

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dark Souls
Platform: PC
Genre: Action role-playing
Release Date: August 24, 2012
Developer: FromSoftware
Publisher: Namco Bandai Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hidetaka Miyazaki

Overview

Dark Souls is a challenging, expansive and narrative-rich fantasy action-roll-playing-game, taking place in a Tolkien-esque, fading world that has fallen to ashes in the grips of an undead plague. We find our protagonist trapped in a forgotten asylum for the undead, only to be released by a mysterious benefactor to a dying world filled with demons, hostile creatures, and barely a living soul to guide our vulnerable hero.

As the player explores and masters this mysterious realm, we come to understand our purpose – to awaken the ancient beings of the land, succeed its ailing king, Gwyn, and usher in a new age of fire – or defy this purpose altogether, and bring about an age of dark. Whatever path the player chooses, the way ahead will take them to the darkest depths and the most glorious heights of Lordran, bringing them face-to-face with its most ferocious, bizarre and majestic beings.

Characters

The narrative of *Dark Souls* is conveyed largely through flavor text in item descriptions and through environment design, and there are few living characters who offer true insight into the secrets of the world. A few of these notable beings include:

- **The Chosen Undead** – the game’s silent protagonist, a human afflicted with an undead curse that prevents death, but slowly turns the victim into a feral, soulless hollow. After the undead has valiantly fought their way to ring the Bell of Awakening, they are told by the mysterious Kingseeker Frampt of their destiny to succeed the land’s monarch.
- **Solaire of Astora** – A jolly, pious knight, the player encounters Solaire throughout their journey, as he embarks on a pilgrimage to find the Sun God. Though serving as a symbol of hope and providing the player with much needed company early in the game, Solaire begins to lose hope and question his faith as

the journey continues. Ultimately, the player is often forced to euthanize Solaire when he is driven mad by a light-emitting parasite, deep underground.

- **Kingseeker Frampt** – A self-proclaimed “primordial serpent” with wide, staring eyes, large, fleshy whiskers and an enormous toothy grin, Frampt is the player’s first living connection to the royal deities whose mythology frames a heretofore mysterious narrative. Frampt is cordial, eloquent, and commanding, and his instructions carry an institutional weight. While dialogue with Frampt is revealing, his motives for compelling the player to action are somewhat questionable and unclear.
- **Darkstalker Kaathe** – Discerning the truth is even further complicated by the presence of a little-known, second primordial serpent. Many players will complete the game without ever hearing the testimony of Kaathe, who is found in the darkest depths of Lodran’s “abyss”. Kaathe claims that Gwyn and Frampt have wrongfully prolonged the age of fire, and that a human known as the Dark Lord is the rightful ruler of the land. Kaathe urges the Chosen Undead to reject the Gods of sun and fire, become the Dark Lord and usher in a new age. There are many conclusions to be drawn about the relationship between Frampt and Kaathe – as they look identical, it is not illogical to speculate that they are the same being – but *Dark Souls* offers no objective truth to confirm these speculations.

Breakdown

Dark Souls begins with a mysterious three-minute cinematic, by far the longest and most verbose cutscene in the game. The cutscene is narrated by an elderly woman, whose voice begins in a soothing, fire-and-brimstone manner: “In the age of ancients, the world was unformed; shrouded by fog ...” The narrator tells the story of a mysterious, unnamed land: the world was cold, unchanging, and ruled by ancient dragons, until fire sprang from the earth. Within this flame were the souls of lords, which were claimed by four great beings: a skeletal mass of death, a witch of fire, a king of sunlight, and a furtive pygmy. Together with their newfound strength, these beings conquered the dragons, and an age of fire began; humanity flourished. But in time, the flames began to fade, and the land was devastated by a curse of the undead.

The camera fades out, then fades back and leads down a winding, decrepit hallway to meet the protagonist, a dejected-looking undead trapped in a prison cell. The narrator explains the player’s curse, then ceases to speak for the rest of the game. A body containing the key to the cell is dropped into the room by a mysterious knight, and the player is free to leave. Upon exiting the building, we encounter the savior knight near death, who explains that we must now carry on his mission, to ring the bell of awakening.

From this point on, it is very difficult to make connections between the opening cutscene and the game we experience. Characters with information about where we are and what we should be doing are few and far between, and their advice is often cryptic and unclear. The only clues to be found come from the textual descriptions of in-game items, and the aesthetic details of the environment and its inhabitants.

Roughly a third of the way into the game the player meets Kingseeker Frampt, who provides insight that creates a narrative context for the player character to exist in. When they are tasked with defeating the great lords first mentioned in the intro cinematic this context is deepened, and the player takes a more active role in the game’s lore, rather

than simply trying to survive. Despite these insights, many elements of the story still remain open to speculation after these milestones, and leave the player hunting for more revealing details. The player's journey leads farther and farther from the starting area, and the creatures and places encountered becoming more and more bizarre, raising more questions. As the player progresses through the challenges of the latter half of the game, they will learn only what they can infer from the subtle details – conclusive, omniscient explanations are nowhere to be found. The conclusion is just as bleak as it is confusing to the inattentive player – after defeating an undead, crestfallen king, the player will find themselves either immolated in a massive pyre (prolonging the age of fire) or returning victoriously to dark chamber filled with primordial serpents (becoming the Dark Lord).

