

God in the Machine: Depicting Religion in Video Games

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Abstract

This thesis shows that *Dark Souls* uses representations of fictive religion to comment on real religion. These representations are rooted in the affordances of the video game medium, meaning that even as *Dark Souls* comments on real religion it also comes up against the limits and particularities of its own form. I argue this case with reference to three aspects of fictive religion found in *Dark Souls*: religious architecture, religious violence, and religious sacrifice. Individually, none of these aspects are exclusively religious. Architecture and violence exist outside of religion, and so does sacrifice, taken in a broad sense. Thus for *Dark Souls* real religion is not treated as existing in some sealed vacuum isolated from other areas of human life. It has cultural, political, and economic dimensions, and part of the commentary offered by *Dark Souls* examines those interconnections. A study of *Dark Souls* thus informs our understanding of the capacity of video games to engage meaningfully with topics such as religion, as well as perhaps suggesting certain structural similarities between religion and video games.

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Introduction

In an interview on the Japanese podcast “Game no Shokutaku,” the game director Hidetaka Miyazaki discussed the portrayal of religion in his recently released *Dark Souls*. “I sometimes get inquiries about me having problems with religion or religious people ... it’s a misunderstanding.” He cites the depiction of Solaire, a Warrior of Sunlight – one of the few “good characters” in the game, and also religious. “I really like that character,” he notes. “I wanted to create a good character, like him, from the very beginning ... what I wanted to do is show total devotion, in a pure form. That’s how I imagined it: the Warriors of Sunlight” (Soulslore website, 2018). These comments notwithstanding, the depiction of religion continues to be controversial among the player base. Many religious characters in the *Souls* games are manipulative and cruel, and players are still debating the root causes of those behaviours. One forum member argues that in *Dark Souls*, “fanaticism or zealotry is dangerous [sic], not religion.” Another suggests that “religion/covenants/factions are a construct of humanity and a cause of division and strife” (u/Gaidnawarrior 2015). Even the example of Solaire is not uncontroversial: over the course of the game, Solaire seeks desperately to become like the sun. “The sun is a wondrous body,” he muses. “If only I could be so grossly incandescent!” His devotion to the sun drives him throughout the game, although he is not without his moments of doubt: “But when I peer at the Sun up above, it occurs to me... what if I am seen as a laughing stock, as a blind fool without reason?” (ellipsis in original) Ultimately Solaire is attacked by a demonic parasite that emits its own light. He becomes controlled by it and tries to kill the player. From one perspective, Solaire is a tragic character, reduced to a lumbering parody of himself by his utter devotion. He is dominated by a parasite, something that from his perspective is fulfilling his desire just as it drives him insane – perhaps a bitter comment on religion? For Miyazaki, it is nothing of the sort: “I think that the happiest ending for him is to die by becoming the sun” (Soulslore website, 2018).

To those unfamiliar with *Dark Souls*, it might seem odd to ask such deep questions about the fictional world of a game. But Miyazaki is renowned for the depth and thought put into crafting his worlds. In the Design Works interviews, Miyazaki discusses the major thematic components of *Dark Souls* in remarkably abstract and complex terms. He describes “the image of Gods and knights centered around Anor Londo; Lost Izalith and the theme of Chaos, fire and demons; and Gravelord Nito and the image of death and decay.” He continues in the same interview to discuss the philosophical foundations of the fictional world, speaking of how they

conceptualised “the world, life and death ... the meaning of fire and role of the Four Kings” (Soulslore website, 2018). He does not expand on what precisely was said about these topics, but they are all key components in understanding the *Dark Souls* world. Many of them will be expanded upon during this thesis. Of course, as well as being deeply complex, *Dark Souls* is also famously opaque, in an almost Blakean way. An anecdote might illustrate the point clearly: one of the enemies in *Dark Souls* is the basilisk, a large lizard that can turn the player to stone. The basilisk has enormous round eyes, almost like two balloons on the top of its head – but, as Miyazaki points out, those eyes are fake. They are like eyespots on moths or butterflies, a misleading detail hiding the actual, much smaller eyes by the mouth and nose. “I put a lot of care into things that I don’t expect many people to find out easily,” Miyazaki explains (Soulslore website, 2018). This relatively minor anecdote indicates a wider pattern of secrecy and obfuscation that holds true across the game and indeed the wider series of *Dark Souls* games. Many important characters are hidden from the player, and, in the case of Ash Lake, even entire levels are concealed. The enigmatic structure of *Dark Souls*, along with its resounding complexity, make it rich material for any player seeking to unlock its secrets.

As I have suggested, one prominent dimension of the *Dark Souls* universe is that of religion. Miyazaki’s own thematic contrast between the gods of Anor Londo and the demons of Lost Izalith immediately foregrounds religion as a major component in any discussion of the game’s fictional world. Often the treatment of religion in video games is quite negative. In 2013’s *BioShock Infinite*, for example, you enter a flying city filled with white racist Christians who have enshrined the Founding Fathers as saints, merging American nationalism and religious identity in a terrifying isolationist cult. 2014 saw *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth*, where the main antagonist is an insane religious woman trying to murder her son after hearing the voice of God; 2015 had *The Witcher 3*, a fantasy game depicting an intolerant religious sect burning books and mages; and this year’s *Far Cry 5* features a Christian doomsday cult terrorising a fictional county of Montana. Each of these high-profile games associates organised religion with intolerance, insanity, and death. They typically draw on tropes about the contemporary American evangelical movement, with the exception of *Witcher 3*, which instead evokes medieval witch-hunts.

In some ways, these games have a relatively superficial engagement with religion. Critiques of religion for its militant aspects or its complex relationship with nationalism in America are neither new nor particularly uncommon. By contrast, *Dark Souls* does not engage in a basic valuation of religion as good or bad. Rather, it interrogates the ways in which religion operates in the world. The game is not set in our world, meaning that it is not depicting historical religions such as Christianity or Islam. Rather, *Dark Souls* represents fictive religions, using their

various cultural operations to comment on the cultural operations of real world religions. The focus on fictive religions allows *Dark Souls* to aesthetically distort different features, thus foregrounding the elements of religion that it wants to consider at any given moment.

Introducing *Dark Souls*

FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* is the first game in a trilogy, released in 2011 for PS3 and Xbox 360, and in 2012 for PC. While originally published in Japan, its brutally difficult gameplay and complex level design were well-received in a global market that was becoming oversaturated with player-friendly mechanics such as waypoints and frequent autosaves. For example, in another massive 2011 bestseller, *Batman: Arkham City*, players are provided with constant directions to their next goal – through, suitably, a giant Bat-symbol floating in the sky. Players in *Arkham City* also receive an overarching map of the environment that reveals different points of interest, and if they happen to die, they begin again at the start of whichever room or space they happened to be in. One games journalist described the 2011 games market as “an industry dominated by short campaigns that play themselves and offer easy rewards” (Lynch 2011). While this is probably an ungenerous characterisation, it does demonstrate frustration with the contemporary games industry. *Dark Souls* offered a complete change of pace, with no waypoints, no map, and no starting again in the previous room – players who die are sent back to a ‘bonfire’, which might well be at the start of the level.

