

The Fire Fades*

Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*

Eric Stein

March 19, 2020

Introduction

What is the role of play at the end of the world? As reports on the climate crisis become increasingly dire,¹ I find myself asking what good it is to talk about games, and particularly those games that operate in a fantastic register. The question inevitably arises: why continue to play at all when the world is on fire around us? Indeed, as Emily Rose remarked in an article on *RE:BIND* this past fall,² not only is the planet on the brink of environmental collapse, but the game industry, as it currently operates, is complicit in many of the unsustainable human practices that have led us to this point. The “abstract theater of leisure-crafting,” as Rose phrases it, is not innocent. So, then, *why play?*

This study takes up these urgent questions through close readings of developer FromSoftware's critically acclaimed Dark Souls trilogy of video games: *Dark Souls* (2011), *Dark Souls II* (2014), and *Dark Souls III* (2016).³ In these games, the end of the world drives the narrative, but it is also the thematic support for the basic gameplay loop that organizes players' traversals of each gameworld. It is the contention of this paper that the *Souls* trilogy uses the structural factor of the apocalypse to mount a radical critique of political, epistemological, and ontological regimes that desperately cling to the status quo, proposing in their stead a myriad of new forms of existence that might be able to thrive in

*International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4603492.

¹See, for instance, the UN's Report of the Secretary-General from the Climate Action Summit 2019, December 11, 2019, https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/cas_report_11_dec.pdf. “We are in a climate crisis,” the report begins, a crisis that is “becoming increasingly evident in our daily lives,” a crisis that is approaching “irreversible and catastrophic impacts” (3).

²Emily Rose, “Fool's Errand – A Guide to the Game Sepulchre,” *RE:BIND*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.rebind.io/fools-errand-a-guide-to-the-game-sepulchre-3348/>.

³FromSoftware, *Dark Souls*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, PS3 and Xbox 360, 2011; *Dark Souls II*, dir. Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, PS3 and Xbox 360, 2014; *Dark Souls III*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, PS4, Xbox One, and Microsoft Windows, 2016.

and through this very apocalypse. These alternatives are born of affinities and agencies entirely other to and irreconcilable with the powers that have led the present world to its doom, and through play, the *Souls* games invite their players to consider such “minor literatures” as practicable alternatives to that which claims to be the only legitimate source of authority.⁴

In the opening cinematic to 2011’s *Dark Souls*, we are told that “the flames will fade, and only dark will remain,” but it is precisely in this darkness that a fecund plurality of potentialities for future existences are to be found.

Dark Souls

Dark Souls begins with a cinematic animation that introduces the metaphysical and historical foundations of its world:

In the Age of Ancients, the world was unformed, shrouded by fog. A land of grey crags, archtrees, and everlasting dragons. But then there was Fire. And with Fire, came Disparity. Heat and cold, life and death, and of course. . . Light and Dark. Then, from the Dark, They came, and found the Souls of Lords within the flame. Nito, the first of the dead, the Witch of Izalith and her Daughters of Chaos, Gwyn, the Lord of Sunlight, and his faithful knights. And the furtive pygmy, so easily forgotten. With the Strength of Lords, they challenged the Dragons. [. . .] Thus began the Age of Fire. But soon, the flames will fade, and only Dark will remain. Even now, there are only embers, and man sees not light, but only endless nights. And amongst the living are seen, carriers of the accursed Darksign. Yes, indeed. The Darksign brands the Undead. [. . .] This is your fate. Only, in the ancient legends it is stated, that one day an undead shall be chosen to leave the undead asylum, in pilgrimage, to the land of ancient lords, Lordran.⁵

We see here a genesis of *differentiated being* (based in metaphysical duality or opposition) that coincides with the genesis of *history*. There is no history in the Age of Ancients because this age is the age of stasis, but with fire and the disparity that follows from it we see a passage to a new age, an age of dynamism and change. Though this passage is contested, it is all but guaranteed by the *ontological* passage that operates as its spark. The Lords and their servants *must* succeed, because the very terms of existence have changed through the advent of their birth, demanding that disparity *be*.

