

# The Dark Sigil Will Guide Thee\*

## The Hollowing Mechanic in FromSoftware’s *Souls* Games

Eric Stein<sup>†</sup>

October 23, 2020

### Introduction

The three games in Japanese game developer FromSoftware’s *Dark Souls* series (released in 2011, 2014, and 2016),<sup>1</sup> and their progenitor, *Demon’s Souls* (2009),<sup>2</sup> can be described, simply, as *dark fantasy, third-person, action-roleplaying games*. This description can be further nuanced with the gameplay elements that have come to be distinctive of the *feel* of these games, and which have been inherited by a myriad of “soulslike” imitators: *action warm-ups*, *animation priority*, and *stamina management*.<sup>3</sup> These elements are what make a *Souls* game *feel* like a *Souls* game. I have spent many pages examining the ecopolitical,<sup>4</sup> metaphysical,<sup>5</sup> and ethical<sup>6</sup> questions posed by the *Dark Souls* games, but it is this matter of *feel* on which I will be focusing here. In my first scholarly engagement with the *Souls* series,<sup>7</sup> I wrote about the “tactile thematics” communicated by the

---

\*Northeast Popular Culture Association Annual Conference. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4603519.

<sup>†</sup>Eric.Stein@twu.ca, Game Development, School of the Arts, Media, and Culture, Trinity Western University, Langley, BC.

<sup>1</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Dark Souls* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2011), Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2014), and Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls III* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Demon’s Souls* (PS3: FromSoftware, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>See Mark Brown, “Do We Need a Soulslike Genre?” Game Maker’s Toolkit, *YouTube*, July 2017, <https://youtu.be/Lx7BWayWu08>. Brown mentions some other elements of game feel, but these three are constitutive of the *tactile* space of these games.

<sup>4</sup>Eric Stein, “The Fire Fades: Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware’s *Dark Souls*” (International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Orlando, FL, March 2020), <https://www.academia.edu/42195654/>.

<sup>5</sup>Eric Stein, “Praise the Sun: The Metaphysics of *Dark Souls* from the First Flame to the End of Fire” (Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, Western University, London, ON, June 2020), <https://www.academia.edu/43267406/>.

<sup>6</sup>Eric Stein, “Pure Vessels: The Insect and the Other in *Dark Souls* and *Hollow Knight*” (Insect Entanglements, Centre for Environmental Humanities, University of Bristol, Online, June 2020), <https://academia.edu/43386564/>.

<sup>7</sup>Eric Stein, “Tactile Thematics: From Power to Skill in FromSoftware’s *Souls* Games” (Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 2020), <https://academia.edu/42026629/>.

weapon animations across the entire series, including the three *Dark Souls* games, *Demon's Souls*, and their spiritual successors *Bloodborne* (2015)<sup>8</sup> and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019).<sup>9</sup> I identified an empirically verifiable design trajectory across these six games, mapping a progression in mechanics to a progression in theme. Specifically, I noted this trajectory as a mechanical and thematic shift from *agency* to *context*, from *purpose* to *compromise*, from *intentionality* to *intimacy*, and from *power* to *skill*,<sup>10</sup> a shift that I then proceeded to pursue by way of the ecopolitical, metaphysical, and ethical questions noted above.

By the point of my most recent engagement with this design trajectory, however, it had become clear that the explicitly binary or polar structure of this trajectory is itself problematized by the *Souls* games. This is to say that the *Souls* games perform a critique of “power” as an ecopolitical, metaphysical, and ethical category while at the same time disassembling the very terms and conceptual framework upon which this critique depends. This auto-deconstructive movement is mobilized most potently by the dynamic between *philosophical subject* and *philosophical other* that these games present, a dynamic that is organized therein in the shape of the *turn*, the entangling, ensnaring form that the philosopher François Laruelle contends is the structuring model of western philosophy as such.<sup>11</sup> The *opening* and subsequent *collapse* effectuated by the in-turning of subject and other in the *Souls* games produces at the same moment the opening and collapse of the turn itself,<sup>12</sup> revealing the entire construction in the contingency and groundlessness of its being.<sup>13</sup>

So, then, who stands in the ruins? Or, as another philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, pointedly asks, *who comes after the subject?*<sup>14</sup> This is the question that *Dark Souls* has you *play*, over and over again, a folding, twisting interrogation that buckles under the burden of its own eternal repetition. Both the subject and its other are dead, burnt to ash, faded into darkness, and yet we ask, in the midst of this, our ongoing crisis, *who comes?* How are we to conceive of this multiplicity of actually existing subjectivities irreducible to a singular image of thought or mode of being? How are we to understand this plurality of contingent entities, rooted not in the logic of the transcendent universal but in a diagram of the

<sup>8</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Bloodborne* (PS4: FromSoftware, 2015).

<sup>9</sup>Hidetaka Miyazaki and Kazuhiro Hamatani, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2019).

<sup>10</sup>Stein, “Tactile Thematics,” 7.

<sup>11</sup>François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London, UK: Continuum, 2010), 184, 194.

<sup>12</sup>This construction (subject-other) demands a reason that is at once its instrument and cause, what Laruelle terms the “real/syntax disjunction,” the originary scission of occidental thought. See Laruelle, 103.