The forbidding difficulty of *Dark Souls* is matched by a foreboding atmosphere and narrative. In the game's fictional world, human civilisation is crumbling, rotting away from the inside. The opening cinematic explains this crumbling with a mythological framework that echoes the Judeo-Christian Creation story. A narrative voice-over reveals that in the beginning, “the world was unformed, shrouded by fog” (2012¹). This ‘unformed’ world is populated by “grey crags, archtrees, and everlasting dragons.” But then came fire, “and with fire came disparity.” Fire disrupts the equilibrium of the shrouded world: it introduces disparity, or a binary between things like life and death, heat and cold, and light and dark. In *Dark Souls*, humans originate within the binary brought about by fire. As the fire begins to fade, that binary begins to

¹ It is difficult to provide useful citations for video games. To avoid unnecessary repetition, the reader may assume that all quotes from and references to *Dark Souls* henceforth are from the English-language PC version, released in 2012 as *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition*. Dialogue will be introduced in terms of the character speaking, and text drawn from item descriptions will have the item in question identified. Any other references are introduced in the body of the text in such a way that those wishing to follow a reference should be able to locate it within the game.

degrade, and many humans shift past the life/death binary into a state of undeath. It would be possible to describe the undead in *Dark Souls* as essentially zombies, although they are not the lumbering mindless monsters familiar to pop culture. On the contrary, they retain their mental function and personality – at least initially. Over time, the existential weight of undeath can cause undead to go insane, in a process referred to as ‘Hollowing’. Hollows are like zombies in the more traditional understanding; although many of them retain skill with swords or bows or other weapons, they are no longer rational or sociable beings. They are violent, savage creatures that will attack the player on sight. The undead of *Dark Souls* are thus split into two categories: the Undead (henceforth capitalised), who are simply undead humans, and Hollows, the more traditional degenerated zombies.

The plot of *Dark Souls* is tied to the fading fire and the increasing numbers of Undead. The player, one such Undead, is sent on a mission to overthrow Gwyn, the king of the gods, and inherit the original mythological fire, the First Flame. As I explore in detail in the first chapter, the player is tricked into believing they will become the new divine monarch, when really their character’s soul will be consumed by the First Flame. A strong soul will rejuvenate the Flame, allowing human civilisation and the binary of life and death to limp on a little while longer. In a sense, then, *Dark Souls* is about cycles: the cycle of life and death, and the cycle of sacrifice that must be perpetuated to sustain the withering Age of Fire. Cycles are associated with disparity and change, with the ravages of time. They are contrasted against the grey permanence of the everlasting dragons, those immortal, timeless beings that sit outside the life/death binary. And arguably the cycle is also set in contrast to the Undead, who similarly exist outside the life/death binary. Fittingly, then, while the player can self-immolate in the First Flame at the end of *Dark Souls*, they are also able to simply leave, allowing the Flame to die and ushering in the new Age of Dark, extinguishing human civilisation in its current form. Regardless of which decision the player makes, a finished game will cycle back round to the beginning again. The player is returned to the Undead Asylum (the game’s first level) and must make their way into Lordran again. There are some minor changes – all the enemies are stronger, and the player-character retains all of their items and stats from the previous playthrough – but aside from that, nothing has changed. The cycle of the game begins again.

The cyclic theme of *Dark Souls* is repeated across *Dark Souls II* (2014) and *III* (2016), the second and third games in the trilogy. In each game, a new civilisation has risen out of the ashes of the past. Relics can be found from the civilisations of *Dark Souls*, suggesting that all three games take place in roughly the same geographical location, even though place names and geographical features have little to nothing in common. Like the first game, *Dark Souls II* and *III*

also take place in the dying days of their respective civilisations. In *Dark Souls II*, the kingdom of Drangleic has fallen to a race of giants, and is largely populated by Hollows. Curiously, the giants are made of wood, such that when they are killed they simply put out roots and grow into trees. In their own way, the giants also exist outside of the life/death binary. They do not ‘die’ per se, but develop from one form of life into another. One might ask further speculative questions – what happens if you chop those trees down? – but there is little resolution within the game. The *Dark Souls* games are famously opaque, offering only enough information to hook players into the speculation game.

In *Dark Souls III*, the conclusion to the series, the cycle is drawn to a close. The world has been regenerated too many times and is slowly collapsing in on itself. Different locations impossibly collide, such that a walk through a swampy jungle (Farron Keep) turns into spelunking through a sandy catacomb (Catacombs of Carthus). These locations should belong to entirely different countries: Farron Keep is in Lothric, while the Catacombs are in Carthus. Their proximity shows how the world is folding in on itself. In this game, the Lords of Cinder, responsible for feeding the First Flame, have abandoned their responsibilities and fled, and the player must hunt them down. By rejecting their responsibilities, the various Lords reject the cycle that keeps the Age of Fire limping on. One Lord, the royal Prince Lorian, says to the player, “The mantle of Lord interests me none. The fire-linking curse, the legacy of Lords, let it all fade into nothing” (2016). Another Lord, Aldrich, had a vision of coming darkness and created the Church of the Deep, hoping to bring the world into a new age “of the deep sea.” It has been suggested by some players that the Church’s home, the Cathedral of the Deep, takes design inspiration from St Peter’s Basilica (the seat of the Pope) and the Kaaba, which Muslims consider to be the house of God (Reddit 2016). For those unfamiliar with the Kaaba, its significance is such that the Muslim practice of facing towards Mecca during prayer is really about praying towards the Kaaba, which is in the Grand Mosque in the heart of Mecca. While Lorian chooses to ignore his responsibilities to the First Flame, hoping to end the cycle of death and regeneration, Aldrich seeks a different pathway into the future and beyond that same cycle.

***Dark Souls* Scholarship**

Despite the rich philosophical and thematic concerns of the *Dark Souls* games, they have been only briefly studied in video game scholarship. Where the literature does touch on *Dark Souls*, it is often only as a passing reference; for example, Kristina Egumenovska cites it in a list of video games influenced by manga (2014, 14). Most commonly, *Dark Souls* is referenced in terms of its