But players never get to experience the glorious Age of Fire. *Dark Souls* picks

⁴For “minor literatures,” see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁵For the video, see “Dark Souls: Full Prologue,” Bandai Namco Entertainment America, *YouTube*, September 14, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lmEqpgg3B4>. For a transcript of the narration, see “Opening (Dark Souls),” Dark Souls Wiki, Fandom, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lmEqpgg3B4>.

up after the power of the Lords has waned, and the fire, flickering and quavering, has begun to fade altogether. Among the human subjects of the world, the Darksign begins to appear, marking the undead, marking a new passage, the passage from Fire to Dark. In their fear, the devotees of Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, begin to corral the undead and lock them away in a northern asylum “to await the end of the world.”⁶ This is where the game begins.

The player takes on the role of the “Chosen Undead,” destined to make pilgrimage to Lordran, the birthplace of Fire. But to what end? Upon ringing two Bells of Awakening, Kingseeker Frampt, a primordial serpent, appears in Firelink Shrine, the main hub where the Chosen Undead first arrives in Lordran. Frampt takes it upon himself to “elucidate [the] fate” of the Chosen Undead, telling the player character that they must “link the Fire, cast away the Dark, and undo the curse of the Undead.”⁷ For many, this is all that the story of *Dark Souls* ever amounts to: the Chosen Undead defeats the ancient lords, taking their souls in order to become powerful enough to confront Gwyn in the Kiln of the First Flame and succeed him, linking the fire and extending the age of light. And for many, the abruptness of this ending, after all the struggle of its achievement, feels empty. Indeed, as the player-character touches the final bonfire, the fire spreads to their body, the ground, and soon, the entirety of the Kiln, consuming them utterly and reducing everything around them to ash.

Dark Souls, however, has not one ending, but two. After retrieving the Lordvessel,⁸ a key item in the Chosen Undead’s quest, the player-character can choose to ignore Frampt and descend into the black heart of New Londo Ruins. Draped in subterranean half-light, flooded and populated with the ghosts of the drowned, this cursed city harbours the wellspring of the evils of humanity, a wellspring that the red-cloaked Sealers tried to hide, a wellspring that renders material the existential darkness of humanity as the Abyss. With the Covenant of Artorias upon their finger, the Chosen Undead must plunge into the Abyss and face the Four Kings, inheritors of the shards of Gwyn’s soul. If they succeed, and if they have chosen to repudiate the destiny proclaimed by Frampt, another primordial serpent will appear in the black—but this serpent tells a rather different tale:

The truth I shall share without sentiment. After the advent of fire, the ancient lords found the three souls. But your progenitor found a fourth, unique soul. The Dark Soul. Your ancestor claimed the Dark Soul and waited for Fire to subside. And soon, the flames did fade, and only Dark remained. Thus began the age of men, the Age of Dark. However. . . Lord Gwyn trembled at the Dark. Clinging to his Age of Fire, and in dire fear of humans, and the Dark Lord who

⁶“Opening (Dark Souls),” Dark Souls Wiki, *Fandom*.

⁷Frampt’s Dialogues, “Kingseeker Frampt,” Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/kingseeker-frampt>.

⁸This step can, in fact, be accomplished after Darkroot Garden and prior to Anor Londo (and so prior to the acquisition of the Lordvessel), though I have typically progressed down this story path after Anor Londo. If the player-character reaches the Abyss early, Kaathe will have some additional dialogue.

would one day be born amongst them, Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature. By sacrificing himself to link the fire, and commanding his children to shepherd the humans, Gwyn has blurred your past, to prevent the birth of the Dark Lord. I am the primordial serpent. I seek to right the wrongs of the past to discover our true Lord. But the other serpent, Frampt, lost his sense, and befriended Lord Gwyn. Undead warrior, we stand at the crossroad. Only I know the truth about your fate. You must destroy the fading Lord Gwyn, who has coddled Fire and resisted nature, and become the Fourth Lord, so that you may usher in the Age of Dark!⁹

The story that this serpent, Darkstalker Kaathe, tells is one of being and its natural progression. Just as Gwyn supplanted the eternal dragons and their age of fog, so too will the Lord of Dark supplant Gwyn and his age of fire. Those who would attempt to obstruct this passage are merely obstructing the order of things.