<sup>13</sup>I have relied on Quentin Meillassoux’s articulation of the “principle of unreason” or the “non-facticity of facticity” to theorize this originary contingency—in a word, the “factuality” of what is. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London, UK: Continuum, 2009), 60, 79.

<sup>14</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 1–8.

“finite and generic one”?<sup>15</sup> This is a *feel* that requires our attention, a feel that “comes to us” and yet also “precede[s] us.”<sup>16</sup> So we ask again, *who comes*? It is with this question in mind that I now return to the domain of the tactile, taking up this question *who* through an engagement with the mechanic of *hollowing* in the *Souls* games.

### ***Demon’s Souls***

Though integral to the experience of *Dark Souls*, hollowing, which in those games is the consequence of the “undead curse,” begins in *Demon’s Souls* as something quite distinct. In the opening cutscene, we are told that, “On the first day man was granted a soul, and with it, clarity,” but, “On the second day, upon Earth was planted an irrevocable poison, a soul-devouring demon.” After starting a new game and completing character creation, a second cutscene plays, telling us the history of the northern kingdom of Boletaria and its king, Allant the twelfth, who brought “unprecedented prosperity” to his realm through his mastery of the “power of souls.” But, in so doing, Allant woke the Old One from its “eternal slumber,” and a “colourless Deep Fog swept across the land,” bringing with it “terrible Demons” that preyed upon humanity in order to “claim their souls.” Boletaria was cut off from the world and plunged into chaos. We, the player character, are lured to Boletaria by legends of the great power hidden in the fog; through gameplay, it will be determined whether “the land [has] found its saviour” or “the Demons [have] found a new slave.”<sup>17</sup>

What is established mechanically by this introductory narration is the economy of giving, taking, losing, and reclaiming souls that drives the gameplay of *Demon’s Souls*, an economy that will persist through the *Dark Souls* trilogy as well as *Bloodborne* (albeit as “blood echoes” in the latter). The difference, in *Demon’s Souls*, is the configuration of the *playing subject* with respect to this economy, and the *feel* that this configuration produces. In *Demon’s Souls*, when the player character dies for the first time (typically at the hands of the Vanguard boss in the tutorial level of the game), they will be presented with the now famous “You Died” screen, and in smaller font beneath, “However, the Nexus traps you. You shall remain in this world *as a Soul*, forever.” When the player character awakes from death, they will do so in the Nexus, the hub for the game, in “soul form.” When in soul form, the player character has a faint, ghostly glow surrounding their avatar, is completely silent when moving, and has their health reduced by half—emphasizing their phantasmic, bodiless state. Though the health penalty is punishing, soul form makes possible the game’s multiplayer mechanics, allowing the player character to be summoned as a helpful blue phantom into another player’s world or invade another player’s world as a baleful black phantom. Furthermore, the player character’s “character tendency” will

<sup>15</sup>A phrase I borrow from Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii.

<sup>16</sup>Nancy, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>17</sup>Miyazaki, *Demon’s Souls*.

determine additional effects when in soul form. If a player does “good” aligned actions in play, their tendency will shift white, boosting their attack power in soul form and as a blue phantom; if a player does “evil” aligned actions, their tendency will shift black, reducing their maximum health in soul form but increasing attack power as a black phantom.<sup>18</sup> To regain their body, a player character must use a stone of ephemeral eyes, kill a boss in their own world, help another player kill the boss in that player’s world, or invade and kill a player in that player’s world.

Apart from the status effects and online gameplay elements noted, soul form plugs into a much higher level, and significantly more obtuse mechanic that yet bears heavily on players’ experiences of *Demon’s Souls*: world tendency. Like character tendency, world tendency is affected by a player’s actions, but unlike character tendency, world tendency is affected by all players online at any give time, and the global balance of world tendency across all online players will be registered every time a player launches the game. When a player character dies in body form and kills certain named NPCs in their body forms, world tendency shifts toward black; when a player character kills a boss, the same named NPCs in their black phantom forms, and certain other powerful enemies, world tendency shifts toward white. It is important to pay attention to current world tendency during play, because white world tendency will make enemies weaker but also reduce item drops, and black world tendency will make enemies stronger but drop rarer items and yield more souls upon death. Additionally, the gameplay effects noted above with respect to character tendency stack with world tendency. White world and character tendency boost attack power in soul form, while black world and character tendency reduce health in soul form but boost attack power when invading other players. Lastly, the abovementioned named NPCs will only appear in the world in body form at pure white world tendency and as black phantoms at pure black world tendency, thus motivating players to pursue one or the other tendency in order to experience these unique gameplay events.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the world of *Demon’s Souls* is highly sensitive to the actions of its players, shifting and changing in response to their deeds. The basic feedback loop of combat (defined by action warm-ups, animation priority, and stamina management, as noted previously) is shifted ever so slightly, changing the actual *feel* of play by changing how the world pushes back against the player’s efforts. Because dying in soul form will not impact world tendency, players are encouraged to take risks while in soul form, without fear of the world becoming more dangerous due to their failure. Similarly, the feel of making a final push

---

<sup>18</sup>These mechanics are not clearly explained in game, and have been deduced with much effort by members of the *Souls* community. For a guide, see “Character Tendency,” *Demon’s Souls* Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://demonssouls.wikidot.com/character-tendency>.