brutal difficulty. For instance, Ian Bryce Jones has an article on ‘fumblecore’, which is a genre of game where the player avatar is obscenely hard to control. Jones invokes *Dark Souls* as a point of contrast, arguing that while *Dark Souls* draws the player in “with the thrill of hard-earned progress,” fumblecore games “largely cast off notions of ‘progress’” (2016, 91). Alternately, Elena Bertozzi argues that many video games virtually simulate predation, which, rather than making gamers more violent, instead makes them “savvier at assessing and calculating opportunities in given environments, more willing to face difficult challenges, and able to learn from failure rather than be crushed by it” (2014, 430). *Dark Souls* is used as one of many examples of the ‘predation game’, again because of its brutal difficulty: “players have to do research on the internet, consult with expert players, and be willing to undergo many hours of trial-and-error practice in order to be able to move forward” (433). Stephen Curtis similarly focuses on the role of failure and death in games, citing *Dark Souls* as a type of ‘maso-core’ game (as in masochistic). For Curtis, death and failure are aesthetic tools as well as didactic training devices, “serving as a learning tool in the development of the player’s skills” (2015). Further, in an article on developing cooperative and computational thinking in three online multiplayer games (*Overwatch*, *Siege*, and *For Honor*), Enrico Gandolfi lists familiarity with *Dark Souls* combat as one of many factors that might help develop computational thinking in *For Honor* (2018, 138). The rationale is yet again rooted in the difficulty of the *Dark Souls* games, which “teach how to read patterns of attack and distances” through their punishing gameplay (139). Indeed, the *Dark Souls* games are so important for Gandolfi that they are listed beside the broad categories of ‘fighting games’ and ‘martial arts’ as major developmental factors. Finally, in an article about morality and naturalism in *The Last of Us*, Amy Green describes the difficulty of the *Dark Souls* games as exclusionary: “these too failed to capture my interest because of the intense focus required in learning the mechanics necessary to play the game” (2016, 759). The difficulty of *Dark Souls* is thus cited variously as aesthetic device, training mechanism, and limitation discouraging people from playing the game.

In the few instances where *Dark Souls* has been foregrounded in an article or chapter, there is a recurring theme of control. Tom van Neunen sees the online components of *Dark Souls* as a metaphor for our “post-Panoptic society” (2016, 511). Players often have their actions broadcast into other game-worlds; they appear as ghosts, intangible spectres running along corridors or swinging at unseen enemies. Van Neunen notes the sense of surveillance that accompanies the sight of such spectres: “It evokes a feeling of being watched, although in their current state these ghosts clearly cannot harm me. I am not even sure if they can see me, too” (517). For van Neunen, the appearance of a ghost stands as a reminder that one’s own actions

could also be projected into another world at any given time, with no notification or acknowledgement of this projection. He associates this surveillance with the Panopticon, where inmates have “a consciousness of permanent visibility” that causes them to “internalize the gaze... and start to self-monitor their own behaviour” (514). When combined with the multiplayer elements and the possibility of actual invasion from another player, van Neunen suggests that “through its gameplay mechanics, *Dark Souls* is embedded in a discourse of surveillance and punishment” (522), introducing the theme of social control.

Jodi Byrd also touches on the theme of control in an article on “the possible interventions indigenous critical theory might make to both settler colonial studies and videogame studies” (2016, 424). Byrd again invokes the multiplayer process of invading other games, although this time in the context of *Demon's Souls* (2009), the precursor to *Dark Souls*. She argues that the game is “built on obviously racially and colonially inflected tropes – white and black, invasion and defense,” and presents players with “an alienated world of intimate violence that demands exploration tied to the legacies of conquest and slavery in the new world” (432). Most of the article is focused on *Demon's Souls*, although she also argues that the *Dark Souls* games may similarly be read “through the conquest of the new world” (434). Players must develop “control of space, the power to advance past monsters and finally achieve dominance over embattled terrain” (432-33). Ultimately, she argues, “games such as *Demon's Souls* demonstrate the degree to which territorial acquisitions continue to map onto previous racial and colonial paradigms” (434). Mastery of foreign space is thus conceived of as a colonial exercise.

Lastly, Daniel Vella studies *Dark Souls* as an example of the ludic sublime. He argues that while procedurality is clearly an important part of video game theory, an exclusive focus on procedure or the systematic is unable to maintain “an aesthetic space within games for that which resists direct presentation or conceptualization” (2015). *Dark Souls* is thus introduced as a game that “foregrounds a sublime quality of mystery.” Vella describes the sublime according to Kant, who offers St Peter's Basilica as an example: “its totality extends beyond the limits of perception, tied as it is to a narrow, situated viewpoint, leaving the faculty of the imagination struggling to represent it as a coherent object of thought determined by a formal order” (Vella 2015). Following this definition, Vella offers four techniques “by which *Dark Souls* suggests to the player an ineffable whole that extends beyond her necessarily limited perception and cosmic understanding of the game at any given moment” (2015). These techniques include indistinct boundaries, unclear causes and effects, undefined entities, and ergodic ironies.

One of these techniques, ‘indistinct boundaries’, refers to the relationship between game level and background environment. Vella cites a story about *Battlezone* (1980), where some players believed that a volcano on the horizon “could be reached if the player was willing to travel long enough in its direction” (2015). The belief was mistaken; the volcano was merely part of the background environment, something that makes the game level look like part of a cohesive fictional world – crudely akin to a backdrop in theatre. However in *Dark Souls*, Vella notes, places that one might assume are merely backdrop turn out to be accessible and important locations. Anor Londo, the city of the gods, is visible throughout most of Lordran, located on the top of a large hill. It seems to be merely backdrop – until the player arrives there. The Painted World of Ariamis might be read as an ironic nod to this slippage between background environment and game level. In one of the chapels in Anor Londo, the player can find a painting of a bridge in a wintery world. If they have the correct item, players can be sucked into the painting, finding themselves in a new and mysterious realm – the Painted World of Ariamis. This transition actualises the process of background environment – a flat, two-dimensional image – transforming into a three-dimensional game level. Although Vella never raises the Painted World as an example, it embodies precisely the “erasure of the fixity of boundaries” that he is concerned with (2015). That which seems to be a flat backdrop is refigured as a location within the fictional world. In turn, the “narrow, situated viewpoint” of the player means that the totality of the fictional world seems to sprawl beyond the limits of player perception (2015).

Vella goes on to suggest that the sublime might not be a permanent feeling in video games. In another article on the video game *Oblivion*, Paul Martin argues that “while the landscape may be initially presented to the player as sublime ... the player is also equipped with the means of encountering the landscape in such a way as to make it familiar and banal” (2011). Vella agrees that the “dizzying range of possibilities” may be reduced to “a network of locations, paths and possibilities for action,” such that the gameworld as a whole “can, eventually, be easily grasped as a bounded, orderly cosmos” (2015). This is certainly the case for *Dark Souls*: at least spatially, the limits of the gameworld are clear, meaning that even as the game gestures towards unseen lands outside of what is experienced by the player, the actual locations that can be traveled do become familiar and somewhat banal. “The landscape of *Oblivion*,” or indeed *Dark Souls*, “is therefore only grasped as sublime for as long as it takes for the last vestiges of mystery to succumb to mastery” (2015).

In Vella’s case, control is the mechanism by which mystery almost degrades into mastery. The feeling of the boundless sublime becomes replaced by the bounded and familiar. There is nothing more disappointing, perhaps, than finishing a video game. Bringing Byrd into

conversation with Vella, one is tempted to read this description of the sublime unknown as an extended case study demonstrating the colonial heritage of exploration in new digital worlds. It evokes Joseph Conrad's description of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*: "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (2011, 41). From that perspective, the development of mystery into mastery sounds suspiciously like the colonial narrative of control and exploration, of developing the dangerous and mysterious Africa into a place regulated by Western ideals of reason and law. In *Dark Souls* especially, the decline of civilization finds a parallel in Achebe's characterisation of *Heart of Darkness*: "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (1978, 3). The colonial fear of 'going primitive' might find its corollary in the fear of going Hollow, of becoming 'just' a mindless zombie instead of an Undead struggling to hold on to one's sanity and human nature. The racialized undertones of the zombie are thus brought to the fore. For example, Edward Comentale explores the fear of zombie outbreak as a Western fear of colonial infection – what he refers to as "reverse colonization" (2017, 193). To be clear, I am not trying to discredit Vella's argument. I do not think the sublime in *Dark Souls* can be reduced to an imperial fantasy. However, the parallels are startling, and the possibly imperialistic dimension is worth keeping in mind. I will return to Vella's concept of the sublime in Chapter Three and the Coda.

