with Addictive Behaviors: A Latent Profile Analysis” is a study that examines the age, video game habits, and mental health of subjects, alongside their usage of different substances and gambling habits, to see if there is a correlation between addictive behaviors (Aonso-Diego et al. 254). Considering the existence of loot boxes, pay-to-play video games, and character skins, such a study is a worthwhile addition to the field. “Gaming Your Mental Health: A Narrative Review on Mitigating Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety Using Commercial Video Games” discusses how video games can be a social outlet and used as a resource alongside other things like meditation, table-top games, and seeing friends as part of a journey to improving one’s mental health (Kowal et al. 1). “The Effects of Casual Videogames on Anxiety, Depression, Stress, and Low Mood: A Systematic Review” does mention the differences between more casual and more challenging games will have in examining anxiety and depression among players but also suggests that video games, alongside therapeutic or other treatments, can help improve and manage players’ mental health (Pine et al. 8).

The three articles mentioned in the previous paragraph are but a handful of examples of papers that have a scientific basis in examining the relationship between video games and mental health.

This article is based in video game studies, following more traditional methods of literary studies, and is more interested in the allegorical representation of depression in the Dark Souls trilogy as well as the players' response to it.

Depression and melancholy are well-worn themes in art. In a piece of writing about their own experiences with mental health and medieval literature, Jes Battis writes, "I'm a wreck in the sense of already having fallen apart, like the ruins in the eponymous Old English poem. Being a wreck led me to medieval literature, while at the same time, it allowed me to see what ruins can offer" (51). Old English poetry brims with sadness, with elegiac poetry such as the "Wanderer" being part of a major trend in Battis's works. Even Beowulf has multiple elegies embedded in its body. The specificity of a mind wracked with anguish to utter ruin is especially emblematic when one considers the Dark Souls series. These games are filled with the ruins of a past destroyed by centuries of warfare, calamity, and neglect. Wherever the player turns, they encounter remnants of great structures that provide environmental storytelling and spark the imagination. Notably, one area in Dark Souls is marked as a ruin on a metatextual level—the Demon Ruins and Lost Izalith suffered from budget cuts and scheduling issues because no one anticipated the game would be as successful; thus, the area is widely considered unfinished. The boss is a poor example of a gimmick boss, and the area itself does not have a lot of the layered vibrancy that defines the rest of the game (Dark Souls). Even the bodies of most characters in the entire Dark Souls trilogy, including the player's characters and the bosses, are marked as ruins of what they once were, now being undead and Hollowed versions of their old selves. It is a world defined by loss and ruins.

Battis writes that medieval literature can provide a "framework for discussing anxiety and depression," just as Dark Souls has provided for its fans (65). In medieval literature, one can consider that "Original Sin was a cause for sadness: life beyond the Garden of Eden was full of harsh knowledge and … [these writers] felt an ache of sadness for ancient lives that existed outside a framework of grace" (Battis 52). This Biblical past is out of reach to the medieval audience, just as the legendary past in Dark Souls remains out of the player's grasp, offering only glimpses of what the glory would have once been. Rather than being marked by Original Sin, the player's character is marked by the Undead Curse. This leaves a literal mark on their undead body and defines how the world first sees them. Old English elegies "offer no 'cure' for being incomplete,

because the world itself is incomplete. Sadness is a precondition for society" (Battis 52). This is also true for Dark Souls: how the reader must piece together the story and hunt for its history shows the erosion of that past. Additionally, the characters are often marked by their own melancholy. Aldia is the only character who comes close to a cure without destroying the world or merely putting off the inevitable decline. What he offers, rather than a true cure, is hope. Battis writes: "There is no cure because sadness is part of the world rather than a temporary state" (63), and this applies to Dark Souls: the world has been irrevocably marked by the Undead Curse, and the people who live with it are forever changed. A return to some Edenic past is impossible, having been so changed by such deep depression and melancholy.

While not a miracle cure, since it is not therapy or medicine, one video essayist proposes that "self-efficacy, our own perception that we can perform a task and achieve desired results" is a method that could combat depression ("How Souls Games Save You" 00:07:10-16). The essayist cites studies that show lower self-efficacy is related to a lot of mental health struggles, and while it is not the root of all mental health struggles, higher self-efficacy certainly makes it easier to battle them. They draw a connection to these games, saying that "as you find yourself getting better in these games, it provides a sense of competence and a chance to grasp that sensation of feeling sure of yourself once again" ("How Souls Games Save You" 00:08:21-31). This asks someone if they take responsibility for the things in their life, both good and bad, or if they place the blame on others or the world. While being able to parse this out situationally is most useful as a skill, mastery experiences are suggested as a great way to work on one's self-efficacy. These are all tangible things one can use as evidence of one's self-growth.