<sup>19</sup>Like character tendency, *Demon’s Souls* does not explain the world tendency mechanic. For a guide, see “World Tendency,” *Demon’s Souls* Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://demonssouls.wikidot.com/world-tendency>.

on the boss in body form with friendly blue phantoms in tow raises the tension of play. Though a player character in body form might have more health, and blue phantoms will aid them in battle, they are also inviting the possibility of invasion, and death will shift the tendency of the world toward black, making the next attempt more difficult. To formalize the point, we can say that the *insertion* of the playing subject in the world is met with feedback, friction, and compromise.<sup>20</sup> The gameworld is thick with context and sensation, directly challenging the player character’s *power for doing*. Though the economy of *Demon’s Souls* is structured around ever-increasing power, the first intimations of a critique can already be felt here in these challenges that are posed to this central structure.

## ***Dark Souls***

With *Dark Souls*, then, released two years after *Demon’s Souls*, though we find the “soul form” mechanic transformed almost entirely, the friction and compromise that make the feel of *Demon’s Souls* so distinct from other games of the era remains, and it is this feel, that of *radical contingency*, that has come to be distinctive of the soulslike as a genre. This is not to say that the *Souls* games are characterized by luck or randomness, because they are not, but rather that the play experience of these games is one of profound *situatedness* and *vulnerability*. When people speak of the intense *difficulty* of these games, this is in fact the experience to which they are referring, an experience that the “hollowing” mechanic emphasizes, drawing out the thematic of *compromise* first elaborated in *Demon’s Souls* and making it explicit.

Wherein *Demon’s Souls* souls were bestowed upon humankind, in *Dark Souls* souls were discovered by many different creatures in the midst of the First Flame, the blazing genesis of disparity within an unformed, fog-shrouded world. The Lords claimed the great souls therein, becoming gods of their respective domains—death, chaos, light, and dark—and leading their subjects in battle against the everlasting dragons that ruled over the grey stasis of that ancient age. The dragons fell, the Age of Fire began, and humanity lived in happiness and prosperity under the seemingly benevolent rule of Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight. But *Dark Souls* picks up at the waning of this age. The flames fade, darkness encroaches, and the darksign begins to spread among the living, the brand of those afflicted with the incurable curse of undeath. The player character is one such accursed undead, locked away by the adherents of Gwyn in an asylum to the north and left to go hollow. The player character is rescued from this fate by Oscar, Knight of Astora, an undead hero who tells the player character of the prophecy of the Chosen Undead who will make pilgrimage to Lordran, the land of Ancient Lords. The player character embarks upon their quest.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>I derive the concept of “insertion” from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, beginning with the section “Concrete movement,” in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 106.

<sup>21</sup>Miyazaki, *Dark Souls*.

Quite clearly, then, we see how the player character's insertion in the world of *Dark Souls* is distinguished from that of *Demon's Souls*. Though the *feel* of gameplay remains largely the same, the *profile* that the player character cuts in the world has been transformed at the thematic, and indeed, cosmological, level. In *Demon's Souls*, the soul is bestowed on humanity, and with it reason. Demons feed on the souls of humanity to satiate their hunger. The player character kills demons to take their souls and grow in power, so that eventually they might face the Old One and return it to its slumber. In *Dark Souls*, on the other hand, souls are *discovered* by all manner of creatures, and while they do serve as a font of power as in *Demon's Souls* (and can be taken by force to this end), they are not primarily a source of reason but of *differentiation*. The First Flame is the originary scission of preindividual being, giving rise to a whole set of binary oppositions that supplant the static unity of the prior age, forming the formless and filling it with a myriad of intersecting and conflicting individuations. Humanity is but one individuation, one soul, one possible *expression* of reason among many, descended from the Furtive Pygmy who claimed the titular "dark soul" from within the First Flame—so linking all of its descendants with primordial darkness. Already, *Dark Souls* decenters the power that it inherits from its predecessor, rendering it ontologically, fundamentally contingent. This decentering is only intensified by the implementation of the hollowing mechanic, and the way it shifts the player character's insertion in the gameworld.

The player character begins the game "hollowed," an emaciated undead corpse. They pass other "hollows" in the hallway outside their cell, aimless shells of human beings who long ago lost the will to live. The player character progresses through the level, meets Oscar once again, and eventually kills the first boss of the game, the Asylum Demon, that will award souls *and* a new resource: humanity. Upon arriving in Lordran, the first NPC that the player character meets is the Crestfallen Warrior, who tells them about hollowing and humanity, and that humanity can be used to reverse an undead human's hollowing. Crushing the humanity sprite in their hand and then sitting at the nearby bonfire, the player character can then use this humanity to rejuvenate their corpseslike appearance—though this does not break the curse of undeath. While human, the player character can now offer further pieces of humanity to the bonfire to kindle it, increasing its strength and so increasing the amount of healing that the player character's estus flask provides. As with body form in *Demon's Souls*, while human the player character can summon other players to aid them, but also runs the risk of being invaded by hostile players. However, the modifiers and penalties imposed upon player characters in soul form in *Demon's Souls*, and the influences of character and world tendency, do not persist, and are instead replaced with a different overdetermining world structure all together.