What makes Kaathe's story even more convincing, apart from this logic of natural progression, is his revelation of Gwyn's crime against humanity: their enslavement to fire. Careful attention to certain item descriptions will reveal to the player-character that the bonfires to which they are bound are "fueled by the bones of the Undead."¹⁰ Cursed to return time and again, death after death, until inevitable hollowing—final insanity—sets in, it is the fate of the undead under Gwyn's protracted reign to become "white ash"¹¹ fueling the slavery of those who follow. Humanity is cursed to serve as fodder for its own subjection, and whole kingdoms—like the kingdom of Thorolund—find their living populations devoted to the preservation of this oppressive regime. Kaathe promises a destiny free of these shackles. Because of the complexity required to achieve this ending, and because of the apparent revelation that Kaathe provides, it would seem that "The Dark Lord" ending is the true ending of *Dark Souls*.

But as conversations at the SWPACA conference¹² with David Pugh of Indiana University South Bend and Kevin Moberly of Old Dominion University made clear to me, this ending is entirely duplicitous in its construction. Neither is "The Dark Lord" ending the true ending simply because it takes more work to achieve, nor does it signify liberation from the ontology of presence signified by Gwyn's light. Decentred power remains power. The dialectic of fire and dark recapitulates its logic in every cycle, the same logic that Jacques Derrida critiqued over fifty years ago in his famous essay on Emmanuel Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics."¹³ Indeed, we can say, with Derrida, of *Dark Souls* and the

⁹Dialogue, "Darkstalker Kaathe," Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/darkstalker-kaathe>.

¹⁰In-Game Description, "Homeward Bone," Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/homeward-bone>.

¹¹In-Game Description, "Homeward Bone," Dark Souls Wiki, *Wikidot*.

¹²Southwest Popular/American Culture Association 41st Annual Conference, February 19-22, 2020, Albuquerque, NM, <https://southwestpca.org/>.

¹³Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 97-192, trans.

apocalyptic history it figures, that this is a story “fed on its own agony.”¹⁴

How, then, to read *Dark Souls* with an eye to both our current crisis and the remainder of the series? First, *Dark Souls* is concerned with endings, and with their repetition—particularly, the cyclical passing of ages. If we treat *Dark Souls* in its actuality, as a field of significations organized as a subset of the set of actual significations (that is to say, as a subset of the lifeworld of meanings),¹⁵ we see the game presenting us via homotype with two options for navigating our own crisis: prolongation or extinguishment. Should we prop up the old power, or should we let it die so that a new power can rise to take its place? This seems a poor choice to me. With Derrida we can say of this duplicitous conclusion that it “exhorts us” to a doubled “parricide,”¹⁶ a “repetition of the murder,”¹⁷ a “[v]iolence against violence,”¹⁸ and a “mak[ing] war upon the war which institut[ed]” the present regime.¹⁹ A bleak path, to be sure. We must keep reading, keep playing, to find a more satisfactory answer.

Dark Souls II

FromSoftware consistently demonstrates a cutting awareness of the tropes and themes that they employ in their games, and 2014’s *Dark Souls II* (rereleased with substantial changes in 2015 as *Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin*) is no exception.

Dark Souls II takes place at an indeterminate time in the future after the first *Dark Souls*, in a kingdom never mentioned in that game: Drangleic. Whether or not the Chosen Undead did, in fact, link the fire remains a contested point of lore, and this determined indeterminacy proves to be foundational to *Dark Souls II*.

The clearest link to Lordran and the story of *Dark Souls* is in the basic structure of progression that orders *Dark Souls II*. The Emerald Herald, a mysterious woman serving as quest giver and the player-character’s means of levelling up, asks the player-character, the “Bearer of the Curse” (that is, the darksign, the mark of the undead), if they are “the next monarch” or “merely a pawn of fate.”²⁰ From the beginning of *Dark Souls II*, FromSoftware situates the player-character in the duplicitous gap instantiated by the previous game, identifying the choice implied by the double ending as a false one. Monarch or pawn, the Bearer of the Curse is one and the same. They are told by another NPC, Crestfallen Salden, to confront the “four beings in this land with giant souls” and take their

Alan Bass (London, UK: Routledge, 1987).