Video Game Scholarship

Vella's concept of the sublime touches on *Dark Souls*' obsession with religion. The games are not necessarily concerned with any one given religion – as noted above, the Cathedral of the Deep in *Dark Souls III* draws architectural inspiration from two of the most prominent buildings in two of the world's major religions. The *Dark Souls* games draw elements from many religions to construct fictional religions, which in turn function as often generalised comments on real-world religion. To properly approach this idea of fictive religions in video games, we must now turn to a consideration of the video game medium, and some of the theoretical debates that have informed our understanding of it.

One key debate was the so-called narratology and ludology debate in the late 90s to early 2000s. Noah Wardrip-Fruin suggests that ludologists "believe much of current [video] game theory to be founded on a series of ill-advised analogies between computer games and the individual theorists' fields of study – rather than a specific analysis of the 'gaming situation'

itself" (2004). Wardrip-Fruin justifiably describes Markku Eskelinen as "perhaps ludology's most outspoken and controversial proponent." Eskelinen has no doubt produced some fiery work; in a riposte to Henry Jenkins, for example, Eskelinen argues against the role of narrative theory in video games: "By systematically ignoring and downplaying the importance of these and other formal differences between games and narratives as well as the resulting cognitive differences, Jenkins runs the risk of reducing his comparative media studies into repetitive media studies: seeing, seeking, and finding stories, and nothing but stories, everywhere" (2004). Eskelinen further asserts that "architecture, choreography, sculpture or even orienteering [are] far more important to game scholars and designers than any travelogue or myth" (2004). Jenkins, who Eskelinen would describe as a narratologist, responds with bemusement: "What I want to suggest is that Eskelinen is expending a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy combating phantoms of his own imagination. I feel a bit like Travis Bickle when I ask Eskelinen, 'Are you talking to me?' For starters, I don't consider myself to be a narratologist at all" (2004a). Eskelinen does make important points about the specificity of the video game medium: "In games there are other kinds of dominant cues and constraints: rules, goals, the necessary manipulation of equipment, and the effect of possible other players for starters" (2004). Jenkins entirely agrees: "games cannot be reduced to stories." However, he contests that "we also need to hold onto the tools of narratology if we want to understand the 'similarities and differences' or points of 'overlap' between games and stories" (2004a). This perspective is similarly present in the original article that Eskelinen criticised: Jenkins emphasises that "not all games tell stories," and suggests that "to understand such games, we need other terms and concepts beyond narrative." Even so, Jenkins correctly states that "many games do have narrative aspirations" (Jenkins 2004b).

Considering the video game market today, it seems almost impossible to disagree with the idea that many games have narrative aspirations. Although not all games tell stories, narrative studies can help us understand how narratives function within the specificity of the video game medium. As Eskelinen says, it is important to consider the details of the video game medium, and to note that video games are not reducible to stories. Jenkins agrees, noting the parallel case of dance: "Some ballets... tell stories, but storytelling isn't an intrinsic or defining feature of dance" (2004b). If nothing else, then, the ludology-narratology debate reminds scholars of the importance of treating video games as games that only sometimes incorporate stories.

Concurrent with the study of games as games is a series of terminological shifts away from terms perhaps more familiar to those who study literature. Video games are not read like books, or watched like films – obviously there is a visual and sometimes even cinematic quality

to video games, but they are not simply watched. More fundamentally, games are played. There are several different competing definitions of games, often with significant overlap. Bernard Suits puts forward a useful definition in *The Grasshopper*: according to Suits, “to play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity” (2005, 48-49). For example, runners in a race are trying to be the first to cross a line at the end of the track. Each runner is trying to bring about a state of affairs where he or she is first across the line. Upon reflection, running is a remarkably inefficient way to achieve this goal – it would be more efficient to drive. But this tactic is not allowed. Runners may only run; they may only use the relatively inefficient means permitted by the rules.

Within this broad field of games, I am only dealing with games in a digital environment. As with any definition, there are of course exceptions and difficulties to the boundaries set forth. Perhaps it is inappropriate to heavily police those boundaries; as Jenkins argues, “the last thing we want to do is reign in the creative experimentation that needs to occur in the earlier years of a medium’s development” (2004b). For now I will simply note that there are some digital texts that are clearly not games (such as digital poems), and there are others which are more difficult to characterise. For example, Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* games (2012) might be described as either visual novels that include minor gameplay elements, or as very easy games with long narrative cutscenes.

It is also important to note that ‘play’, as a term, applies to things other than games. Salen and Zimmerman offer three broad categories of play: gameplay, ludic activities (such as playing on a jungle gym), and playful behaviour. Examples of this last category include nicknames: “we are being playful with words when we create nicknames” (2003, 303). Play is further studied with reference to child development (Pellegrini 2016), or as a form of therapy (O’Connor, Schaefer, and Braverman 2016). The realm of play extends far beyond the domain of video games, and play in video games is therefore not necessarily identical with other types of play. Salen and Zimmerman offer a broad definition of play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (304), but they open their chapter on defining play with a quote suggesting the limitations of such a definition: “Any earnest definition of play has to be haunted by the possibility that playful enjoinders will render it invalid” (301). For my purposes, video game play is best thought of as the process of bringing about a specific state of affairs within a ludic structure. In *Dark Souls*, for instance, the goal of the game is to beat the final boss and finish the game. By returning to Suits’ definition of a game, we are also able to crystallise the distinction between formal ludic game and

its narrative elements. The game has a formal ludic goal (beating the final boss) that can also be expressed in narrative terms: the player-character must overcome Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, and inherit (or rather be consumed by) the First Flame. Jesper Juul points that video games are half-real, positioned between real rules and fictional worlds (2005, 1). This halfway positioning explains the double articulation of a single event.

I have noted already that this thesis focuses on the representation of fictive religion in *Dark Souls*. Having covered some key theoretical ground within game studies, I now turn to the intersection between game studies and religion, and its broader parent-field of digital media and religion. The academic study of digital media and religion is cast in many different ways. Some scholars study how digital media technologies are thought of and incorporated within religious cultures – for example, Heidi Campbell’s book *When Religion Meets New Media* explores what she calls the religious-social shaping of technology (2010, 17). Campbell is responding to what she sees as a sort of technological determinism in the field of religion and media: that is, the idea that “media use within religious contexts brings with it predetermined paths and outcomes, which run counter to the life of most religious communities, and thus must be carefully observed, identified, and resisted.” Contrary to this approach, Campbell suggests that religious media users are not so passive or thoughtless in their approach to digital technology. She “considers religious individuals and communities as active, empowered users of new media who make distinctive choices about their relationship with technology in light of their faith, community history, and contemporary way of life” (6). The key case study in this argument is the kosher cellphone, a specially produced cellphone deemed culturally appropriate by authorities within a conservative Jewish community. These kosher cellphones have functions such as internet access and texting disabled; for Campbell, they represent “a story of religious tradition, values, and discourse guiding the evolution of a technology” (163). It is a clear instance of a contemporary religious group actively shaping technology, rather than passively submitting to some *Matrix*-style machine takeover.