In *Demon's Souls* the player character is bound to the Nexus; in *Dark Souls* the player character is bound to the bonfires scattered throughout the world. Whenever a player character dies, they will wake up at the bonfire at which they most recently rested. Resting at a bonfire refills the player character's estus

flask, cures status effects, and recharges sorceries, pyromancies, and miracles. At the same time, any enemies that had been killed are revived, resetting the areas through which the player character just travelled. As already noted, bonfires serve as instruments for reversing hollowing, but they are also where the player character uses souls to level up, and can manage their inventory and work on their equipment.

However, the warmth and safety offered by the bonfires belies a dark origin. The description for the Homeward miracle tells us that its power “Would normally link to one’s homeland, only the curse of the Undead has distorted its power, redirecting casters to a bonfire,” because “perhaps for Undead, this serves as home.”<sup>22</sup> The description for the Homeward Bone further explicates this distortion: “Bonfires are fueled by the bones of the Undead. In rare cases, the strong urge of their previous owner’s to seek bonfires enchants their bones with a homeward instinct.” Both the miracle and the consumable have the same effect, but the consumable reveals the distortion of the miracle for what it is: the bonfires are, for the undead, both home *and* grave because they are the ones cursed to serve as fuel for the flame. If an undead does not merely go hollow, wandering the world devoid of will, they will be “reduced to white ash,” made an instrument for the prolongation of the age and the entrapment of more like themselves.<sup>23</sup> Though soul form in *Demon’s Souls* presents the player with significant *mechanical* friction and compromise, hollowing in *Dark Souls* shifts much of this friction and compromise to the thematic register, making the playing subject’s insertion in the world the vehicle for a *philosophical* critique of power.

An interaction with the primordial serpent Darkstalker Kaathe presents this critique to the player plainly. Disparity, as such, cannot last for ever, and Gwyn, for fear of his fading, and with it the fading of his Age of Fire, sought to overcome the course of nature and stop the Age of Dark from coming to pass. Gwyn sacrificed himself to the fire and directed his faithful to serve as shepherds of humanity, so leading to the corralling of the hollow in asylums like the one in which the player character begins the game, and the manipulation of the not yet hollow into unwitting servitude to a dying power. The player character’s quest is a sham, the perpetuation of an age kept alight by the cinders of their fellows. The undead curse, too, is revealed to be a consequence of Gwyn’s rebellion against nature, with hollowing, by extension, the fate of mortals trapped in the dimming light of a faltering god. But Kaathe offers an alternative: rather than replace Gwyn and link the fire again, the player character can choose to destroy the old husk of a lord and let his beloved fire burn out once and for all, breaking the undead curse in the process and ushering in the new age of humankind.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>“Homeward,” Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls.wiki dot.com/homeward>.

<sup>23</sup>“Homeward Bone,” Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksoul s.wikidot.com/homeward-bone>

<sup>24</sup>“Darkstalker Kaathe,” Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/darkstalker-kaathe>.

In *Demon's Souls*, every person, every choice, every action is overdetermined by the logic of the soul, a monolithic logic which is referred back, in every instance, to the Old One. In *Dark Souls*, however, this logic is made disparate, the world populated with a myriad of incommensurable powers, making possible this break from the power of the sun, this ontological passage to a different paradigm of existence. Furthermore, this disparity of powers allows for the soul and humanity to be distinguished from each other, separating the unified economy of power and connection in *Demon's Souls* into two separate economies. While soul level continues to signify a player character's power, humanity signifies their resilience and will, boosting defenses in all categories, increasing item discovery, and increasing resistance to the curse status effect (which halves the effected player character's health in the same way as soul form in *Demon's Souls*)—all in addition to the multiplayer mechanics that being human makes possible. So, by separating these economies, *Dark Souls* detaches the boons of connection from the mechanism of power, inserting the player character in the world with a radically different profile from the prior game. Where the *situation* of the player character in *Demon's Souls* implies compromise and vulnerability through the feel of gameplay, *Dark Souls* resituates this feel on a different ontological and cosmological plane, injecting contingency at the very heart of the transcendental. It is this move that the next two *Dark Souls* games will continue to develop, a development that we can discern in the transformations of the hollowing mechanic that these games enact.

## Dark Souls II

Wherein *Demon's Souls* the critique of the playing subject, its configuration as situated, vulnerable, and contingent, remains implicit, and in *Dark Souls* this critique is explicated over the course of play, *Dark Souls II* makes this thematic explicit from the very beginning, and indeed centers it as *the* dramatic question motivating the player character's journey. "You will lose everything, once branded," the opening cutscene tells us. "Your past. Your future. Your very light. None will have meaning, and you won't even care. By then you'll be something other than human. A thing that feeds on souls. A Hollow." The brand to which the cutscene refers is the "symbol of the curse, an augur of darkness," a swirling black void that mars the flesh, an outward sigil of an "ailing mind" blighted with undeath and hollowing. The player character comes to the land of Drangleic in search of "souls" that might "mend" their condition, lured like "a moth drawn to a flame." But even this quest is cursed: "Your wings will burn in anguish. Time after time. For that is your fate. The fate of the cursed."<sup>25</sup> There is no light here, no warmth of fire, only darkness. Is this the future Kaathe promised? Is this the other choice, slavery to fire or annihilation by dark?