Feelings that can bring about meaningful change "are especially likely to emerge during periods of personal crisis" (Caracciolo 82). Dark Souls is not unique, since many pieces of media can move a reader and provide "a reconsideration of personal experience that is transformative and interpretive at the same time," but Dark Souls contains an "existential insight that could fold into nihilism but is actually redeemed by the positive emotional values of the combat as well as of the complex narrative and spatial design" (Caracciolo 82-83). The games acknowledge the darkness in humanity and the world, but are a space where the player can work through and accept it for what it is.

Most video games are designed in such a way that keeps the player engaged, pulling them along so that they can beat the game and win, receiving a fair challenge and rewards that keep them going with the game flow. The player can grind so things never become a challenge and do not depend on decisions, not to mention quick-time events. While these games do have "upgradable equipment and levels, … easily the biggest determining factor [for success] is your performance. There is no luck, there are no reverse feedback loops or pity items, there are no dynamic difficulty adjustments, there is no easy mode. If most games are built to be beaten, FromSoft games are built to make you quit" ("How Souls Games Save You" 00:14:37-58). It is difficult to overemphasize how this is woven into the entirety of the game's fabric and how these games do have a reputation for difficulty.

People on online threads message each other and share their own experiences about this "…usually signing off on their story with the phrase 'Don't you dare go hollow'" ("How Souls Games Save You" 00:05:23-28). "Don't you dare go hollow," is said by Laurentius, and "No one wants to see you go hollow," is said by Andre, two fan-favorite characters in Dark Souls, respectively a pyromancy teacher and a blacksmith, both characters in the position of mentor to the player in the dark world they find themselves in (Dark Souls). Being undead in Dark Souls is akin to dealing with depression. However, the player's avatar can literally go Hollow; while the model can appear more human or undead, the player will never see their character when fully Hollow. This is the moment when they give up the game because it is too hard, and the character becomes a mindless undead instead of one with purpose. If in a story world so explicitly dark and gloomy there are characters insisting on the player's avatar and, through them, on the actual player not to give up. The blend between character and player on such a personal topic might be what has allowed these statements to become something simultaneously intimate for each player and shared in the larger game community.

Another video essay describes depression as a "constant cycle of facing the same enemy over and over again, only to lose some of yourself each time" ("Don't You Dare Go Hollow" 00:01:15-22), which is also quite an accurate way to describe the process of learning to defeat a boss in a Souls game. This aligns with the above reading on Hollowing and depression in these games. The essayist says,

There are … two main ways people defeat Dark Souls. Some choose to go [at] it alone, either trusting in their own strength or simply not wanting to be a bother to others. The rest will decide to call on the help of friends or strangers, gaining strength by having those friends or strangers by their side. ("Don't You Dare Go Hollow" 00:02:53-03:09)

This is a literal description of how co-operative play works in the game. While these games can be treated as a single-player experience, a player can use an item in the game that allows them to be summoned to help other players in their own game world. They will be summoned into their game, moving freely through an area with them to defeat enemies and eventually the boss of the area. In the games, there is also a unique "messaging system that empowers players to help each other out in making sense of challenging situations or obscure lore" (Caracciolo 61), with a limited number of words players can use to formulate the messages. Some NPCs can be summoned to help with areas and bosses. The game rewards both parties participating in co-operation with specific items that the player can only gain through this process. The bosses gain extra health to balance having additional players, and this player's world becomes more likely to be a participant in player-versus-player combat as well, since there is an extra pair of hands.

Arguably, the most beloved character from these games centers around the concept of helping other people in a bleak world for no gain beyond friendship. Solaire of Astora is a knight on a pilgrimage to "seek [his] own sun" (Dark Souls). He is the character who shares the item to allow cooperation with the player, saying, "Why not help one another on this lonely journey?" (Dark Souls). Over the course of the game, he gains nothing by helping the player other than company and friendship. The later games even alter the flavor of the Sunlight Covenant, the group he is part of, to reflect his values, and his armor can be found as well, all described as well-maintained but average equipment that bears no special properties (Dark Souls III). The 'Praise the Sun' gesture and phrase also stem from Solaire. That such a character has become possibly the most iconic character from these games shows how even a character reaching out a friendly hand with no expectation of reward can touch so many people. This is also reflected in the way players treat each other, following the example set by Solaire.

Truthfully, in the comment section of each of these videos, there are hundreds, in fact thousands, of comments made by people about their own anecdotal stories of how these games helped them through mental health, physical health, and other troubles in their own lives. Such a thing replies to first-hand accounts of how these games helped people, how personal the stories all are and how the shared experience of playing and beating these games has brought together a community who love these stories. These stories speak to a crowd who feel more in common with such a flawed and human character than traditional heroes in fantasy fiction. The player's character in any game in the Dark Souls trilogy is marked out by being quite literally anyone; they are not descendants of kings but nameless undead who have the potential to recognize the corruption within the world's power structures while finding community and mutually helping their friends. These goals are still noble and more likely for a real person than taking a crown.