Rachel Wagner also repeatedly touches on digital media in religious life in her book *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (2012). For instance, she cites an app called *Pray*, where users can type out a prayer to God and then hit ‘Send’ to send it away. The app does not really send the text anywhere; rather, Wagner argues, “the point of this prayer app is the sheer performance of sending a ‘message’ to God” (25). Although digital media technologies no doubt come with their own structural constraints, global religions are clearly taking possession of these technologies and experimenting with how best to incorporate them into existing religious cultures.

If one approach considers how religions deal with digital technology, then another considers how religions are represented by digital technologies – or, in my more specific focus, how religions are represented in video games. Many games depict some form of religion, from the *Civilization* games (1991), where religion is presented in terms of cultural benefits and drawbacks, to *Half-Life 2* (2004), where a slightly crazy but broadly benevolent shotgun-toting Russian priest guides the player through the zombie-infested town of Ravensholm. In *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve, Jason Anthony argues that the historical intersection between religion and games can be sequestered into four categories. These are didactic games, which teach about a religion (2014, 29); hestiasic games, which are games as part of religious festivals – Anthony cites Ramadan games such as mhaibis in Iraq (31); poimenic games, which are games that divine the will of God or the gods – that is, the winner is said to have been divinely sponsored (32); and praxic games, which are games that themselves constitute a form of religious devotion (33). Anthony argues that for video games, hestiasic and poimenic games are marginal, if they exist at all (36). However, both didactic games (such as *The Shivab* (2006)) and praxic games (such as *Dance Praise* (2005), a Christian variant of the popular *Dance Dance Revolution* (1999)) clearly do exist. Anthony further adds three new types of religiously-themed games that he suggests largely originate within the video game medium: allomythic games, which depict non-existent religions (39); allopolitical games, which revolve around alternate online social spaces, such as in 2003's *Second Life* (41); and theoptic games, more commonly known as 'god-games' (42). This last category includes games such as *Civilization* or *SimCity* (1989), where the player is put in a god's eye view over a population and instructed to develop it. The term 'theoptic' is a neologism combining 'theo-', meaning god, and 'optic', referring to vision – the classic god's eye game.

Within Anthony's typology, *Dark Souls* is clearly an allomythic game. It depicts what he calls a non-existent religion, although I will use the word *fictive*. Further, despite being fictive, the religions of *Dark Souls* draw heavily from real-life religions, especially Christianity. For example, as mentioned above, the Cathedral of the Deep probably draws inspiration from St Peter's Cathedral and the Islamic Kaaba. The allomythic religions of *Dark Souls* are positioned as comments on religion broadly, but also more closely as comments on the religions that they are inspired by.

Many of the other contributions in the *Playing with Religion* volume can be divided into one of two camps. Either they are concerned with religious experience in video games, or with religious identity in video games. Articles on religious experience include Brenda Gardenour Walter's chapter, "*Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*: Finding Transcendent Horror in and beyond the

Haunted Magic Circle,” where she points to the potential of “horrifying digital gameplay” to become “a spiritual action, a sacred conduit to transcendence and communion with the divine” (2014, 91-2). According to Anthony’s typology, this might be considered a sort of praxis video game, where the act of playing is a form of devotion.

The other group of articles, focused on religious identity, considers the intersection between video games and religious identities such as Christian (Luft), Hindu (Zeiler), Jewish (Masso and Abrams), and Muslim (Šisler). The articles by Luft and Zeiler show how different religions respond to video games, and are therefore part of the ‘games in religion’ approach represented by Campbell’s *When Religion Meets New Media*. Luft elucidates how the faith of evangelicals impacts “their experience playing and interpreting video games” (2014, 155), while Zeiler argues that controversy generated around *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* was “employed to (1) negotiate Hindu authority, (2) establish a characteristic identity marker for one particular Hindu organisation, and (3) construct and present a particular picture of ‘Hindu-ness’ as approved by the Universal Society of Hinduism,” the group initiating the controversy (2014, 67). The other two articles, by Masso and Abrams (2014) and Šisler (2014), operate in the other direction, focusing on religion in games. Both are focused on didactic games – that is, games that teach audiences about Judaism and Islam respectively. Masso and Abrams argue that *The Shivah* “provides new ways and trajectories of being Jewish that move beyond other stereotypes and is based on the practice of Jewish faith” (2014, 62). Meanwhile Šisler compares three Arabic and American portrayals of Islam in video games, concluding (perhaps unsurprisingly) that American portrayals of Islam tend to ‘other’ Muslims. His study is of course more nuanced than that – for example, he indicates that most of the Arabic games studied draw on genre constraints already established by an American industry. Thus the first-person shooter *Special Force 2* (2007), created by Hezbollah, follows in the steps of American predecessors by “offer[ing] racialised representations of enemies and schematize[s] complex, real-world events into a bipolar frame” (2014, 128). It does not only take its ludic structure from the American industry, but its representation of race and political conflict.

Modelling Religion in *Dark Souls*

If Šisler takes a critical stance against the representation of religion in certain video games, *Dark Souls* is a video game that takes its own critical stance against certain aspects of religion, thus absorbing the role of critical social commentary. A study of *Dark Souls* therefore reveals not only the ways in which religion is represented by a game, but more specifically the tools with which

games can interrogate certain religious behaviours. In *Dark Souls*, these interrogated behaviours belong to religious institutions and hierarchies; they are systematic issues relating to power, knowledge, and authority. Where Masso and Abrams as well as Šisler are concerned (quite rightly) with the representation of religion in video games, I wish to drill down further and consider how video games can comment on the systems and structures that underpin the process of religious self-representation, especially as it pertains to constructing and maintaining religious power. That is, my concern is with how *Dark Souls* as video game acts in the field of religion not as an articulation of any particular religious identity, but as a commentary on the processes of articulation. As I have suggested, *Dark Souls* deploys a fictive religion in order to comment broadly on religious practices. It ranges freely across the religious spectrum, creating a voracious and polyphonic intertextuality. For example, the architecture of the lost city of Izalith is based on Angkor Wat. Because these real-world religions are only serving as inspiration for the fictive religions of *Dark Souls*, the game is not locked into any particular system of belief. It is not bound to Christianity, or to the Hinduism or Buddhism associated with Angkor Wat. It takes these elements of religion and reshapes them according to its own purposes, creating a link back to real-world origins while instilling those elements with new meaning and significance. This holds true for many aspects of the game, religious or not – for instance, I argue in Chapter Two that the Undead who are imprisoned in the Undead Asylum are an aesthetic exaggeration of the seeming timelessness of solitary confinement. These Undead are literally stuck in a cell until the end of time. The remaking practices of *Dark Souls* thus allow it to focus on the systems and structures that underpin the processes of religious self-representation rather than simply representing any given religion.