Of the three *Dark Souls* games, *Dark Souls II* borrows the most substantially from *Demon's Souls*. In *Demon's Souls*, we are told in the second introductory cinematic: "The Demons hunt down men and claim their souls . . . Each time a

---

<sup>25</sup>Shibuyo and Tanimura, *Dark Souls II*.

Demon claims a human soul, the Demon's own soul is invigorated by the life force."<sup>26</sup> Once gameplay begins in *Dark Souls II*, the player character will meet three elderly fire keepers who tell them more of their fate: "You're finished. You'll go Hollow. Yes, you will become one of them. Hollows prey upon men, feast upon their souls. This is the fate of the cursed."<sup>27</sup> The parallelism between the demons of *Demon's Souls* and the hollows of *Dark Souls II* is obvious, but now, rather than an outside threat, this threat comes from within the playing subject itself, the player character of *Dark Souls II*.

The fire keepers ask the player character their name, giving the player the opportunity to name their character. Once chosen, the cutscene continues, and one of the fire keepers gives the player character a Human Effigy, a wicker object crafted in the shape of a humanity sprite from *Dark Souls*. "Take a closer look," she says, "Who do you think it's supposed to be? Think back, deep into your past. Yes, it's an effigy of you."<sup>28</sup> Staring into the black spot that marks the effigy, just as the darksign marks the player character's skin, initiates character creation—forgotten humanity, rendered in effigy, becomes a means of recollection. Wherein *Dark Souls* humanity allows an undead to recall their human form, in *Dark Souls II* human effigies allow for the recollection of the subject as such. The contingency of the playing subject is therefore significantly intensified by *Dark Souls II*, positioned closer to the edge of hollowing than ever before. This is a *feel* that the game maintains throughout its duration.

In *Dark Souls*, being hollow simply cuts player characters off from online gameplay and reduces the aforementioned defenses and resistances granted by human status. But in *Dark Souls II*, every time a player character dies while hollow they lose five percent of their maximum health with a lower limit of fifty percent after ten deaths (though high "sin," a mechanic we do not have the space to discuss here, can cause a player character's health to drop as low as five percent of maximum). This accomplishes the same effect as soul form in *Demon's Souls*, but the feel it provokes is one of creeping dread and steadily increasing challenge, the punishment for repeat failure. Hollowing in *Dark Souls II*, therefore, not only adapts the health penalty of soul form in *Demon's Souls* but the punitive elements of world and character tendency, rolling this system of feedback into a single mechanic. And yet, it is important to note that this game design choice is not undoing the work of *Dark Souls*. Though the penalties of two different systems from *Demon's Souls* are combined into one in *Dark Souls II*, the distinction between the economies of soul and humanity introduced by *Dark Souls* remains, and here is implemented in such a way as to make the player character even more vulnerable than in the preceding game. Further samples of dialogue will help clarify what *Dark Souls II* is trying to accomplish.

The fire keepers tell the player character to "hold on to [their] souls," because souls are "all that keep you from going Hollow." This is the promise of Drangleic,

---

<sup>26</sup>Miyazaki, *Demon's Souls*.

<sup>27</sup>Shibuyo and Tanimura, *Dark Souls II*

<sup>28</sup>Shibuyo and Tanimura.

the reason the player character has come, an echo of the promise of Boletaria and the power hidden within its fog-shrouded lands. But then, the firekeeper changes tack: “Oh, I’ll fool you no longer. You’ll lose your souls... All of them. Over and over again.” The player character is cursed, and their quest likewise—none of this is hidden. There is no illusory hope of linking the fire, as in *Dark Souls*, only darkness. Saulden the Crestfallen Warrior, one of the next NPCs that the player character meets, drives the point home: “You probably heard that it was possible to break the curse here. Well, that’s not true at all.”<sup>29</sup> And Saulden does not lie. *Dark Souls II* is but another step in an endless cycle of fire and dark. If the Chosen Undead chose to link the fire in *Dark Souls*, that age would have yet given way to an age of dark; if the Chosen Undead chose to let the fire burn out, the dark age would have eventually seen fire once more. If undeath is caused by the unnatural prolongation of the age in *Dark Souls*, in *Dark Souls II* undeath is in fact an inevitable feature of a cyclical cosmology. Nearly exhausted, eerily resilient, neither living nor dead—such is existence between the twinned powers of fire and dark, the fragility of mortal being caught up in eternal repetition.<sup>30</sup> If *Demon’s Souls* promises salvation through the acquisition of soul power, and *Dark Souls* the same, but through the embrace of humanity’s darkness, *Dark Souls II* declares that neither path is truly different from the other. Both terminate in *power*; this is the true curse. Saulden says as much: “What we call the curse is traceable to the soul. Do you see what that means? To be alive... to walk this earth... That’s the real curse right there.”<sup>31</sup> Original difference, the splitting of humanity as *another* power, another principle distinct from the soul, is but the propagation of accursed power under another name. In the end, the only truth is want, the curse of life, of individuated being as such.<sup>32</sup>

