

The Video Game Auteur
Understanding grief and failure in Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Souls* series

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Preface

There are only a handful pieces of art that can be considered truly influential to their own respective artforms – still, certain works do possess the uncanny ability to spark an entire cultural reform or paradigm shift. In their infancy, most forms of art are much more prone to mold to their time period's respective wants and needs. As time passes and cultures change, different themes and aspects of life come into the limelight, and we see new artists emerge and old ones adapt. When this initial era of establishment is passed however, it becomes increasingly harder to introduce change. Through the method of conscious deconstruction, elements of an artform can be broken down into singular pieces, but whether this endeavor is fruitful or not is dependent on many factors, arguably the most elusive and coveted of them all – luck. As history would have it, luck, or more elegantly known as “being in the right place at the right time”, has not usually been on the side of artistic visionaries when it comes to contemporary artforms.

In the 1970s, the term *cult classic* started to emerge, and was used to describe films that amassed a dedicated, cultlike following, even if they were not financially successful, and in certain cases, were generally inaccessible to, or completely misunderstood by contemporary audiences. Cult classics come in many forms. The 1988 movie *Heathers* is a perfect example of the above-mentioned cautious deconstruction of a genre, albeit it is still relatively unknown today. On the other hand, the early works of directors like Quentin Tarantino are basically universal experiences. Other than their cultlike following, *cult classics* are usually united by their delayed cultural significance.

Yet, as time passed, fans of these movies have not only developed their own subcultures, but also took major inspiration from them, and thus, a chain of influence was born. To this day, several artists of different mediums cite *cult classics* of their times as the most important pieces of art that propelled them further into exploring their vision. In my opinion, this phenomenon is not only due to the ever-evolving state of the world, but it can also be credited to a desire to explore the unknown. While the comfort provided by well-established writing and directing techniques is more accessible, breaking that norm can present the audience with such a sudden feeling of unrest, that they may temporarily let go of their preconceived ideas and open themselves up to something new – or dismiss the experience entirely due to the rapidly overflowing anxiety and potentially

never partake again. This uncertainty is the main reason why introducing change is so difficult, since even if an artist is ready to make such a leap (and in certain cases they may not comprehend this themselves), the reaction they will get from the other side of the screen is unpredictable.

I view the evolution of the movie industry and the introduction of purely art films as a great predecessor to the theme I want to explore in this thesis. While I was an advocate of the recognition of video games as art ever since I was first introduced to them, I felt that the uphill battle that I and many others had to fight just so they would even be considered as such, to be both arduous and stigmatizing. However, by examining the journey films had to go through, I find a lot of comfort in realizing that it is the same path all pieces of media must walk. Paolo Xavier Machado Menuetz put this perfectly in his 2017 thesis, *The Downward Spiral: Postmodern Consciousness as Buddhist Metaphysics in the Dark Souls Video Game Series*.

New mediums tend to have a rough go at it in the university as each one must fight its way uphill past the arbiters of high-culture. It was true of film and photography at the outset of the twentieth century, and it is true of comics, television and video games today, but how impoverished would the Humanities be if we simply dismissed the works of Mizoguchi Kenji on the grounds that they belong to the wrong medium? What is there to gain by privileging the study of one medium over all others? This is prejudice of the worst sort, and we are all the poorer for such arbitrary judgements.¹

Throughout the history of video games, due to the nature of the medium and its recent accessibility, even more works had to walk the very same path as *cult classics*. While an innumerable amount of essays and theses could be written about all the works that have contributed to the shift of focus from purely entertainment to art, in this thesis, I will focus on Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Souls* series, starting with the 2009 game *Demon's Souls*², and making the 2011 game, *Dark Souls*³ my focal point. I will examine how these works came into existence through both Miyazaki's vision and the appreciation of contemporary audiences, its interpretation of both western and Japanese ethos, their way of processing and understanding grief and failure, and how they changed the modern outlook on the video game industry.

¹ MENUETZ, P. *The Downward Spiral: Postmodern Consciousness as Buddhist Metaphysics in the Dark Souls Video Game Series*. Portland: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017, 4.

² *Demon's Souls*. FromSoftware, Sony/Atlus/Namco Bandai, 2009.

³ *Dark Souls*. FromSoftware, Namco Bandai, 2011.

Chapter I: The Emergence of Video Games as Art

Limitations Will Set You Free

The concept of a ‘first video game’ comes up quite often when discussing the history of the industry. Even though the roots of video games as an artforms are not as vast as those of film, photography or music – due to its relatively recent inception – William Higinbotham’s laser-based tennis game in his Brookhaven radio laboratory in 1958⁴ is usually considered to be the very first functional video game. Fitting, that it was not intentionally believed to be anything significant, other than an entertaining concept. As we know today, it grew into an industry that’s 2022 total revenue is projected to be \$197 billion⁵, completely overtaking more mainstream industries like that of cinema⁶. This growth in both revenue and popularity accumulated quite slowly in the early years, and when video games became truly accessible to the public, they were usually relegated to arcades. With the popularity of home consoles such as the Atari 2600, video games slowly started to find their place in homes, but it was not until the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (from hereby NES) that their presence was cemented in both Japan and the west⁷. It would have been quite early to declare them a piece of art akin to the film industry of the time, but it was indeed art, nonetheless. As more companies ventured into the industry, basic, now commonplace concepts came to be established. While video games are an audio-visual medium, their mechanism bared more resemblance to that of tabletop games. Concepts such as life points, or more commonly known as health points, movement and level design all had to be conveyed through the systems’ limited graphical abilities. These eventually became more abstract, and the average player could easily understand what the icons corresponded to on their screen. As technology advanced and limitations slowly came to be lifted, games started becoming more complex and were able to even introduce narrative elements. However, I am of the belief that without its initial period of experimentation, abstractions that we use today would not be as well established. This can be very easily seen with games of the 1980s and 1990s that were made by companies who had no prior

⁴ CHODOS, A., „This Month in Physics History”, *American Physical Society*, 2008, XVII/9, 1.

⁵ STATISTA, Video Game Industry Projected Revenue www.statista.com

⁶ STATISTA, Cinema Industry Projected Revenue www.statista.com

⁷ KOHLER, C., „Oct. 18, 1985: Nintendo Entertainment System Launches”, www.wired.com

video game experiences⁸⁹ – as many times before through different mediums, we can observe an attempt at outsiders trying to invent solutions to problems that did not exist in the target demographic of video game audiences, like communicating the previously mentioned concepts through the home consoles’ still limited visual fidelity, to even the basic narrative structure. The importance of the need for experimentation due to limitations will be a recurring theme of this thesis, as I believe it is fundamentally inseparable from the creative process that led to video games becoming a unique artform, not just interactive movies.