Strongest Element

What is most powerful about the storytelling in *Dark Souls* is the subtle and indirect storytelling. While on their first playthrough some players may feel that they have learned very little about the game's world and characters, it is not for lack of content – the environments and characters suggest a world teeming with history and meaning, item descriptions provide detailed but all-too-short glimpses of what the world once was. Players are rarely spoon-fed information, but through imagination and critical thinking, players can discover the underlying storylines, which in turn leave players with extremely satisfying insights, and of course more questions.

Unsuccessful Element

A controversial aspect of *Dark Souls* is its punishing difficulty, which can arguably be said to interfere with the narrative experience for novice players. While this is a sacred aspect of the game for many of its veterans, the learning curve for beginners is very steep, and getting into the game – let alone completing it – requires a substantial amount of time and dedication. Miyazaki lamented¹ that many players are hesitant to begin the game due to its reputation for difficulty, and thus will be unable to appreciate its narrative and themes. Many players eventually hit an obstacle that they are unable to pass, put down the controller, and thus are never able to see the game's full picture.

The game's difficulty also works against the storytelling in more specific ways. For instance, the choice and duality that the player is supposed to be presented with as a core aspect of the game's story is imbalanced – one of the paths available to the player is incredibly hard to discover. In order to meet Darkstalker Kaathe and learn of their alternate path through the game, the player must go well out of their way at a specific stage of the game to defeat an immensely difficult late-game boss, an inconvenient difficulty barrier that many players may simply interpret as a sign that they are going the wrong way.

Highlight

Dark Souls excels at visual storytelling, and one of its finest moments is when the player is lifted high into the sky to the city of Anor Londo. For roughly the first third of the game, the player explores forests, caverns, and lowland villages, all of them in various states of decrepitude. Observant players may notice that the view to the North is always obscured by a massive cliff face, even at the highest vantage points. Once the player has

overcome the mighty challenges of Sen's Fortress, supposed gateway to the mythical city of Anor Londo, it is not immediately clear where the city is, nor how they will get there. In a cutscene, the player is suddenly surrounded and grasped by bizarre winged creatures, and lifted far above and beyond the cliff face to reveal an expansive, ornate and pristine city unlike anything the player has seen before. In the next moment, the creatures drop the player on a small platform just beyond the wall, above a staircase inviting the player deep into the heart of this strange new place.

This moment is powerful for a number of reasons. For one, the almost instantaneous shift from crumbling, murky lowlands to sparkling gothic metropolis is aesthetically jarring, and challenges player's assumptions about the game's setting. For players with a keen memory, this moment may directly link the world they have been exploring with that seen in the opening cutscene, and for others, it greatly expands their understanding of the game's geography, which is deeply tied to the narrative.

Critical Reception

Eurogamer gave *Dark Souls* a 9/10, praising the game's storytelling ability, and noting the game's difficulty: "If adventure is to surprise and mystify you and invite you to uncover the secrets of a forgotten world, then *Dark Souls* is a great adventure game. If entertainment is fun without failure and progress without pain, you'll have to find it somewhere else. But you'll be missing out on one of the best games of the year."²

Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw writing for *The Escapist* has on numerous occasions praised the game's narrative depth and atmosphere³. A notable feature he mentions is that the game's skybox holds no false promises – almost every piece of scenery that can be seen on the horizon is visited by the player at some point³.

Lessons

1. **When it comes to lore, less is more** – The lore of *Dark Souls* is undoubtedly expansive, but aside from the introductory cutscene players are almost never hit over the head with extensive, rambling histories. Player curiosity is fed with short, intriguing sound bites which hold their attention just long enough to leave them hungry for more, and collectively add up to something great.
2. **Show, don't tell** – The storytelling in *Dark Souls* succeeds largely due to how it intertwines with the visual world. Detailed environments contextualize and add meaning to the often confusing story, little visual details call our assumptions about the world into question. Aside from environment design, the name and placement of in-game objects and characters also offer clues about the world.

Summation

Dark Souls is a far-reaching masterpiece, whose world is filled with subtle detail, mysterious characters and secrets that always leave players hunting for a deeper understanding. Though its difficulty and length are a steep barrier for entry, players of *Dark Souls* looking for a nuanced, complex and grandiose game narrative experience will be greatly rewarded for investing their time and energy.

Bibliography

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3. Croshaw, Ben "Yahtzee" (2014-19-02). ["*Dark Souls*."](#) The Escapist. Retrieved 2016-28-11.