We see, then, how in *Dark Souls II*, hollowing as both mechanic and thematic has been sharpened by FromSoftware to a finely honed edge. And yet, it is only the middle entry in a trilogy, and *Dark Souls III*, in concluding the series, takes hollowing even further, and surprisingly, does so in such a way that unsettles the starkly conclusive cynicism of *Dark Souls II*, challenging its players to once again reinterpret the series and the critique of the playing subject that it mounts. Though the situation of the player character is still vulnerable, their insertion in the world profoundly contingent, the *feel* of *Dark Souls III* leads its players beyond the limited logics of the prior games, beyond both the “scope of light” and the “reach of dark,” and the catastrophic polarity of these terms.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup>“Saulden the Crestfallen Warrior,” Dark Souls II Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/saulden-the-crestfallen-warrior>.

<sup>30</sup>The item description for the Dull Ember states: “An ember radiating a dull light. This flame seems nearly exhausted, but exhibits an eerie resilience. Perhaps this is its ordinary state.” See “Dull Ember,” Dark Souls II Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/dull-ember>.

<sup>31</sup>“Saulden the Crestfallen Warrior.”

<sup>32</sup>“Ancient Dragon,” Dark Souls II Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/ancient-dragon>.

<sup>33</sup>“Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin,” Dark Souls Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed October 21, 2020, [https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,\\_Scholar\\_of\\_the\\_First\\_Sin](https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,_Scholar_of_the_First_Sin).

## Dark Souls III

In the chronology of *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls III* establishes itself at what appears to be the end of ends, the final *turn* in the cycle of fire and dark. Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, in giving himself to flame, became the first Lord of Cinder. Many followed in his footsteps. Many turned their backs. But none escaped the cycle of fate. Now, in Lothric, yet another northern kingdom, the “transitory lands of the Lords of Cinder converge,” because no hero has arisen to link the fire, and the old lords refuse to take their thrones, abandoning their duty to fire and retreating to the darkness of their domains. The bell tolls, and without lords to heed it, ash begins to rise, agglomerations of the countless undead sacrificed to the bonfires that bind the world together. These Unkindled, “nameless, accursed Undead,” are “unfit even to be cinder,” and yet, we are told, “ash seeketh embers.” The flame beckons, still.<sup>34</sup>

Yet again, *Dark Souls* shifts the terms of its ontology, repositioning the player character in this, its final ruin. Here is where power has brought us, an inevitable conclusion regardless of one's loyalty—to fire, dark, or otherwise. And in this doomed and twisted land, the hollowing mechanic once again plays a vital role. The opening cutscene of the game is the first place where *Dark Souls III*'s ontological shift is seen: the player character is not a hollow but an “unkindled,” not a corpse but a heap of ash. Though still undead, the unkindled contain within themselves whole communities of humanity, bodies formed of memories and histories, the corporealization of that which has been forgotten by, and indeed *sacrificed to*, age after age of fire.

And yet, humanity in the form of sprites or effigies is nowhere to be found. Instead, player characters collect “embers,” which, when consumed, increase the player character's health *above* their usual maximum and activate multiplayer mechanics. Nothing is said of hollowing until the player character meets Yoel of Londor. This shell-backed pilgrim tells the unkindled that he can “tease out [their] true strength,” tapping into the power of the darksign and the power that it signifies.<sup>35</sup> If the player character accepts Yoel's offer, they will gain a soul level *as well as* a “dark sigil,” a “black, gaping hole in the flesh that resembles the brand of an Undead.” Though already branded with the darksign of the accursed undead, it is only now that the unkindled becomes attuned to the “darkness of humanity,” which “seeps from this bottomless pitch-black hole” inflicted upon their flesh.<sup>36</sup> After gaining their first dark sigil, the player character will start hollowing upon death, but unlike previous games, hollowing does not reduce the player character's defenses or health. Indeed, it at first appears that the only consequence of hollowing for an unkindled is the gradually deteriorating appearance now familiar to players of the previous two games.

---

<sup>34</sup>Miyazaki, Okano, and Tanimura, *Dark Souls III*.

<sup>35</sup>“Yoel of Londor,” Dark Souls III Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:yoel-of-londor>.

<sup>36</sup>“Dark Sigil,” Dark Souls III Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/key-item:dark-sigil>.

After teasing out their true strength five times, Yoel of Londor dies, and Yuria of Londor comes to replace him, a black-garbed warrior and one of three founders of the Church of Londor. Yuria tells the player character that, as bearer of the dark sigil, the player character has assumed the mantle of Lord of Hollows, the Dark Lord fated to bring about humanity's age of dark. Rather than changing the *feel* of the player-world feedback system, hollowing in *Dark Souls III* invests the world with lines of intentionality, cutting across those lines upon which the player character was first set. The decision between fire and dark finds itself expressed in the player character's ashen body, a decision upon which many characters throughout the world will comment, telling the unkindled that they must choose this or that, link the fire or let it die, because *it is they who have seized the power to do so*. In Yuria's words, "I prithee play the usurper . . . May the dark sigil guide thee."<sup>37</sup> If the player character chooses to believe Yuria, and follows the Lord of Hollows questline to its end, a new age will begin indeed, accomplished by the unkindled's "wrest[ing] of the fire from its mantle."<sup>38</sup> But this language lays bare the violence of this decision for darkness, a violence that merely inverts the blazing rebirth wrought by the linking of the fire. The two impulses that compete in every gesture, every action, every move of the player character find themselves now overdetermined by the turn of this *decision*, the very turning of the ages made flesh.<sup>39</sup>