While home consoles of the time could produce sound, it was not until the release of the NES in the later half of the 1980’s that the concept of video game music became accepted. Songs, such as the main theme of the 1987 *The Legend of Zelda*¹⁰ and *Castlevania 2: Simon’s Quest*¹¹ became so iconic, that modern inceptions of the series still use the very same melodies. Though much simpler than the two aforementioned pieces, the soundtrack of the 1989 *Tetris*¹² is universally known both in- and outside of the subculture. As we see this evolution in artistic presentation, we can also perceive a similar change when it comes to general game design. In the days of arcade machines, games frequently employed a trial and error approach, as a means to get attendees to spend more money on extra lives, by putting coins into the machines, which then let the players try again. Due to this, it was generally expected that no matter how skilled someone might be, their initial experience with arcade games will usually end in failure, and should they learn from it, they would be able to eventually master the game. Leaderboards were quite popular, and this gave a competitive edge to the community, which has now grown itself into a highly profitable modern esports scene. Since home consoles did not have such a system in place, developers could actively make use of narrative techniques that required the player to spend more time with the game and encourage a more attentive approach. Since video games were quite expensive at the time, with brand new releases usually priced in the \$40-50 range, this was also a clever way to pad out game time, thus providing more hours of entertainment for the price. In certain cases, these attempts at inflating game time became quite notorious, most famously the 1993 *X-Men*¹³ game, in which, after

⁸ Color Games, later known as Wisdom Tree, became the first company to create games for the NES and SNES that were not officially approved by Nintendo

⁹ BOGOST, I. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2007, 287–288.

¹⁰ *The Legend of Zelda*, Nintendo R&D4, Nintendo, 1987.

¹¹ *Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest*, Konami, Konami, 1987.

¹² *Tetris*, Nintendo R&D1, Nintendo, 1989.

¹³ *X-Men*, Western Technologies, Inc., Sega, 1993.

giving the written instruction “Reset the Computer”, the player had to literally reset their game console in order to progress to the next level. Faced with such a situation now, one could easily look up to the solution online, but since there was no such method at the time, all players could turn towards were their own communities, and the game’s official strategy guide. This might seem like a developer oversight, but there are also examples, where it could be argued that the player was never intended to find out the solution without looking up such a guide. In the example of *X-Men*, the player is at least given a clue, but in games like the previously mentioned *Castlevania 2: Simon’s Quest*, in order to finish one of the levels, the player had to equip a specific item, crouch down, lean towards a wall and wait a couple of seconds before a tornado took them away to the next stage. Whatever the intention of the developers was, these kind of challenges not only strengthened the cohesion of gaming communities, as there was simply no way to find out about something like this alone, it also raised an important question: if by doing something this specific, you can progress to the next level, just how many secrets could there have been inside other games, that were all yet to be discovered. Further and further experimentation led to the emergence of specific genres and gameplay loops, and as formulas cemented, video games became more alike. While this made games even more appealing to mainstream audiences, as having similar concepts throughout different games made getting into new ones much easier for gamers, it also led to oversaturation in the industry later on.

Most styles came to be described by their gameplay, camera angle, or themes. In the NES and SNES¹⁴ era, the most popular genre was the ‘side-scroller’. These games had a parallel camera angle to the player character that followed their movement on a two-dimensional plane, usually from the left to the right. The gameplay centered around players performing precise jumps between platforms. To defeat enemies, the player either had some kind of attack that he could utilize with one of the face buttons of the NES controller, or they could deal with them through other means, most often by jumping on top of them. Arguably the most famous game of the decade – and possibly of all time – Nintendo’s own *Super Mario Bros.*¹⁵, released in 1985 as the launch title of the NES, was the most influential of these platforming games. Ever since Mario, side-scrollers are associated with him, and in order to find their audience, other side-scrollers had to find something

¹⁴The Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) was the 16bit successor to the NES, released in 1990 in Japan, 1991 in the United States, and 1992 in Europe

¹⁵ Super Mario Bros., Nintendo R&D4, Nintendo, 1985

new and unique ways to add to the genre in order to set themselves apart from the Mario games. The *Metroid* and *Castlevania* series started to further add to this concept by making labyrinth-like stages that encouraged exploration, and the term ‘metroidvania’ was born. As we can see from its name, both players and developers associated the genres with their most standout games, and thus, certain games became benchmarks of the entire industry. Games under the metroidvania subgenre still exist today, albeit newer titles also had to adapt and further develop the gameplay loop into something memorable and outstanding. There were several other genres, like real-time strategy and fighting games, that also set themselves apart with their unique gameplay, and while these genres were all defined by their mechanics, as in its control and core gameplay loop, we can see that narrative similarities also start to arise.

With the possibility of three-dimensional environments, in 1992, the first-person shooter (hereby FPS) emerged as the most revolutionary genre with the release of *Wolfenstein 3D*¹⁶ by id Software. First-person shooters, as the name implies, had a camera perspective where the player saw the world through the eyes of the character, and carried a ranged weapon – usually a gun – that they could use to deal with enemies. This was a whole new level of immersion compared to everything else accessible to the general public before, and with the emergence of the fifth generation of video game home consoles, the ability to produce three-dimensional graphics became a top priority of the still competitive companies. The Nintendo 64, the Sony PlayStation, the Sega Saturn, the Atari Jaguar and the 3DO Interactive all focused their efforts on graphical fidelity, but the first two became the prominent leaders of the industry at the time. In order to keep up with the increase in file sizes, the PlayStation also opted to use CDs with its built-in CD-ROM instead of the traditional cartridge system that was employed by Nintendo and Sega in the previous generation.

The ever-increasing speed of technical development greatly contributed to video games not succumbing to the staleness that can be observed in most artforms after the initial establishment period. Between 1990 and 2000, it seemed like there was a new game that tried to reinvent the way a three-dimensional environment should be controlled almost every year. An unfortunate side effect of the nature of video games is that works that missed the mark on the fundamentals have aged ungracefully. Unlike a painting or a movie that can be experienced in the context of its time period, outdated game design usually asks far more leniency from the player. For people who

¹⁶ *Wolfenstein 3D*, id Software, Apogee Software, 1992.

regularly play modern games, it feels as if when attempting to raise their left arm, their right leg would move. Because of this, games that have stood the test of time like the 1996 *Super Mario 64*¹⁷ or the 1998 *Banjo-Kazooie*¹⁸ are much easier to revisit than something like the famous *GoldenEye64*¹⁹, which, while being one of the most influential FPS games of all time, feels completely outdated by modern standards.