Even though I am working in a different area to the scholars cited so far, a key concept uniting our work is the idea that there are structural parallels between religion and video games. In *Godwired*, Wagner argues that video games “can be understood as one of the most poignant ‘ritual’ components of the virtual world ... ritual and video games are both scripted ways of interacting with virtual (or sacred) space” (2012, 5). This might seem like an overwhelmingly broad claim – and Wagner recognises this: “Because rituals and games are both contested terms that exhibit immense diversity of practice, all comparative observations must be generalizations. But even the most obvious comparisons reveal that both video games and ritual may be doing some similar things for the people who use them” (5). In the introduction to *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Campbell and Grieve describe several of the articles contained within as also touching on the similarities between elements of religion and games. They write that “Jason Anthony ... maintains that digital games entangle the mind with many of the same mysteries as

religious practice” (2014, 9), while “Oliver Steffen ... wonders if certain categories of games satisfy the same psychological needs as religion satisfies,” and Michael Waltemathe is described as arguing that “both the religious experience and play relieve us of the tense and fundamental anxiety of what Schutz calls ‘paramount reality’” (13).

Although I agree that games have striking similarities to religion, it is important to note the distinction between my approach and the approach of a religious studies scholar. As a discipline, religious studies tends to be more sociological, focusing on the human and cultural dimensions of religion rather than contesting the theological and existential claims that different religions make. This point is made by Scott G. Brown in *A Guide to Writing Academic Essays in Religious Studies*: “Scholars who work in public universities are not trying to comprehend religions in the ways that religions tend to comprehend themselves, in terms of encounters between the supernatural and the human” (2008, 5). The statement is not quite correct, as many public universities (including the University of Otago) have Christian theology departments that are trying to comprehend their religion in this second way. But the basic distinction between religious studies and theology departments holds true. That said, the distinction does not stop religious studies and theology departments from productive intellectual cross-pollination. We might simply say that religious studies practices a certain agnosticism towards the truth-value of different religious claims.

To some extent, then, arguments made by religious studies scholars might not always be considered admissible by some religious believers. For example, when Steffen is described as wondering whether certain categories of games satisfy the same psychological needs as religion, a believer might contend that religion is not about satisfying psychological needs, and is, in fact, sometimes deeply unsatisfying. That believer might further contend that thinking about religion as a series of psychological needs is to distort what religion is really all about – it is to ignore the more pressing issue of an encounter with the supernatural. Basic assumptions about the nature and purpose of religion are, to some extent, political assumptions rooted in the worldview of the scholar. As such, it is important to disclose my own religious commitments: I am a practicing Christian from a low Protestant tradition. My intention here is not to dismiss or contest Steffen’s work, or the work of any other scholars. I do not want to make any assumptions about an individual’s religious beliefs or lack thereof. I am only pointing out that, as a discipline, religious studies is not value-free. It is a particular approach to religion that picks out and emphasises the qualities that it wishes to study. Some of this approach might be at odds with the way in which believers conceptualise their own faith. Nevertheless, I agree with the basic premise that the similarities between video games and religion allow video games to depict religions in interesting

ways. Specifically, I argue that the similarities empower video games to reflect on the way in which religions construct and maintain their self-representation.

This underlying concept of the structural similarities between video games and religion informs the shape of my three chapters. In the first chapter, I show how *Dark Souls* explores the construction of religious ideology through religious architecture. I argue that it helps the player to deconstruct the messages of that architecture and consider the mechanisms by which its meaning is communicated. My key example is Anor Londo, a game level that within the fiction is also the city of the gods. Earlier in the introduction I briefly touched on the plot point of inheriting the First Flame. It is in Anor Londo that this plot point is most explicitly drawn out. Up to this point, the player has simply been told to seek Anor Londo. At the end of the Anor Londo level, they are told by the goddess Gwynevere to seek Lord Gwyn, king of the gods: “Succeed Lord Gwyn, and inheriteth [sic] the Fire of our world.” The authority of Gwyn and the significance of this quest are emphasised by the religious architecture of Anor Londo – it is a mighty city that embodies the strength and power of the gods. But the player-character will not become the next Lord of Sunlight by defeating Gwyn. As intimated above, the player-character will be consumed, providing only fuel for the Age of Fire to continue. While the religious architecture of Anor Londo lends credibility to the quest offered by Gwynevere, it is ultimately a sham. By tricking the player in this way, *Dark Souls* prompts a re-evaluation of Anor Londo’s religious architecture. It highlights the way in which architecture creates meaning and exposes the gap between what that architecture means and what is actually true within the fictional world.

I also argue that this re-evaluation of religious architecture is in some ways a reflection on the video game medium. The player is not only tricked by the architecture; the game positions the player within the environment in such a way as to tacitly legitimise its claims. By helping the player to re-evaluate the meaning of the environment, the game subtly draws attention to its own spatial organisations, which also construct meaning in particular ways.

In my second chapter, I argue that *Dark Souls* shows how religion is used to justify multiple types of violence. I use the Undead Asylum, the game’s introductory level, to show how the game portrays the psychological violence of imprisonment. The Undead in *Dark Souls* violate the worldview of fictional religious communities, and so are portrayed by those communities as accursed creatures. They are rounded up by cleric knights and locked away in the mountains in an attempt to erase their transgression from society. They are put in cells and abandoned – this is where players find themselves at the beginning of each new game. By exploring the Asylum, players can discover the psychologically damaged Undead, those reduced to a Hollowed state by

the mental and physical stagnation of being locked away in a cell. It is an indictment of the psychological violence caused by certain prisons or solitary confinement cells, but also an indictment of the religions that construct Undead as accursed and lock them away to preserve a worldview. I then consider another instance of religiously justified violence in the Undead Quest of clerics from the Way of White. These Undead clerics are sent into exile to seek the Rite of Kindling, a religious tool that the Way of White wish to recover. I argue that the Quest takes influence from the Christian medieval pilgrimage, and also from the medieval quest, in the style of King Arthur's knights. This Quest is portrayed as a method of spiritual cleansing as well as a practical mission to recover the Rite of Kindling. I show how, for *Dark Souls*, the Quest sits similarly within a religious framework of legitimation and justification that sees many Undead clerics losing their minds and ultimately becoming Hollowed.

I also argue that the condemnation of systems of violence sits uneasily in a medium – and a game – that fundamentally revolves around violent play. Violence is legitimised by these fictional religious worldviews, but it is also legitimised on a ludic level by the structure of the game. The reflection on religious violence might be read as an indirect *mea culpa*, as an acknowledgement of the problematic of video game violence by a game that does not necessarily have a solution.