It is for this reason that I contend that the End of Fire ending to *Dark Souls III* ought to be considered the true ending to the game, and what is more, that it is not only a true ending but a hopeful one. But this conclusion is not merely supported by a philosophical or critical reading of the game, but by the game's *mechanics* themselves. The End of Fire is the only *mechanically* different conclusion to any of the *Souls* games discussed here, and as such, presents its players with a fundamentally *different* path forward. Despite the injection of *difference* into the transcendental by *Dark Souls*, and the cynical critique of that difference by *Dark Souls II*, an actual critique of the original system of power established by *Demon's Souls* has yet to be accomplished.

Hidden behind a toxic garden, a mad king obsessed with the power of an ancient age, and an illusory wall in pitch black graveyard, the player character can find the Eyes of a Fire Keeper, which are said "to be the eyes of the first Fire Keeper, the light that was lost by all Fire Keepers to come."<sup>40</sup> If given to the Fire Keeper in the main hub of the game, the eyes will reveal to this blind steward "things that [she] should never see," a "world without fire."<sup>41</sup> But what sets this end apart from all the others that have preceded it is what this "without" entails. As we saw in the introduction to *Dark Souls*, fire is the *genesis* of

<sup>37</sup>"Yuria of Londor," Dark Souls III Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:yuria-of-londor>.

<sup>38</sup>"Yuria of Londor."

<sup>39</sup>For an extended critique of *decision*, see Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*.

<sup>40</sup>"Eyes of a Fire Keeper," Dark Souls III Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/key-item:eyes-of-a-fire-keeper>.

<sup>41</sup>"Fire Keeper," Dark Souls III Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed October 21, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:fire-keeper>.

disparity, and within the First Flame were found *both* Gwyn's sunlit soul and the dark soul of humanity. The Age of Fire is thus the first *age of disparity*, and fire as an individuated power, arrayed in opposition to dark, a derivation of this originary split. When the Fire Keeper speaks of a "world without fire," then, she does not speak simply of yet another dark age but an age freed of the logic of decision, the self-defeating turn of subject and other annihilated in an instant, the transcendental logic of this conflictual cosmology dissolved into nothingness. And in its stead, a black expanse dotted with innumerable "tiny flames," "precious embers" from the world before, which now, at long last, might burn unshackled from the curse of gods and fate.<sup>42</sup>

This is not the darkness of an age ruled by human power promised by Yuria, but the "strangely enticing darkness" of a blackness beyond decision, beyond the endless turning of philosophy, and the violence therein.<sup>43</sup> And this reading is sealed by the *feel*, the *feedback*, that this particular ending provides. In *Demon's Souls*, the player character must bolster their soul with the souls of demons, growing powerful enough to face the Old One and either returning it to its sleep or becoming its new servant. Though these endings are superficially different, they are in fact united in the transcendental figure of the Old One, from which soul power is derived, and to which all soul power returns. In *Dark Souls*, the endings are *ontologically* distinguished, rendering the player character's final choice a *real* choice, insofar as it is a choice between two incommensurable powers, but the decision remains trapped within a logic of power. The player character grows in power so that they can become mighty enough to decide what principle will order the age to come. Thus, the difference is again superficial. *Dark Souls II* cuts to the heart of this superficiality, exposing the transcendental principles of fire and dark as mere expressions of a more basic principle: want. Fire and dark are both sources of power, ontologically different means for the realization of the same ends. If *Dark Souls III* did not offer an actual third option, it would certainly replicate this interminable logic. But offer such an option it does.

The Fire Keeper's world without fire is different, demanding an altogether *other* insertion of the subjectivities that it beckons. Each of the three preceding games ends with the player character acquiring enough power to *decide*, enough power to *realize* whatever world they desire—superficial variations on the same accursed story. But to choose for fire to end, for *decision* to end, to follow the Fire Keeper in her new found vision, the player character must not hold on to their power but *give it away*. The unkindled neither links the fire nor seizes it for their own but rather, ever so gently, ever so intimately, cradles it in their hands and gives it over to the woman who had never been so privileged as to have been considered worthy of a fate other than her servitude. This is the only ending across all four *Souls* games that is *substantially* different in feel, and this feel is achieved through the simplest yet most radical of mechanical gestures: a gift.

---

<sup>42</sup>"Fire Keeper."

<sup>43</sup>"Fire Keeper."