¹⁴Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 97.

¹⁵Fiction always happens *here*, in this world, as an operation of this world.

¹⁶Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 110.

¹⁷Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 110.

¹⁸Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 145.

¹⁹Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 162.

²⁰Dialogue, “Emerald Herald,” *Dark Souls II* Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls2.wiki.fextralife.com/Emerald+Herald>.

power, the descriptions of which echo the souls of Lords from *Dark Souls* that the player-character is tasked with acquiring.²¹ It is in this deliberate repetition of *Dark Souls*' structure that we see FromSoftware mount a critique of their own narrative. The Emerald Herald herself upsets the logic of the curse from the previous game, claiming that the "soul and the curse are one and the same."²² It is not the darksign and undead that is the curse, but the pursuit of souls and the greater power that they promise. This argument is reinforced by Crestfallen Saulden, who plainly states the bitter truth of existence:

Do you know much about souls? Even I'm not certain, but... I'm told that the soul is the essence of life itself. Anything living, sentient or no, supposedly has one. 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.²³

So, when the Emerald Herald states, "long have I awaited one such as you, one who might shatter the shackles of fate,"²⁴ her dream is undercut by the game itself, which will only proceed if the player continues to play, if the player-character continues in their quest. This "is the only choice left to you."²⁵

Dark Souls II is persistent in this conviction. When the player-character finally confronts King Vendrick, abdicated ruler of Drangleic, he is a shambling husk of his former self, a far-cry from the flame-swathed fury of hollowed Lord Gwyn. To emphasize the point, Vendrick is an *optional* boss, only becoming aggressive if you attack him (it should be stated: this is not an easy fight, but the *imagery* casts it in a far different light from the fight with Gwyn). You can enter the chamber and watch Vendrick shuffle in circles without fear, retrieving the King's Ring to allow for continued progress in the game.

Upon defeat of the series of bosses at the end of game, the player-character proceeds to the Throne of Want, the great stone seat harboured in an ashen tomb, and sits upon it. In the original ending to the 2014 release, the doors close as the player now watches their character, resolute in their victory, through the narrowing gap. There is no choice, no binary of Light and Dark. There is only power.

In the *Scholar of the First Sin* update (2015), however, the addition of a new NPC, Aldia, the titular scholar, provides a choice in the vein of *Dark Souls*, with added narration that makes for an important, if minute, distinction from the first game. Now, rather than being limited to taking the throne, the player-character can choose to walk away, while Aldia delivers these closing lines: "There is no path. Beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of Dark... what could

²¹Dialogue, "Crestfallen Saulden," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls2.wiki.fextralife.com/Crestfallen+Saulden>.

²²Dialogue, "Emerald Herald," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Fextralife*.

²³Dialogue, "Crestfallen Saulden," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls2.wiki.fextralife.com/Crestfallen+Saulden>.

²⁴Dialogue, "Emerald Herald," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Fextralife*.

²⁵Dialogue, "Emerald Herald," Dark Souls II Wiki, *Fextralife*.

possibly await us? And yet, we seek it, insatiably. . . Such is our fate.”²⁶ The throne signifies the duplicitous choice, the false decision, but Aldia presents a third option: walk away. Allow the Emerald Herald’s dream to be, fate beyond fate, a *what if* beyond the cycles of violence and power. Though some find this addition to be a compromise of *Dark Souls II*’s themes, and I myself appreciate the bleakness of the singular ending of the original game, it is in this alternative that we begin to see glimmers of a *nonstandard logic* taking hold. Beyond the nihilism of tyranny and annihilation, might we imagine an otherwise? To allow such a possibility to be is vital if we are to take FromSoftware’s treatment of the *end* as instructive.