As time passed, it became increasingly more important *why* and *how* something is happening, not just *what* it is exactly that the player has to do, and this was the perfect opportunity for artistic expression to shine. While it is impossible to pinpoint when exactly the focus on artistry became a conscious decision, the first three-dimensional installments of the Legend of Zelda series, namely *Ocarina of Time*²⁰ in 1998 and *Majora's Mask*²¹ in 2000 mark a large shift in the way people interacted with video games. Being the singular title to hold a 99/100 rating on Metacritic²², *Ocarina of Time* has been regarded as potentially the greatest game of all time – a bold title to hold for a game technically released in the 20th century. *Majora's Mask* on the other hand, is a perfect example of what I described in the preface of this thesis – a true cult classic. While being much less accessible than its previous installment, *Majora's Mask* explores particularly heavy subjects like grief, loss and mortality. Usually, games in the Zelda series revolve around the game's protagonist, Link, having to save Princess Zelda from the game's main antagonist Ganon. Here however, the plot revolves around Link trying to prevent the end of the World, as the Moon itself is about to fall onto the village the story is set in. This means that the game had to tackle a serious tonal shift, from a classic heroic adventure, to facing seemingly predetermined impending doom, while also being a Zelda game, accessible to its usual target demographic. Other than both being excellent games, the reason I chose to focus on them is that in my assessment, the *Souls* games continue the legacy set by games such as *Majora's Mask* in tackling topics of grief, loss, and the inevitable passage of time in the confines of its own medium, as well as something even more prominent – failure.

¹⁷ Super Mario 64, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 1996.

¹⁸ Banjo-Kazooie, Rare, Nintendo, 1998.

¹⁹ GoldenEye64, Rare, Nintendo, 1997.

²⁰ Legend of Zelda, Ocarina of Time, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 1998.

²¹ Legend of Zelda. Majora's Mask, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 2000.

²² The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, www.metacritic.com

Chapter II: Hidetaka Miyazaki's Vision

Through the Looking Glass

In the previous chapter, I wanted to attentively focus on how innovation is done in the gaming industry. Through ingenuity, conscious risk-taking and the evolution of technology, leaps forward are made, and are followed and built upon by others. When it comes to the legacy of the greatest artists however, there is more to it than just sheer innovation. The term *auteur*²³ refers to artists whose influence over their work is paramount. In the realm of film, it usually means a director who qualifies as the work's author, even in cases when they may not be the writer themselves. When it comes video games, a very close parallel can be drawn to the above mentioned definition. The Mario and Zelda games of the 1980's and 1990's are inseparable from the figure of Shigeru Miyamoto, usually considered to be the most influential video game director and producer of all time. The same could be said for then-Konami's²⁴ Hideo Kojima²⁵, main developer of the game *Metal Gear Solid*²⁶. Once games of these series have risen to popularity, imitation works also emerged, but since the works themselves were so immensely connected to the artistry and vision of their respective directors, these games usually misinterpreted what made the originals so beloved. This is true of almost every auteur, regardless of the medium they express themselves in. What sets Hidetaka Miyazaki's work apart, however, is that a great number of studios have been inspired by his games in such a way, that their creations feel much more like new interpretations and bows of respect, rather than sheer mimicry. This is so prevalent as of the second half of the 2010's, that an entirely new subgenre was born called 'souls-likes', named after Miyazaki's most influential work, the *Dark Souls* series. What makes a game a souls-like is not so easily defined, as the lines are blurred between genres of any medium. Games that resemble the *Souls* games in either their gameplay presentation, tone, or their portrayal of failure as a narrative tool can all be described as souls-like to a certain degree. As of the writing of this thesis, more than 600 titles have been labeled

²³ SANTAS, C., *Responding to Film: A Text Guide for Students of Cinema Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, 18.

²⁴ SAMIT, S., Konami's bitter, yearlong breakup with Hideo Kojima, explained, www.polygon.com

²⁵ Hideo Kojima's departure from Konami considerably lowered the company's public opinion, due to his status as an auteur

²⁶ *Metal Gear Solid*, Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Konami, 1998.

as souls-like on Steam, the most prominent digital PC game distributor service²⁷, most of them paying homage to one sole visionary.

Hidetaka Miyazaki was born in 1974, in Shizouka, Japan²⁸. Coincidentally, he only made the decision to become a video game developer later in his life, at the age of 29, after playing the 2001 game *ICO*²⁹, by fellow auteur Fumito Ueda³⁰. He was also greatly influenced by western literature, like *The Song of Ice and Fire* series of books by George R. R. Martin, as well as several works of H. P. Lovecraft³¹. He also greatly enjoyed the *Fighting Fantasy* role-playing gamebooks. These books were available to him thanks to his father, although as a child, he did not have a strong command of English just yet, which meant he frequently had to employ use of his imagination to fill in the gaps in these stories. The feeling of obscurity and mystery one might feel when reading a story in such a way is perfectly encapsulated in the *souls* series' non-linear story structure – instead of conventional narrative tools, these games employ environmental and meta-communicated storytelling, therefore taking full advantage of the medium's every possibility. It speaks volumes of his talent and dedication, that shortly after he started working at FromSoftware in 2004, he would become the director of the next installment of the *Armored Core* series, *Armored Core 4*³², and in 2009, would direct *Demon's Souls*, the first of the *Souls* games, establishing a series that's success resulted in him being awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual Golden Joystick Award show in 2018³³. From my perspective, it is hard to imagine a more validating example of success than the one crowning Miyazaki's career – illustrated perfectly by the fact that the aforementioned award was given to him by Ian Livingston and Steve Jackson, authors of the *Fighting Fantasy* series, and his latest video game, *Elden Ring*³⁴ was written in a collaboration with none other than George R. R. Martin himself³⁵.

²⁷ Steam, Souls-like games, www.store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Souls-like/

²⁸ PARKIN, S., Bloodborne creator Hidetaka Miyazaki: 'I didn't have a dream. I wasn't ambitious'", www.theguardian.com

²⁹ *ICO*, Japan Studio/Team Ico, Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001.

³⁰ PARKIN, S., Hidetaka Miyazaki Sees Death as a Feature, Not a Bug, www.newyorker.com

³¹ MIELKE, J., "'Dark Souls' Creator Miyazaki on 'Zelda,' Sequels and Starting Out", www.rollingstone.com

³² *Armored Core 4*, FromSoftware, FromSoftware/Sega/505 Games, 2006.