5. Dark Souls III and Closing Remarks

In the final game of this trilogy, enough time has passed, and enough individual undead have turned away from sacrificing themselves that the First Flame burns low. The world itself has crumbled and fallen out of time, with locations from the world's history clustered near the shrine that acts as the central hub for the game (Dark Souls III). Even more so than in the first game, the final game in the trilogy truly illustrates how the "flow of time itself is convoluted, with heroes centuries old phasing in and out," even as the world itself seems to suffer endless wounds leading to its ruin (Dark Souls I). If the player chooses to link the fire once again at the end of the game, they will get a rather lackluster final scene with no music or dialogue, where they burn themselves like in the first game. Instead of a great gout of flame, they are barely set aflame at all. They sit down next to the bonfire, which is barely giving off light in a scene almost entirely set in darkness (Dark Souls III). With this ending, it is inevitable that the game will repeat or that it will lead directly to the apocalypse of Ringed City's finale.

The final area of the Ringed City DLC is the truest, barest ruin these games have shown players yet: what is left of the Ringed City is a desert, with only a few walls and other pieces of architecture left (Dark Souls III). Like a spiral down a drain, all the remaining architecture seems to circle the final boss arena, where the player faces the only other being left at the very end of the

world—Gael. This other being is an undead knight who has helped the player before, but the world is literally a barren wasteland if left to spin in endless cycles until the fire burns itself out. However, there is another ending, and this is just one future that awaits the world.

In Dark Souls III, the player can work with their closest ally and friend to extinguish what is left of the First Flame. This is not a dark lord ending where the player becomes the fated 'Lord of Hollows' who replaces Gwyn as the tyrannical leader of this age of humanity. Instead, it becomes an age for all humans, with the flame out and the curse lifted for all of humanity. As the screen turns completely dark, the avatar's friend says, "One day, tiny flames will dance across the darkness," so the darkness will not last forever but instead become an age with lights for everyone (Dark Souls III). Whatever is left of the world is hidden under the cover of darkness, as it was at its inception. Any ruins, any scars from war, any new growth is left under that darkness, with the image of the new world left to the imagination of the player. After the screen goes dark and the music stops, this same character asks the sole line of dialogue remaining before the game ends, "Ashen one, hearest thou my voice still?" (Dark Souls III). The ending focuses on helping the avatar's friend and on extinguishing the First Flame in a way that does not impose another tyrant on the world. It makes sense that this ending would be known as 'the End of Fire.'

The Dark Souls series has moved many players, and it contains layered allusions and outright references to medieval romance. The focus on embracing alterity in the cursed protagonist and aiding friends both in real life and game characters makes it focused on building a community, even in a dire, dark world. These lessons are taken by players into the real world. The undead characters can become a further metaphor for the players themselves and their mental health struggles, since over the course of the games, the players approached these ruined characters and worlds on their own terms and fought against the bosses who initially seemed impossible to beat through eventually were overcome. Reading the undead in the Dark Souls trilogy as an allegory for depression allows one to read not just their ruined bodies but the ruined landscapes they inhabit as markers of their pasts, things beautiful and tragic at once that offer a new type of moody nostalgia due to that half-destroyed nature, which encourages the imagination to fill in the gaps and brings mixed emotions to the fore. There is no magical way to rebuild the ruined world or even to find what caused the kingdoms to crumble, but spending time in this world within an

equally ruined undead body, the player can linger in that place between, offering a space for their own reflections and feelings to breathe.

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[1] Each game has different in-game mechanics for how this works exactly. In the first game, the player can possess humanity, which they must literally consume and burn to become more human. The second game allows the player to experience a slower physical decay after repeated deaths, rather than the two mechanical states of the first game. The third game is the only one where the player's character's undeath functions differently, since the character essentially experiences a type of permanent death, resurrected as a new type of undead form, 'unkindled.' All of this is more complicated in the games, but the general specifics are worth noting.

[2] Despite predating the Dark Souls trilogy, the names provide surface-level connection beyond the myriad thematic connections between the games and gameplay. Patches is, of course, a character in Demon's Souls and the Dark Souls trilogy.

[3] The exception to this is the Sunken King, who never appears in the game, even if his queen and the dragon he worshipped are both bosses. Vendrick, the Old Iron King, and the Burnt Ivory King must all be defeated if one wishes to subvert the expectation of merely becoming another king and eventually falling, as they all did.

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