Dark Souls III

Where *Dark Souls* is marked by a binaristic logic, and *Dark Souls II* responds directly to this logic with first, closure, and second, speculation, *Dark Souls III* attempts a recuperation of the ending of *Dark Souls* by way of a *proliferation* of its terms.

Dark Souls III progresses through a now-familiar formula. The player takes on the character of the Ashen One, an undead sacrificed (whether by choice or coercion is uncertain) to the flames to perpetuate the age of fire, who arises from their grave at the toll of a bell. Upon arriving at Firelink Shrine, a grand echo of the shrine from *Dark Souls*, the Ashen One learns that four “Lords of Cinder” have abandoned their thrones and so too their duty to the flame. Only one feeble lord remains, Ludleth of Courland, who refers to himself as a “charred corse” and a “sad cadav’r,” but seems resolute in his task, committed to the linking of the fire.²⁷ He is the one who tells the Ashen One of their fate:

Knowest thou of our purpose? Five thrones will take five Lords, as kindling for the linking of the Fire. The fast fading Flame must be linked to preserve this world. A re-enactment of the first linking of the fire. So it is, I became a Lord of Cinder. I may be but small, but I will die a colossus.²⁸

Again, FromSoftware uses the opening moments of the game to situate the player-character in relation to the decisions of the previous two games. *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II* are here repositioned as distinct iterations of the eternally recurrent cycle of fire and dark, with *Dark Souls III* following as terrible consequence, the true end, stakes elevated, and so too the price. Four of five lords have abandoned the flame, and now countless undead find themselves being sacrificed to the bonfires to perpetuate the dying order. There is a desperation to *Dark Souls III* that gives the game a distinct atmosphere. *This is really the end.*

²⁶Dialogue, “Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin,” *Dark Souls II* Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/aldia-scholar-of-the-first-sin>.

²⁷Dialogue, “Ludleth of Courland,” *Dark Souls 3* Wiki, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls3.wikidot.com/npc:ludleth-of-courland>. There is *much* conjecture about Ludleth in the lore community, so, for our purposes here, I will take his dialogue at face value.

²⁸Dialogue, “Ludleth of Courland,” *Dark Souls 3* Wiki, *Wikidot*.

And yet, throughout the game, the Ashen One encounters characters with visions of unseen worlds, some precious and some ghastly. The *otherwise* speculated upon in *Dark Soul II* is an active pursuit of several different individuals and their adherents in *Dark Souls III*: Rosaria, Mother of Rebirth, turning the power of speech to the end of ceaseless variation; Aldrich, the Devourer of Gods, who, before succumbing to his hunger, “ruminated on the fading of the fire, [...] inspir[ing] visions of a coming age of the deep sea”;²⁹ Sister Friede, who fashioned a frozen world and “chose rot over fire”;³⁰ the forsaken Locust Preachers, who prophecy of a feast to come; the sleeping Filianore, and her verdant reverie; and the Slave Knight Gael, protector of the young woman who seeks to paint a new world with the ink of the Dark Soul itself, a world she names Ash, a “cold, dark, and very gentle place.”³¹ Wherein *Dark Souls* the terms of existence oscillate between fire and dark, and in *Dark Souls II* there exists but a hint of a future beyond these terms, *Dark Souls III* presents a manifold of alternatives to fire and dark: birth, the deep, rot, the feast, growth, ash. These are not all necessarily hopeful alternatives, but within the bounds of the metaphysics established in the prologue to the first game (a metaphysics that I will be discussing in greater detail in another study later this year³²), these counter-terms present us with actual alternatives to the dialectic of tyranny and annihilation that functions as the inescapable fate of the Chosen Undead and the Bearer of the Curse, and casts our attention back over the instances of such alterity in the prior games. In *Dark Souls*, I am reminded of Priscilla in her Painted World, a land “peaceful, its inhabitants kind,”³³ and the Fair Lady in the bowels of Blighttown who tried to consume the blight in order to save her people. In *Dark Souls II*, I am reminded of the Milfanitos, who minister to those “bound by death and Dark” with song,³⁴ and the Pilgrims of the Dark, who learned to traverse the subtle contours of the abyss, plunging into its blackness. Again, these are complicated alternatives, without obvious justification for being better than the original choice offered by the first game. But it is, in fact, one of the endings of *Dark Souls III* that presents us with the key to unlocking this burgeoning pluralist logic.