³³ SULLIVAN, L., "Dark Souls creator Hidetaka Miyazaki takes the Lifetime Achievement award at the Golden Joystick Awards 2018", www.gamesradar.com

³⁴ *Elden Ring*. FromSoftware, Namco Bandai, 2022.

³⁵ DINSDALE, R. "Miyazaki Explains Working With George R.R. Martin on Elden Ring: 'It Was Like Speaking With an Old Friend'", www.ign.com

When it comes to any field, innovation comes from people who are able to think outside the box, and because of that, innovators usually emerge from backgrounds that are not dominated by the zeitgeist of their specific realm of study. This might be the reason why Miyazaki was not afraid to put his personal experiences into the centerstage of his game design philosophy. However, a usual bane of these visionaries is that their ideas are not taken seriously by the industry before they prove themselves, which is not possible as a fresh entrant. In this regard, Miyazaki and *Demon's Souls* were not any different.

After *Armored Core 4*, Miyazaki directed the series' next installment, *Armored Core: For Answer*³⁶. The game received mixed to unfavorable reviews from most publications³⁷, and thus the need for something entirely new arose. Development of this new title, that would eventually become *Demon's Souls*, started with a team that was initially comprised of multiple veterans, as it was to be a cooperation between FromSoftware and Sony, in an attempt to create an action role-playing game rooted in a dark fantasy setting for the Sony Playstation 3, with the goal of also breaking the trends that were dominant in western games of the genre³⁸. Most prominent of these trends was the gameplay loop associated with conventional role-playing games, where players would usually receive clear instructions as to what they have to achieve and were rewarded by the game through several means in succeeding in these pre-set challenges. The vision Miyazaki and the team wanted to revive was the sense of mystery and adventure associated with classic adventure games. As I mentioned before in this thesis, the lack of accessible information and general obscurity characterized by early arcade games of the past has greatly contributed to the establishment of gaming communities, as players felt like they have to uncover a mystery together. This, however, was not easy to recreate in a modern setting, as due to the internet and the emergence of online publications, creating an aura of mystery was not only much harder, but also posed a great risk – if a game feels completely inaccessible to journalists and reviewers, negative critical reception of a game can spread much faster, a lesson FromSoftware has already learned with their then-latest *Armored Core* release. The project was eventually taken over by Miyazaki himself as sole director, as no coherent vision was established for the game between members of the team. As I have stated before, the game was to be set in a dark fantasy setting, but unlike most Japanese role-

³⁶ *Armored Core: For Answers*, FromSoftware, FromSoftware/Ubisoft, 2008.

³⁷ *Armored Core: For Answers*, www.metacritic.com

³⁸ Interview: *Demon's Souls*, www.edge-online.com

playing games³⁹, the fantasy setting was heavily influenced by European, as opposed to purely Japanese folklore. Other than simply being another way of breaking away from trends associated with the genre, this was also due to Miyazaki's interest and appreciation of western media. Signature areas of *Demon's Souls* like Boletaria Castle or the Tower of Latria all adapted a European medieval setting, and unlike most Japanese games of the time, it was voice acted exclusively in English. What elevates this English voice acting, is that none of the actors were American – in order to keep with the medieval immersion, Miyazaki and the team insisted on a crew of mostly Scottish actors⁴⁰, a tradition they kept in all of the *Souls* games (with the exception of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*⁴¹, which is set in the Sengoku period of Japan).

Although *Demon's Souls* finally started to find its own identity, supervisors and executives from Sony were highly disapproval of several aspects of the game's design choices. Shuhei Yoshida, president of Sony Interactive Entertainment at the time, called the game “unbelievably bad”⁴², after playing its demo for 2 hours. Various ideas of Miyazaki were rejected, so the team decided to keep quiet about the extent of certain mechanics.⁴³ Most notable of these is arguably the series' single most recognizable characteristic, a pose that would later be called by both fans and FromSoftware as ‘Praise the Sun’. In this pose, the character would stretch out their arms in the shape of a V, while looking up at the sky. The pose became much more involved with the series' legacy than originally thought, and it was only possible due to Miyazaki's willingness to go against the executives.

That pose actually carries some significance for me. During *Demon's Souls*, that was a holy sign. When I presented the game to the rest of the company, I showed them that pose and one of the higher ups told me it just wasn't cool enough. Of course I told him I'd get rid of it but I secretly kept it in the game. So naturally, with *Dark Souls* I was determined to use it.⁴⁴

Even though Miyazaki was vigilant, due to low confidence in the game, *Demon's Souls* was only set to be published by Sony in Japan. The game received favorable to mixed reviews, however,

³⁹ Japanese RPG's (role-playing games) in this context simply refer to role-playing games made by Japanese developers, not to JRPG's (Japanese role-playing games), which are a genre of their own.

⁴⁰ MACDONALD, K., “Souls Survivor”, www.eurogamer.net

⁴¹ *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. FromSoftware, Activision, 2019.

⁴² MACDONALD, K., Ibid.

⁴³ 梶田, なぜいまマゾゲーなの? ゲーマーの間で評判の“即死ゲー”「Demon's Souls」 (デモンズソウル) 開発者インタビュー, www.4gamer.net

⁴⁴ MORTON, L., “Why we praise the sun: the story of Dark Souls' most famous gesture”, www.pcgamer.com

when a number of European critics received imported copies, it seemed public opinion of the game in the west was very high⁴⁵. Due to this, the game was later published overseas by Atlus in Northern America, and by Namco Bandai in Europe. *Demon's Souls* was heavily cited as one of the greatest games of the year, which sparked Namco Bandai's interest in a continued partnership with FromSoftware, which gave birth to the *Dark Souls* trilogy, a spiritual successor to *Demon's Souls*⁴⁶. Since this was no longer a cooperating between Sony, instead of only releasing to Sony's own Playstation 3, the game came out on all modern platforms, and later on personal computers, and thus was most gamers first entry into the *Souls* series.

⁴⁵ MACDONALD, K., "Demon's Souls: Fighting the impossible." www.eurogamer.net

⁴⁶ Since the intellectual rights of *Demon's Souls* were still held by Sony, creation of a true narrative sequel was not possible.