In the third chapter, I argue that *Dark Souls* uses a covenant system to model the process of religious sacrifice. The covenant system is an element of the game's multiplayer mode: players can dedicate themselves to a particular god, and complete tasks for that god in exchange for rewards. I argue that this process of economic exchange falls within the framework of religious sacrifice. *Dark Souls* is essentially modelling the process of sacrifice in order to offer comment on it. However, I further argue that our interpretation of that comment depends on how we theorise sacrifice. By variously contextualising sacrifice against Ancient Greek and Christian frameworks, I show that the representation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* might be read as either a critical comment on empty legalism in real religion, or as a positive and accurate modelling of spirituality in religious practice, depending on the resources brought to bear on the game.

I finish with a coda touching on one of the key issues in the representation of religion in video games. This issue is succinctly expressed by Kevin Schut, who argues that video games have a “mechanistic bias” (2014, 255). According to Schut, games are made up of systems and processes – closed, mechanical procedures that admit nothing outside of the computational logic of code. He describes this quality as a mechanistic bias, and argues that it causes video games to “kill mystery” (255). That is, the mechanistic bias of video games hobbles them when it comes to

themes of transcendence, mystery, or the supernatural elements often associated with religion. In this coda, I argue that *Dark Souls* borrows tools from real religions to create a sense of mystery for the player in the game's item descriptions. These item descriptions deploy literary techniques found (among other places) in the Bible. I first demonstrate the unstable process of interpretation associated with the item descriptions, and then show how the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion, as found especially in the narrative sections of the Old Testament, is used by *Dark Souls* to create significant gaps and encourage the player/reader towards an inferential mode of reading. While the item descriptions are not in and of themselves religiously themed, the literary techniques that they deploy introduce an element of mystery into the video game, creating future possibilities for a less mechanistic representation of fictive religion.

Clearly none of these topics exist solely within the domain of religion. Architecture, ideologically charged violence, and even sacrifice can be relevant in non-religious domains. This fact merely demonstrates the continuity of religion with the rest of human life. *Dark Souls* has little interest in religion conceived as private and individualistic. Rather, it draws out the social, political, and economic dimensions of religion, integrating its cultural institutions with the rest of human life. However, even with that focus on the social and cultural dimensions of religion, *Dark Souls* does not reduce its fictive religion to an anthropological phenomenon. The gods are very present in the world of Lordran. In *Dark Souls*, then, religion is allowed to sprawl messily across issues of philosophy, theology, and sociology. It is not reduced to or explained away by any one field or concept. It is multifaceted and manifold, resistant to oversimplification or straightforward articulation. This complexity enriches the study of fictive religion in *Dark Souls* and the commentary made by *Dark Souls* on real religion.

Walking in Faith: Religious Architecture in *Dark Souls*

Introduction

I have suggested that *Dark Souls* is largely focused on the broader social and political implications of religious belief. This focus is also sometimes shared by other video games, which explore those themes through the representation of religious architecture. For example, the witch hunters in *Witcher 3* are sequestered in a barracks, rather than a monastery or cathedral, while the shining religio-nationalist museums in *BioShock Infinite* are contrasted against grubby back rooms filled with black and Irish serving staff, illustrating a racialized division of wealth that underpins the city's religious structure. The former, while not technically religious architecture, is used as the architectural setting for a religious group. It emphasises the military, political elements of organised religion, while the latter masks religiously motivated social inequality with a golden façade. Ernest Adams compares video game buildings to movie sets: “incomplete, false fronts whose function is to support the narrative of the movie” (2002, 2). In these instances, the architecture supports the narrative by revealing something about the organised religions presented in the game. Often these revelations stem from perceptions of Christianity: for instance, *Witcher 3* emphasises the military aspects of medieval Christianity and the horrors of burning people at the stake, while *BioShock Infinite* points to the troubling link between religion and nationalism in America, and suggests that the opulence and wealth of the United States was built on racism and oppression.

Clearly, then, both *Witcher 3* and *BioShock Infinite* use religious architecture to frame conversations about the nature of religion. Even so, the points raised are in themselves relatively rudimentary. I suggested earlier that critiques of religion for its militant aspects or its complex relationship with nationalism in America are neither new nor particularly uncommon. I also suggested that *Dark Souls*, by contrast, explores religion in more depth. Instead of engaging in a basic valuation of religion as good or bad, it interrogates the function of architecture in conveying religious worldviews. This first chapter therefore focuses on the depiction of religious architecture in *Dark Souls*, specifically focusing on the game level/fictional city of Anor Londo.

I argue that the simulative qualities of video games make them specially capable of imitating religious architecture, but also allow room for games to offer critique and commentary on religion. The argument is made with reference to Anor Londo's cathedral, which imitates real

religious architecture by communicating the religious worldview of the inhabitants of Lordran. I suggest that this worldview is structured around a motif of verticality implicit in the geography of Lordran and translated into the geometric spatiality of architecture. I also suggest that the game carries out its interrogation of religious architecture while positioning the new player as a believer, in direct opposition to the non-religious outsider perspectives that characterise all four of the other games mentioned above.

Dark Souls is a fantasy game that begins with a religious prophecy about the Chosen Undead. The strictures of genre might lead the player to expect that the prophecy is valid, and the main character is the Chosen Undead. The game tacitly lends credibility to its fictional religion through these genre expectations, such that when players eventually reach Anor Londo, home of the gods, they are cemented in the belief that the game's fictional religion speaks as an authoritative guide to the world. Therefore, one might assume, Anor Londo's religious architecture must accurately communicate something true about the fictional world. But this is not the case. Although Anor Londo is an impressive citadel, players who explore can find evidence that interrupts the façade of religious authority. The goddess Gwynevere, who rests in a chamber at the end of the level, instructs players to seek Gwyn (the king of the gods) and overthrow him, thus becoming the new divine monarch. Players who dare to attack Gwynevere discover she is an illusion, created by her younger brother Gwyndolin to trick Undead into fighting Gwyn and accidentally sacrificing themselves to sustain the First Flame, a mysterious fire that fuels the Age of Man. The prophecy is part of Gwyndolin's shadowy plan, and the gods, while once mighty, are almost entirely gone. *Dark Souls* pretends to communicate authoritative information about the fictional world through a false religious prophecy, and through architecture that appears to support that prophecy. It then allows players to discover the falsity of that prophecy in order to highlight the ways in which religions communicate their worldviews through architecture.

Of course, the Chosen Undead prophecy only seems authoritative because *Dark Souls* presents it in a way that makes it look authoritative. The process of representation is doubled: the fictional religion represents its message architecturally, and then the game positions players within or against that representation, essentially prefiguring them towards a particular interpretation. We see this prefiguring in the barracks of *Witcher 3* and the back rooms of *BioShock Infinite* – the difference with *Dark Souls* is that it constructs its early narrative around the plot device of prophecy, tricking unwitting players into adopting a false view of the fictional world. *Dark Souls* invites us into a particular worldview and then allows us to deconstruct it from the inside, thus foregrounding the mechanisms by which that worldview was maintained. The

easy assumption at this juncture might be that according to *Dark Souls*, religions tell lies, and we must dismantle them in order to get to cold hard rational truth. The reality is somewhat more complex; in the world of *Dark Souls* the gods are real, and believers can perform miracles by faith. The falsehood is therefore situated parasitically within the religious framework rather than constituting its entirety. We can see the falsehood as twofold: first the bogus prophecy, and second the illusion of Gwynevere in Anor Londo. The architecture of Anor Londo is therefore not false but outdated – the gods, who were historically mighty and powerful, have largely left the city. The concept of falsehood within this religious worldview is therefore not really a criticism of religion itself – religion is not presented as false, but hijacked. This hijacking is a chance for players to explore the mechanisms by which religions construct their worldviews.