Two of *Dark Souls III*'s three endings are familiar.³⁵ The first, “To Link the

²⁹In-Game Description, “Soul of Aldrich,” *Dark Souls III Wiki*, *Fandom*, accessed March 9, 2020, https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Soul_of_Aldrich.

³⁰In-Game Description, “Soul of Sister Friede,” *Dark Souls III Wiki*, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Soul+of+Sister+Friede>.

³¹Dialogue, “Painting Woman,” *Dark Souls III Wiki*, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Painting+Woman>.

³²Eric 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.

³³Dialogue, “Crossbreed Priscilla,” *Dark Souls Wiki*, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls.wikidot.com/crossbreed-priscilla>. Though, to be sure, this line cannot be quoted without comment. Priscilla’s perception of the violent denizens of her world has seen much commentary (and comedy) in the *Dark Souls* lore community.

³⁴Dialogue, “Milfanito,” *Dark Souls Wiki*, *Wikidot*, accessed March 9, 2020, <http://darksouls2.wikidot.com/milfanito>.

³⁵There are three endings with trophies or achievements, though one ending has a variant that awards no achievement. We will not be considering this ending here.

First Flame,” echoes the “To Link the Fire” ending of *Dark Souls*. The Ashen One defeats the final boss, the Soul of Cinder, and rekindles the fire, pulling the world back from the brink of utter darkness. The second, the “Usurpation of Fire,” echoes “The Dark Lord” ending of *Dark Souls* and involves one of the most elaborate quest lines of any of the games in the *Souls* trilogy. In this ending, the Ashen One has gained enough strength to take hold of the first flame itself and so usher in the age of dark as the Lord of Hollows and the “true face of mankind.”³⁶ As noted above, this is considered, by many, to be the true ending to *Dark Souls III* because of its complexity. But, as *Dark Souls II* makes clear, this ending is nothing but the other half of the duplicitous choice offered in *Dark Souls*. It is the “End of Fire” ending that truly unsettles the logic of the previous games, realizing the possibility only hinted at in the *Scholar of the First Sin* alternative ending to *Dark Souls II*.

If the Ashen One purchases the Tower Key, they will unlock a portion of Firelink Shrine that houses an awful secret: the corpses of all the Fire Keepers past, discarded after each linking of the flame. These women “were robbed of light, to better serve as vessels for souls,”³⁷ and their lifeless bodies tell of the terrible price that the linking of the fire demands. It is one such woman who serves the player-character throughout their journey, who beckons the Ashen One to “touch the darkness inside [her]” and “take nourishment” from those “manifestations of disparity . . . beyond the reach of flame”³⁸—the souls taken from fallen foes. The Fire Keeper is a servant to both player and character, a mechanic as much as an actual person. And after three games, FromSoftware is ready to mount a critique of the history they have been weaving. If the Ashen One makes it to the optional Untended Graves area of *Dark Souls III*, they will find a darkened Firelink Shrine, seemingly afloat in the Abyss, and hidden behind an illusory wall therein, the Eyes of a Fire Keeper. Upon returning to the main Firelink Shrine, the Ashen One can choose to give these eyes to the Fire Keeper, to which she responds with the following:

Ashen one, are these. . . Are these eyes? How gracious of thee, ashen one. The very things we Fire Keepers have been missing. Ashen one, my thanks for the eyes thou’st given. But Fire Keepers are not meant to have eyes. It is forbidden. These will reveal, through a sliver of light, frightful images of betrayal. A world without fire. Ashen one, is this truly thy wish?³⁹

She then gives you the choice to “wish for a world without flame.” If you say yes, the whole dynamic of the *Souls* series changes. First, you notice the music. The regular Firelink Shrine track is replaced with a new one, the haunting song

³⁶Dialogue, “Yuria of Londor,” *Dark Souls III* Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Yuria+of+Londor>.