Chapter III: The Souls Games

Beyond the Deep Fog

In order to properly understand the design philosophy of the enteries in the *Souls* series, it is important to separate developer intentions from game's eventual perception by consumers. Miyazaki and FromSoftware wanted to create a game that reintroduces all the virtues associated with classic role-playing games of the past – mystery stemming from realtive narrative obscurity, player specific, personal motivation instead of those defined by the games' reward system, and an experience that makes the player feel like they conquered a real challenge. I find this vital, as the general reception of these games slightly differed from these ideas in the beginning. The most notorious aspect of the *Souls* games were their immensely hard difficulty, which is not suprising, since in order for the above-mentioned virtues to materialize, the player had to feel like they really are pursuing near impossible adversities. This aspect alone was enough for the games to find their audiences, but it is only one of several reasons that contributed to their legacy. I would argue that the main reason these games became the new frontiers of game design, is how they complemented this core gameplay loop with a world that explores and gives meaning to concepts that are not generally associated with video games – more precisely, coming to terms with and embracing failure.

Even though *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*⁴⁷, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* and *Elden Ring* are set in different universes, they all explore these same themes. Set character archetypes can be found in all of them, representing their roles in however they can be contextualized within their respective worlds. The stories always center around a kingdom or realm that is facing an inevitable end. This 'end' can be defined in a number of ways - as an end of an age in the *Dark Souls* trilogy, a fall of a clan in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, or even as struggles of the subcountious in *Bloodborne*. The player character is always an outsider to the usual rules of the world, and they are eventually tasked with deciding whether to embrace, or renounce the natural cycle of change. To clearly exemplify how this is done in the series, I will examine the first entry of the *Dark Souls* trilogy, *Dark Souls*.

⁴⁷ Bloodborne. FromSoftware, Sony Computer Interactive, 2015.

The plot of *Dark Souls* is set in the fictional land of Lordran. When starting the game, we are given a brief introduction into the world's lore and mythology. We are told that once, the world was roamed by everlasting dragons, existing outside the cycle of life and death, in an era called the Age of Ancients. This all changed when the First Flame came to be, and thus, distinctions between concepts like light and dark, or life and death emerged. The essence of these four aspects formed souls, which were claimed by beings that are known as the gods of Lordran. Light was claimed by Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, life by the Which of Izalith and death by Gravelord Nito. The fourth soul however, the Dark Soul, was forgotten, and claimed by the "furtive pygmy" in secret. It is alluded to that the Dark Soul is much less powerful than the other three souls, and unlike the other godly figures, we see a character with a human silhouette bending down next to a small, black flame. With power granted to them by the great souls, the three gods challenged the dragons of the Age of Ancients – in this they were aided by Seethe the Scaleless, a dragon that betrayed his fellow kin in order to assist Gwyn and his knights. Once the gods were victorious, a new era began, called the Age of Fire. We can see images of a prosperous kingdom, but soon after, the narrator immediately follows up with stating that the First Flame is soon to fade away, and only Dark will remain. This is complemented by a line that at first seems purely metaphorical.

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. And in this land, the Undead are corralled and led to the north, where they are locked away, to await the end of the world. This is your fate.

The game then begins, and the player is soon to discover, that they are playing as an undead, something less than human. It is important to note that the game refers to these beings as both 'undead', and 'hollow', but never as 'zombie'. The undead of *Dark Souls* differ from the traditional portrayal of what are commonly referred to as 'zombie' in traditional pop-culture significantly. Instead of purely rot, they seem to be decaying on a spiritual level. This is signified by the mark on their chest, that is of the same shape as "accursed Darksign" shown in the opening cinematic.

When writing any fantasy epic that follows the order of the hero's journey story structure, the main character is usually an outsider, which creates a strong similarity between the character and the reader (or in this case, player), as from their perspective, they are both experiencing a whole new world. This is no different in *Dark Souls*, or in any of the *Souls* games for that matter, as the

player is tasked with breaking out of the Northern Undead Asylum, where they were locked up. This serves as the game's introduction to the player, and touches on what will be expected of them later. After the narration finishes, we see a small scene, where a knight throws a key to the protagonist, which opens their cell, then promptly disappears. The player is then left completely alone, to figure out what they have to do, in which they are slightly assisted by written messages visible along their path. This already communicates, that it is up to player to interpret the world, and they are free to do so at their own pace. This is further exemplified when the game's first major enemy, a demon shows up. In a conventional game, one might think that this obstacle is put there with the purpose of serving as their first major battle – however, since the main character has only just recently escaped their cell, they are completely stripped of any weapons. The game expects the player to realize that they are not strong enough to fight this enemy just yet, and they are supposed to run away. Most of the *Souls* games start out very similarly to this – in the example of *Demon's Souls*, the first major enemy the player faces, called the Vanguard, is made to be much stronger than the main character, and player is expected to die. This reinforces the idea, that failure will be a core aspect of the game, and in all entries of the *Souls* series, players will be given an opportunity to prove themselves to these early enemies again, once they have got more used to the game's mechanics. It is important to note, that even though the developers' intention is for the player to fail, these challenges are not impossible to complete. This is a great example of how the game's difficulty is not arbitrary, but is instead based on patience and experience – experience of the player, not just the player character. Gameplay based around the player accurately timing their character's dodges and attacks, while making sure they do not run out of their stamina, which takes time to recover, before they can strike or dodge again. Should the player run out of all their health points and die, they lose all their souls. Souls serve as the game's main currency and experience points, which are used to increase the protagonist's power. After death, the player character reawakes at the last bonfire they touched, which serve as the game's checkpoints. However hard the adventure may become, these bonfires always serve as safe points, completely free of any adversaries. Should the player reach same place they died, they are able to reclaim the lost souls – but if they die on their way there, those are lost forever. On a gameplay level, this is a great showcase of how the game expects the player to think about challenges. On a more subtextual level, it is already in perfect harmony with the lore established by the introduction, as it makes the player feel vulnerable in a world full of demons and controlled by gods. What is even more important, is that it marks the

beginning of a process that could only exist in the medium of video games. By experiencing failure in ample portion, the player slowly starts to take ownership of their character's hardships. Identifying with characters is far from being a new thing in the realm of fiction, but it is only through the expressive nature of video games that such an intense relationship can form.

While the player is busy searching for a weapon to deal with the demon, they can find the knight who freed them, lying on the floor. It is not explicitly communicated to the player what happened to him, but by observing the room, a small crack in the ceiling can be seen, which suggests that he was fighting the demon on the roof, then fell, or got thrown to the ground. The knight introduces himself as Oscar and tells the player of a prophecy. In the prophecy it is stated, that an undead must leave the Northern Asylum, make their way to Lordran, and must ring the Bell of Awakening in order to know their fate. Oscar succumbs to his wounds, and with his final words, says that he dies with hope in his heart that the protagonist might succeed. Once the player finally tackled the guarding demon of the asylum, they are taken away to the land of Lordran by a giant raven, and the game formally begins.