## Conclusion

In all of my work on this series of games, this, the relinquishment of power, is perhaps the point I have belaboured most. In “The Fire Fades,” I argued that this ending functions as a sort of “minor literature,” an emancipatory narrative that poses a direct challenge to ecopolitical narratives predicated on power.<sup>44</sup> In “Praise the Sun,” I argued that this challenge is paired with a philosophical challenge that “decouple[s]” disparity—*real difference*—from “the decision of its inception,” presenting players with a universe teeming with true multiplicities.<sup>45</sup> And in “Pure Vessels,” I began to think through this logic of the multiple, applying the notion of generic finitude or “absolute particularity” to the myriad subjectivities made possible by this third ending, and which the soulslike platformer *Hollow Knight* explores further.<sup>46</sup> But here, after this heady excursus, my argument finds its footing once more in the matter of these games themselves, in the concrete *feel* of mechanics in play, what I first described as the situation of “tactile subjectivity.”<sup>47</sup>

This tactile, intimate, contingent subjectivity is felt most palpably, I have argued, through the experience of hollowing, in all of its iterations across the four games discussed here. *Demon’s Souls* provides the template for hollowing in “soul form,” presenting its players with a transcendental principle while simultaneously compromising that principle through mechanical friction. *Dark Souls* splits the transcendental of the soul in two, concretizing the intimation advanced by *Demon’s Souls* and rendering it an element of the cosmology of its world itself. *Dark Souls II* mounts a scathing critique of this very split, mechanically cursing players’ efforts in a punishing reduplication of the curse as a thematic element of the game. Finally, *Dark Souls III* proliferates the split between soul and humanity, first through the disintegration of humanity into ash, and then through the introduction of a third ending that differs *substantially* from its two alternatives, and indeed from all prior endings across the franchise. Where the soul is fundamentally about the acquisition of power and hollowing about the impossibility, the inevitable doom, of such an endeavor, to wish for a world without fire is, mechanically, to repudiate this entire cursed ensemble, to choose *not-power* when every being in the world would have you do otherwise—every being, that is, except for the Fire Keeper, the humble architect of this, the grandest, the sweetest, the most hopeful of betrayals.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>Stein, “The Fire Fades.”

<sup>45</sup>Stein, “Praise the Sun.”

<sup>46</sup>Stein, “Pure Vessels.”

<sup>47</sup>Stein, “Tactile Thematics.”

<sup>48</sup>“This will be our private affair. No one else may know of this. Stay thy path, find lords to link the fire, and I will blindly tend to the flame. Until the day of thy grand betrayal.” See “Fire Keeper.”

## Bibliography

- “Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin.” Dark Souls Wiki. *Fandom*. Accessed October 21, 2020. [https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,\\_Scholar\\_of\\_the\\_First\\_Sin](https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,_Scholar_of_the_First_Sin).
- “Ancient Dragon.” Dark Souls II Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/ancient-dragon>.
- Brown, Mark. “Do We Need a Soulslike Genre?” Game Maker’s Toolkit. *YouTube*, July 2017. <https://youtu.be/Lx7BWayWu08>.
- “Character Tendency.” Demon’s Souls Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://demonssouls.wikidot.com/character-tendency>.
- “Dark Sigil.” Dark Souls III Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/key-item:dark-sigil>.
- “Darkstalker Kaathe.” Dark Souls Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/darkstalker-kaathe>.
- “Dull Ember.” Dark Souls II Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/dull-ember>.
- “Eyes of a Fire Keeper.” Dark Souls III Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/key-item:eyes-of-a-fire-keeper>.
- “Fire Keeper.” Dark Souls III Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:fire-keeper>.
- Galloway, Alexander R. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- “Homeward.” Dark Souls Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/homeward>.
- “Homeward Bone.” Dark Souls Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/homeward-bone>.
- Laruelle, François. *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*. Translated by Rocco Gangle. London, UK: Continuum, 2010.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. London, UK: Continuum, 2009.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014.
- Miyazaki, Hidetaka. *Bloodborne*. PS4: FromSoftware, 2015.
- . *Dark Souls*. PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2011.
- . *Demon’s Souls*. PS3: FromSoftware, 2009.

- Miyazaki, Hidetaka, and Kazuhiro Hamatani. *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2019.
- Miyazaki, Hidetaka, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura. *Dark Souls III*. PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2016.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Introduction." In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, 1–8. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991.
- "Saulden the Crestfallen Warrior." Dark Souls II Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/saulden-the-crestfallen-warrior>.
- Shibuyo, Tomohiro, and Yui Tanimura. *Dark Souls II*. PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2014.
- Stein, Eric. "Praise the Sun: The Metaphysics of *Dark Souls* from the First Flame to the End of Fire." Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, Western University, London, ON, June 2020. <https://www.academia.edu/43267406/>.
- . "Pure Vessels: The Insect and the Other in *Dark Souls* and *Hollow Knight*." Insect Entanglements, Centre for Environmental Humanities, University of Bristol, Online, June 2020. <https://academia.edu/43386564/>.
- . "Tactile Thematics: From Power to Skill in FromSoftware's *Souls* Games." Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 2020. <https://academia.edu/42026629/>.
- . "The Fire Fades: Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*." International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, Orlando, FL, March 2020. <https://www.academia.edu/42195654/>.
- "World Tendency." Demon's Souls Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://demonssouls.wikidot.com/world-tendency>.
- "Yoel of Londor." Dark Souls III Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:yoel-of-londor>.
- "Yuria of Londor." Dark Souls III Wiki. *Wikidot*. Accessed October 21, 2020. <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:yuria-of-londor>.