³⁷In-Game Description, “Fire Keeper Set,” *Dark Souls III* Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Fire+Keeper+Set>.

³⁸Dialogue, “Fire Keeper,” *Dark Souls III* Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Fire+Keeper>.

³⁹Dialogue, “Fire Keeper,” *Dark Souls III* Wiki, *Fextralife*.

“Secret Betrayal,”⁴⁰ signifying the player-character’s repudiation of the dialectic of fire and dark in favour of the *absolutely other*, sparked by the compassionate confrontation with the barred visage of the Fire Keeper. Next, the Fire Keeper continues to articulate precisely what the Ashen One has chosen:

Of course. I serve thee, and will do as thou bid’st. 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. Ashen one, forgive me if this soundeth strange. The eyes show a world without fire, a vast stretch of darkness. But ‘tis different to what is seen when stripped of vision. In the far distance, I sense the presence of tiny flames. Like precious embers, left to us by past Lords, linkers of the fire. Could this be what draws me to this strangely enticing darkness?⁴¹

Contrary to the searing power of both light and dark, the Fire Keeper sees the gentle flickering of a myriad of precious embers in the black. And as the Soul of Cinder falls, the Ashen One turns to the fire and allows the Fire Keeper to join them, to stoop, to take the fire in her own hands, to take what had been taken, and so, to allow for it to be *given* for the first time in its bloody history, divested of all its power but for the tenderness of warmth and the tactics of furtive illumination. The Ashen One takes nothing, their betrayal committed on behalf of another, a gift, a choice without duplicity, or perhaps, a choice fully aware of the duplicity of any and all such decision. This gesture is neither one of power nor decentred power but *non-power*, the refusal of power and all of its selfish entailments. Though simple, to include such an ending in the conclusion of their trilogy is, I would contend, a profoundly radical act on the part of FromSoftware, one that teaches us something about how we might approach our own apocalyptic crises. What “tiny flames danc[ing] across the darkness” might we imagine? To what voices do we listen, “still?”⁴² These questions “The End of Fire” beckons us to ask.

After Fire

To recapitulate the preceding, we have seen the establishment and decline of a natural order, the Age of Fire, and the contest over its prolongation or succession. We have argued that this binary is in fact a duplicitous choice, that the two alternatives are one in the same. Lastly, we have discussed an alternative to this false decision, signified by a passage from a dualistic (or dialectical) logic to a pluralist logic, which can be achieved through the *proliferation of terms*, rather than the *opposition of terms*. This line of reasoning is evidenced by the narrative trajectory across the three *Dark Souls* games, most clearly seen in the choice of endings made available to the player-character, thus mechanizing and

⁴⁰Yuka Kitamura, “Secret Betrayal,” *Dark Souls III Original Soundtrack*, FromSoftware, March 24, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4w442BrsK8Q>.

⁴¹Dialogue, “Fire Keeper,” Dark Souls III Wiki, *Fextralife*.

⁴²Dialogue, “Fire Keeper,” Dark Souls III Wiki, *Fextralife*.

thematizing the *end* in a single stroke. *Dark Souls*, as such, is a franchise about endings and their repetitions, and the way fragile individuals navigate these often catastrophic passages of time. Accepting the claim that games, like fiction more generally, are real existents participating in the broader lifeworld of meanings, we can describe these stories discussed here today as *narrative machines working upon and transforming the very matter of the real*, so functioning as homotypes for the interpretation of our own experience.

As Michel Serres has postulated, the response to the tyranny of the Platonic Sun (and so, we read, the radiance of Lord Gwyn) is not the nihilism of utter darkness, but a “universe studded with eyes.”⁴³ This is the pluralist metaphysics toward which the history elaborated across the *Souls* trilogy leads, and which in turn serves as the multiplicitous ground for a different conception of history and action.