From here on, the player is free to explore the land of Lordran. Unlike a traditional role-playing video game, there is not a single instruction shown on the player's screen, as to where they would need to go. By talking to a character nearby, the protagonist is given a hint, and are also told that they should not even dare to search for the Bell of Awakening, as the task itself is impossible. While it is a good way to motivate the player, it also makes the character, known as the crestfallen warrior, feel like a living part of the world. Just as the game contextualizes the failure of the player within the confines of the game and draws a parallel to the failures of the protagonist, it also shows how the player might end up if they give up – crestfallen, and unmotivated. It is also here that we learn more about what it means to be human inside the game's world. We soon find out that the First Flame is indeed fading, but the Lord of Sunlight, Gwyn, in a desperate attempt to delay the inevitable, cast his own soul into the fire, and resides within a place known as the Kiln of the First Flame. This sacrilege resulted in a number of changes in the world of Lordran, most importantly causing humans to become unable to die – instead, like the First Flame itself, they slowly fade away and become 'hollow', just like the protagonist. This is significant, as it not only applies to our player character, but to the other undead residing within Lordran. By meeting characters and exploring the world, we slowly start to understand how the process of "hollowing" manifests itself.

New characters usually have a clear purpose when we first meet them – some want to find their relatives, others wish to pursue their knowledge of magic, and in the case of Oscar, he wanted to fulfill the prophecy that was passed down in his family, searching for a purpose that is worthy of him. Once they lose their purpose, they start to aimlessly wander the land, fixated on their failures, and eventually become hollow husks of their former selves. Other than being a strong narrative tool, this subconsciously also awakens a question in the player, regarding what it is they hope to gain from playing the game. While games focusing on artistry have existed beforehand, like the previously mentioned *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* or *ICO*, it is not usual that a game presents a question like this to the player so unapologetically. Giving them such an existentialistic dilemma can seem counterproductive, since games, like other forms of entertainment, often serve as a form of escapism from reality, rather than a device to contemplate purpose and identity. This approach can alienate consumers entirely, but it is highly effective in *Dark Souls*, since the game makes it evidently clear, that failure, in the context of the game, is a necessary step one must take to progress.

Eventually, the player will meet one of two giant snakes, called Primordial Serpents. Whichever of these the player meets is dependent on their choices and in what order they chose to traverse Lordran. These serpents serve as guides throughout the remainder of the game, and they finally unveil the true meaning of the prophecy to the protagonist – however, their interpretation of the said prophecy varies greatly. Both tell the player, that they must become a being stronger than the gods themselves by defeating them and acquiring their souls. According to one of the serpents, Kingseeker Frampt, the protagonist, hereby proclaimed as the ‘Chosen Undead’, after acquiring all this power should make their way to the Kiln of the First Flame, defeat Gwyn, and like him, should cast their soul into the First Flame, so the Age of Fire may be prolonged, and dark may abate. The other serpent, Kaathe, tells the player that they should also defeat Lord Gwyn, after which they should snuff out the First Flame, and let the Age of Man begin. Since it is highly unlikely that a player should meet both snakes in a single playthrough of the game, different players can have a drastically different outlook on what they must do. It also sparks an interesting debate, since the serpent’s retelling of events of the past differ in key places, suggesting that they are both manipulating the protagonist, and thus the player, in order to further their own agenda. Whichever path the player chooses, they are free to make their own choice in the end – the game casts no judgment on whether the player’s actions are selfish or righteous, and neither of the game’s endings show enough of the world’s changes that would evidently conclude what their actions resulted in.

While the game's central topic, communicated effortlessly through gameplay is overcoming challenges and accepting failure, thematically, it contemplates how people and the world react to change. While the exact plots points are different, *Demon's Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Elden Ring* and subsequent Dark Souls games all make the player choose between accepting or refusing change. This motif also shines through in the mythos and lore that inspired the game's art style.

The portrayal of the three gods bears similarity to several mythologies. Gwyn himself, with his long white beard, and the ability to hurl lightning spears, is strikingly similar to Zeus, the main god of Greek mythology. The state of the world and the death of gods also show resemblance to Ragnarök⁴⁸, which refers to a series of events that result in a great battle, and thusly, the death of the gods in Icelandic mythos. In my opinion however, the most striking parallel can be drawn to Zoroastrianism. The “furtive pygmy”, given life to by the Dark Soul itself and ancestor of humanity within the game's lore, in contrast with Gwyn, the all-father of the gods, perfectly encapsulate the cyclical nature of battles between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, as it also signifies humanity's inseparable nature from the gods⁴⁹. This is not surprising, as Miyazaki himself took great inspiration from western mythologies and culture. The city of the gods, Anor Londo for example, was heavily influenced by both the Milan Cathedral and the Château de Chambord. Ties can also be drawn to Shinto – one of the game's most signature characters, Solaire, is met at a balcony, profusely staring at the Sun. He tells the player of the Sun's magnificence and teaches the player the ‘Praise the Sun’ gesture, the pose which Miyazaki underwent great efforts to put into the game. Worship of the Sun is prevalent in many cultures, but it is also strongly associated with the worship of Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun⁵⁰. I am also of the belief that it has elements deeply rooted in other aspects Japanese culture. A great example of this is Artorias, one of the knights of Gwyn, who is tasked with venturing into the Abyss, to rescue the princess of another kingdom, Oolacile. The player, through the manipulation of time, can access these events, and witness the true fate of Artorias. Unlike the protagonist, Artorias, as a knight of Gwyn, was not a human. He was granted a part of Lord Gwyn's soul and in the game's lore, he could be considered a demigod. Since the Abyss itself is filled with darkness, he himself could not venture into the Abyss, and had to forge a covenant with one of the serpents, Kaathe to do so. When we get to Artorias, we see a shallow

⁴⁸ ZOËGA, G., *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1910., 345.

⁴⁹ DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, J., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol 1., New York: Rouledge & Keagen Paul, 1982., 670-673.

⁵⁰ WHEELER, P., *The Sacred Scriptures of the Japanese*. New York: Henry Schumann. 1952, 393-395.

husk of a knight, who has succumbed to the corruption of darkness that has stained the once great land of Oolacile. He represents one of *Dark Souls*' most tragic battles, since prior to this point, all the player has heard about Artorias is that he was a knight of outstanding valor and honor. His tragic fall perfectly showcases what the term *Hōgan-biiki*, the feeling of sympathy one feels for equally tragic figures of Japanese history like Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Amakusa Shiro⁵¹ means. The general theme of impending, inevitable change is also deeply rooted in Japanese ethos. Throughout history, Japan found itself in desperate situations, where the country quickly had to adapt to the outside world. This is most characteristic of the late Edo and Bakumatsu period, and even the events leading up to the Satsuma rebellion, where cultural and ideological debate regarding change was at its most significant⁵². I believe that this blend of western and Japanese ideals is what made the *Dark Souls* series' worldbuilding so cohesive, particularly in *Dark Souls*.

Another example of conscious contextualization of the game's world within its medium is its revolutionary multiplayer mode. In most games, multiplayer, as in, a game mode where players can play together with others, either through a network or locally, is presented in the game's menu as a separate option, disconnected from the game's story. In *Dark Souls* however, and in all of the *Souls* games, this is instead explain within the confines of the lore, and multiplayer functionality is accessible within the core game. In the story, we learn that there are ways to slow down the effects of 'hollowing' by claiming fragments of the original Dark Soul, referred inside the game as humanity. The serpent Kaathe explains to the protagonist, that he once led a covenant, which function as a faction within the game, called Darkwraiths, who were able to take other people's humanity. Darkwraiths can be met inside the game, and they are signified by a red aura around them. The game even gives a warning to the player, that their world has been invaded by a dark spirit, and that they must be dealt with. The player soon finds out however, that these red spirits are not just stronger enemies, but other players. This does not break the player's immersion in the story, yet still makes the experience communal. Another covenant, called the Warriors of Sunlight, led by Solaire, can also be found, who are intent on helping others traverse the land of Lordran. They can be found easily, as their signs radiate in a golden ray of sunlight, just like their auras. The player can choose to join any of these covenants, based on how they want to partake in the multiplayer aspect of the game. This concept, just like almost every gameplay decision, was also

⁵¹ MORRIS, I., *Nobility of Failure*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1975. 82.

⁵² GORDON, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2003, 126.

heavily influenced by Miyazaki's own experiences⁵³. Miyazaki recalled an occurrence, where he was driving upwards on a hill in heavy snowfall, and he saw how cars slowly sliding downhill were deliberately, gently bumped into by cars behind them, helping them get to the top. He recalled how he could not give his appreciation to these silent helpers and wanted a multiplayer experience that showcases this feeling. This system has persisted in subsequent games, and other developers were also greatly inspired by the idea that the single player and multiplayer experience could be blended together.

What further helps the immersion is the series' sound design. The sound weapons, magic, and the souls themselves make have been carefully engineered to be recognizable, but still feel true to the world. This is also aided by the game's soundtrack, which in the case of *Dark Souls* was composed by Motoi Sakuraba. While each major battle is given its distinctive theme, all feel well rounded in the game's dark fantasy setting. Most notable of them is Lord Gwyn's theme, which is built around a solemn piano piece, making the fight feel more like a tragic end to the Lord of Sunlight's inevitable fate, than a validating experience for the player's hardships. While the soundtrack of *Dark Souls* perfectly balances feelings of heroic achievement with somber melancholy, the music of *Demon's Souls* could only be described as brave. Composed by Shunsuke Kida, the themes are all distinct, and offer an incredibly varied portrayal of the world the game is set in.

While *Demon's Souls* became a cult classic in the west, *Dark Souls* became a massive hit. Thanks to its multi-platform nature, the game was eventually available on all current platforms, and it received very high praise. This is most evidently indicated by the fact it won Game of the Decade in 2021 at the annual Golden Joystick Awards, forever cementing its legacy⁵⁴. Several journalists and content creators have also cited *Dark Souls* as instrumental in their battle with depression⁵⁵ and processing grief⁵⁶, mainly due to how the game recontextualized failure and letting go as natural parts of the human experience, rather than something to be prevented or avoided. Due to its success and influence, the gaming industry has undergone an irreversible

⁵³ MACDONALD, K., "Souls Survivor", www.eurogamer.net

⁵⁴ MIDDLE, J., 'Dark Souls' wins Ultimate Game of All Time at the Golden Joystick Awards, www.nme.com

⁵⁵ NaKeyJaKey. "Dark Souls Saved Me", YouTube, 2018. January 20,

⁵⁶ COLLINS, D. L., "Dark Souls and Depression: How the series helps players with their mental health", www.svg.com

change thanks to the *Souls* series, and it was a change that ushered in a completely new outlook on game design.

Chapter IV: Legacy

So the World might be Mended

As I have mentioned previously, Hidetaka Miyazaki as an auteur differed from most famous video game directors in the specific way he influenced subsequent artists. While games resembling Shigeru Miyamoto's *Legend of Zelda* have existed, they were seldom called 'zelda-like', in the way words like kafkaesque are used. When it comes to the *Souls* series however, the extent at which a game can be inspired came under closer inspection.

Unlike genre defining games of the past, like *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*⁵⁷ and *Super Metroid*⁵⁸, which deepened a pre-existing genre with their more focused approach on exploration, the ways the *Souls* series' design philosophy and its collection of unique mechanics innovated the gaming industry are vast. The first notable souls-like was the 2014 game *Lords of the Fallen*⁵⁹, which utilized many of the Dark Souls games' features. It had a combat system based on dodging at pivotal times to evade incoming attacks and also had a death mechanic based on checkpoints and the player's ability to reclaim their lost experience points, should they be able to get back to their last point of death. It also marketed itself as a game of immense difficulty, and was set in a dark fantasy world of dying gods. However, the main character of *Lords of the Fallen*, Harkyn, was an entirely separate being from the player. The *Souls* games employed the use of a 'silent protagonist', which meant that while other characters were able to understand the player through their choice of dialogue options, the player character did not have their own voice. This trope is usually used in games to increase the immersion between the player and their character, and it complemented the world of *Dark Souls*, a game where several other mechanics also focused on immersion perfectly. In *Lords of the Fallen* however, it alienated the player from having such an experience. It received mixed reviews⁶⁰, and made it evidently clear, that the design philosophy behind *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* were much more complicated than what could be seen from the surface. With the release of *Bloodborne* in 2015, the term *Soulsborne* was coined, a portmanteau of *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*. Even though *Bloodborne* was set in a world mainly inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker, and employed the usage of firearms, it

⁵⁷ *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, Konami, 1997.

⁵⁸ *Super Metroid*, Nintendo R&D1, Nintendo, 1994.

⁵⁹ *Lords of the Fallen*, Deck13/Ci Games, Ci Games/BNE Entertainment, 2014.

⁶⁰ *Lords of the Fallen*, www.metacritic.com

was still considered to be a *Souls* game, rather than a souls-like. Because of this, discussion and debate arose in the industry as to what exactly constitutes as a souls-like.