In the introduction to this study I used the phrase “minor literatures” to describe these speculative alternatives that the *Souls* games present, and it is important, here, that we emphasize this phrase. As Deleuze and Guattari write in their book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, a minor literature is constituted by the presence of three characteristics: “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.”⁴⁴ This is one possible pluralist response to the exigencies of totalizing global capital and the dispersion and sublimation of control effected by the neoliberal regimes of the past seventy years in the west (if we trace our genealogy back to Milton Friedman). As Michel de Certeau incisively comments in his *Practice of Everyday Life*, we “witness the advent of the number,” and the consequent dissolution of the transcendental one—which we have been referring to here as power and its decentred reflection.⁴⁵ Organization becomes a matter not of vanguards but of a “flexible and continuous mass . . . a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one.”⁴⁶ De Certeau attempts to think *through* this “murmuring” of the mass, attempts to conceive of a politics without the “rage” of the vanguard,⁴⁷ a politics of “singularity” and “ordinary language,” and “making do,” a politics of what I have referred to elsewhere, following de Certeau, as *citational belonging*, a belonging given and received but never one’s own, never possessed of a “proper place.”⁴⁸ All this is the work of a minor literature, and indeed, a work that we see especially in the myriad imaginings of *Dark Souls III*.

But the problem remains: “how to tear a minor literature away from its own

⁴³Michel Serres, *Eyes*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁴⁴Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 18.

⁴⁵Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), author’s note.

⁴⁶De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, author’s note.

⁴⁷Byung-Chul Han’s conception of “rage” is useful here. See *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 8.

⁴⁸De Certeau, “General Introduction,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. xi-xxiv.

language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path?”⁴⁹ Is revolution even a possibility without the vanguard? How, as individuals, might we effect a “new and unexpected modification” of the real without being coopted (reterritorialized) by the total system against which we struggle?⁵⁰ These are questions with which I find myself continually wrestling. The control society is here, the climate crisis is here, but how do we respond? Do we attempt to mount a return to a prior state, or do we attempt to press forward and create something new? These are questions that I bring into my close reading of the *Souls* games, and so, necessarily, I ask: *is there a praxis here?* And I would maintain that there is.

First, there is the refusal of the simple dialectic of power signified by fire and dark. The reinstatement of regimes founded in power will not resolve our crises.

Second, there is the attention to the local and the particular that we see in figures like Priscilla, Friede, Filianore, and Gael, and even the Ashen One, should they choose to free the Fire Keeper from her bondage. Such an attention requires a thoroughly postmodern revision of Levinas’s ethics, a reading sensitive to Derrida’s critiques and de Certeau’s extensions of the deconstructive project. In a phrase, an *ethics of the local and particular* requires a “tactics” that “insinuates itself into the other’s place, [but] fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.”⁵¹

Third, there is a passion for coalition and a commitment to cooperation that marks each of the *emancipatory communities* noted above. A minor literature is always carried out through “collective enunciation.” Perhaps the twenty-first century vanguard will be built in precisely this way, through allegiance and affinity, through the voice of the multiple, a vanguard founded not in substance but in gesture, the gesture of care demanded by the face of the other.

Finally, there is a passage from dualistic logics to pluralistic logics, a passage that is opened by Aldia in *Dark Souls II* and pursued by those listed above in *Dark Souls III*, a passage that does not operate through dialectical sublation (the awful lure of totality), but rather recognizes the *mere fact* of unaccounted for and unaccountable existents.⁵² This is a logic that we see in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Alain Badiou, and Bruno Latour, philosophers who have deliberately set out to conduct studies in multiplicity, and who represent only a small corner of the philosophical establishment that, if this project succeeds, will cease to be in its present state. This is the same study that the Fire Keeper enacts in her vision of the “precious embers”⁵³ in the black, the study that she now gives to us. The final question is, then: will we receive it?

⁴⁹Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 19.

⁵⁰Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 25.

⁵¹De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

⁵²This unaccountability that troubles the age of the number, of calculation, of countability, is called by Badiou the “inconsistency” of being (*Being and Event*, 56) and by Žižek the “impossibility” and “incompleteness” of the real (*Less than Nothing*, 264, 741).

⁵³Dialogue, “Fire Keeper,” *Dark Souls III Wiki, Fextralife*.