In my opinion, what constitutes as a souls-like has much more to do with the principals behind its mechanics and storytelling than the borrowing precise gameplay elements. Two very good examples of this are the games *Salt and Sanctuary*⁶¹ developed by Ska Studios, and *Hollow Knight*⁶², developed by Team Cherry. From a strictly mechanical standpoints, both of these games are metroidvanias, meaning they are two-dimensional side-scrollers, with a heavy focus on exploration. They still had mechanics associated with *Souls* games, like their checkpoint based death mechanic with the possibility of reclaiming lost experience points, a focus on adequately timed dodges, and in the case of *Salt and Sanctuary*, a stamina bar. They were also marketed as difficult games, set in a dark fantasy world. Their stories also revolved around the same themes and plot points. In *Salt and Sanctuary*, the protagonist is stranded on a mystical island, where worshipers of current and old gods reside, and in order to escape, they have to make their way to the god of the island itself, and then make a choice, whether to truly escape, or take their place. In *Hollow Knight* the main character, only referred to as The Knight, has to mend the world that has been corrupted by an outer god, and decide whether to purge the corruption or to further delay its inevitable end. What sets these games apart however, is that they embraced the mechanics borrowed from the *Souls* series, and built upon them with their own ideas. *Hollow Knight*, for instance, had a new and intuitive healing system, which was not present in any of the *Souls* games, and both games focus much more heavily on platforming, rather than combat. What is albeit much more important, is that these games had their own identity – this is mainly due to the fact that they are, first and foremost, works of passion. Unlike the *Souls* games or *Lords of the Fallen*, both *Hollow Knight* and *Salt and Sanctuary* were made by small indie companies. With the entry into the gaming industry being much more accessible than ever before, the 2010's gave birth to many works that were done by only a handful of people. In the case of these two games, the term ‘handful’ is an understatement – Team Cherry, the development studio behind *Hollow Knight* only consisted of three people, while *Salt and Sanctuary* was made exclusively by married couple James and Michelle Juett Silva.

⁶¹ Salt and Sanctuary, Ska Studios, Ska Studios/Leadman Games, 2016.

⁶² Hollow Knight, Team Cherry, Team Cherry/Popeach, 2017.

Souls-likes eventually made their way back into the mainstream, with the release of games such as *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*⁶³, that enjoyed a favorable critical reception⁶⁴, but it is my assertion, that souls-likes that truly carry the *Souls* series' design philosophy are mainly found within indie games. I arrive to this conclusion based on the way the series themselves came into existence – with the determination of an auteur, unafraid to experiment, and to take inspiration from their own lives. An approach like this is much more prone to be present in a small, dedicated and independent team.

The legacy of the *Dark Souls* series is present in the gaming industry, even outside the realm of the souls-like genre. Both *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* are also full of secrets, that players are not expected to figure out easily. In the case of *Dark Souls*, a number of illusionary walls can be found, which hide extra bonfires and items, that only perceptive players can find. There is an entire area, called the Painted World of Ariamis, that can only be accessed by returning to the game's starting prison cell and finding a small doll, which acts as a key to a painting the player can find much later in the game. This meant, that just like in the era of arcade games, people formed communities to discuss their findings and hopefully uncover all the secrets together. Most notorious of these secrets was one associated with a pendant, that players could choose as their starting items when beginning their adventure. The pendant's description stated that it had no purpose or any special effect, but this did not stop the newly forming community to begin the hunt for something incredible. Only after a year was it confirmed by Miyazaki himself, that the pendant was not hiding any big secret, and it truly had no effect⁶⁵.

With the release of *Dark Souls* on personal computers in 2012, Namco Bandai focused on advertising the game with its signature difficulty, calling the release *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition*. While completely understandable from a marketing standpoint, this made the impression, that there was nothing else to it besides its strenuous challenges. Once the game achieved critical acclaim, developers soon started following the trend, and made increasingly more difficult games. If a particularly challenging game of any genre was made, it was usually called the “Dark Souls of” that specific genre. Thankfully the perception of these games are now much clearer than ever, and it resulted in new discussions opening up when it comes to difficulty in games. The *Souls* series

⁶³ *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, Respawn Entertainment, Electronic Arts, 2019.

⁶⁴ *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, www.metacritic.com

⁶⁵ MATULEF J. “Dark Souls’ director reveals the pendant’s true purpose”, www.eurogamer.net

have proved, that it is not talent, but instead patience and perseverance that is required of players, which are skills anyone can develop. This way, the chatartic feeling one can experience when conquering these challenges, which was the original intention of the seires⁶⁶, have become accessible to everyone.

⁶⁶ KAMEN M., “Dark Souls 3 director: it’s about ‘accomplishment by overcoming tremendous odds’”, www.wired.co.uk

Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out with the goal to accurately showcase the effect Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Souls* series had on the gaming industry as a whole, both in the way it revived the sense of community and mystery associated with classic video games of the 1980's and 1990's, and in the way it contextualized how grief and failure could be interpreted in the confines of video games. I also wanted to examine how Miyazaki's work takes inspiration from both European and Japanese culture, creating a world that is able to grasp the essence of chivalric virtues like honor and valor, while also exploring concepts like *hōgan-biiki*, the sympathy associated with tragic heroic figures. While the shift from pure entertainment to artistry has already begun, prior to the release of *Demon's Souls*, the success of *Dark Souls* and FromSoftware's subsequent games in the series have had a tremendous effect in understanding how immersion can be created within the medium. The fact that *Demon's Souls*, a game that could only be made due to Miyazaki's unwillingness to sacrifice his vision, against all odds, paved the way to a series that has been crowned game of the decade, speaks volumes of the influence these games had in how video game development is approached. It is also vindicating, that Shuhei Yoshida himself, who once called *Demon's Souls* "unbelievably bad", chose to showcase FromSoftware's next game made in a partnership with Sony, *Bloodborne* in 2015⁶⁷. It is quite rare that a work like this leads to the creation of an entire series of games, strongly united in tone and theme, yet still different in their world and story. Emergence of the souls-like genre is further evidence of its reach, and is a trend that is set to continue in the upcoming years, even without a new *Souls* game being on the horizon. Hidetaka Miyazaki, highly awarded as game director, rightfully takes his place next to auteurs like Shigeru Miyamoto and Fumito Ueda, cementing his legacy as a visionary, who was not afraid to innovate.

⁶⁷ PlayStation. "Bloodborne - PlayStation Underground: Shuhei Yoshida Gameplay Video | PS4", YouTube, 2015. July 1.

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