Laying the Foundations: Video Game Space

The function of architecture in *Dark Souls*, as in video games more broadly, is characterised by the simulative qualities of video game space. *Dark Souls* employs what Mark Wolf describes as an interactive three-dimensional environment (2001, 65), more aligned with the experience of three-dimensional architecture than with the two-dimensional photograph or frame. Obviously the image on the computer screen is two-dimensional, but the video game simulates three-dimensionality by placing a player-controlled avatar in an explorable three-dimensional environment. The simulative aspects of virtual game space position it as a continuation of the principles of Renaissance art, Alberti's mathematical perspectivalism reproduced in the computer's dynamic calculations of light, colour, and distance. We might describe this type of represented space as illusionistic, as it follows many of the same rules shaping our experience of actual space. We might equally think of it as simulated space, although that refers to a much broader range of virtual spatialities – for example, the side-scrolling 2D space of *Super Mario Bros* (1985) is a form of simulated space. 'Illusionistic' does a better job of communicating the similarities between space in *Dark Souls* and actual space. Because *Dark Souls* is primarily a third-person game, the experiences are not identical, but there are significant parallels. Anor Londo looks like a real city, and we experience it through a familiar range of spatial actions: walking, running, entering, exiting, opening doors, climbing stairs, and so on. Further, even from a third-person perspective, our experience of video game space is markedly similar to how we conceptualise actual space. Benjamin Fraser attributes this similarity to the mobility and embeddedness of the player through the player-character, "an active and largely self-directed process of exploration" (2011, 94). He sees our active, mobile, and embodied understanding of

spatiality in Lefebvrian terms, arguing that “the method through which we form knowledge of video game space is in fact the very method through which we form knowledge of ‘real world’ urban spaces” (103). Atkinson and Willis further argue that the video game “more broadly repositions and remakes urbanism from the subjective viewpoints offered by immersive and interactive game simulations” (2009, 405). Where we see video game space as similar to real space, it is possible that real space also comes to seem more like video game space. This interplay of spatialities lays the foundation for video games to imitate and comment on religious architecture.

However, video game space differs dramatically from actual space in that every element of video game space is coded by a programmer. This difference is underappreciated by James Newman, who characterises the exploration of video game space as something of a colonial enterprise. While it might productively describe the experience of the player, this appraisal overstates player agency and neglects the role of developers in shaping the space. Drawing on the dialogue already cited between Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller, Newman argues that the plot of a video game is often a superficial framing of a spatial adventure; for example in *Super Mario Bros*, the player is less interested in saving the princess and more interested in the “battle against the terrain of the landscape of the gameworld” (2004, 113). Newman quotes from Jenkins and Fuller’s discussion of de Certeau, distinguishing between ‘places’, which “exist only in the abstract, as potential sites for narrative action,” and ‘spaces’, which are “places that have been acted upon, explored, colonized” (113). For Newman, the arc of a game is the transition from place to space, from abstract hypothetical space to space that is experienced and mastered by the player. Strategy games like *Civilization* prove forceful examples, operating as they do around imperial frameworks of expansion and dominance. This is a point similarly made by Byrd in connection to *Dark Souls* and its predecessor *Demon’s Souls*: “the game presents players with an alienated world of intimate violence that demands exploration tied to the legacies of conquest and slavery in the new world” (2016, 432). However, we should also recognise the formative effect that the developer-designed environment has on players. In *Civilization*, players act as colonial expansionists because the game positions them as colonial expansionists. Even so, their colonial behaviours are directed by a number of environmental factors. For example, the distribution of resources fundamentally affects the location of settlements and supply lines, as well as political relationships and technological advancements. What we are moving towards is a sort of environmental determinism, a term which requires some background.

Environmental determinism is a contested term that very crudely refers to the influence of the environment in shaping human societies (Meyer and Guss 2017, 6). Within the geography

community, environmental determinism is often stigmatised for its most fatalistic forms, which see the environment as a primary or overriding factor in determining human development. Misgivings around environmental determinism stems from “its supposed affinities with imperialism and racism” (19), although Meyer and Guss represent a group of geographers attempting to revitalise the term with reasonable and modest scientific claims about the influence of environment on human culture and development. Meyer and Guss suggest the term ‘environmental fatalism’ for more excessive instances of environmental determinism (9), and argue that although environmental factors are rarely sole determinants, they play a major role in the “conjoint construction” between “social and biophysical dimensions” of human life (12).

Despite environmental determinism’s troubled history in the field of geography, it is reasonable for video game studies to employ a variant on environmental determinism in describing the relationship between player and game. In video games, the player’s actions are strictly delineated by the game structure, as is the game space and the methods of traversing that space. The scope of possible player action is predetermined. I am applying the idea of environmental determinism slightly differently here: I am not talking about the relationship between the player and the virtual spatial environment, but about the more foundational relationship between the player and the game structure, the rules and mechanics that determine where players can go and how they interact with things. The geographer’s concern over environmental determinism (or rather environmental fatalism) is concern over statements like ‘the West was always going to be globally dominant because of their geographical location.’ In video games, I am using an adapted environmental determinist approach to note that players in *Dark Souls* will fight enemies with swords or spells or bow and arrows because those are the available weapons and the available methods of interacting with enemies. As Leigh Schwartz argues, “players interact with environments in forms foreseen and coded by the game designers” (2006, 318). Schwartz’s comment is broadly correct, although I would prefer to soft-pedal the role of game designers and instead focus on the player-environment relationship. Some games, such as *No Man’s Sky* (2017), have environments that are almost entirely determined by random number generator. It would be odd to claim that the developers for those games foresaw all the environments that players would engage in. There are also hackers and cheaters who deliberately bypass game structures – although even they indirectly serve to illustrate the point. Cheaters are people who do not play the game ‘properly’ – they do not engage on the terms of the game. For the purposes of this discussion, we can acknowledge that they exist as an exception to the rule and then set them aside.

Even though game structures are normally the primary determinant of player behaviour, there are other important factors that I have not touched on. Scholars have long recognised the phenomenon of emergent gameplay, where players develop tactics and strategies that were not necessarily anticipated or intended by designers. For example, in the MMORPG *EVE Online* (2003), the leader of one titanic in-game alliance (the Goonswarm Federation) describes the hideously complex bureaucracy that has grown up organically to support the Federation's activities. One such example includes a peacetime reimbursement program, where the Federation encourages members to train in ship-to-ship combat by reimbursing the cost of any destroyed ships (Gianturco 2016, 124). This incentive program, designed and maintained by players, allows members to upskill in combat without financial risk, incrementally increasing the strength and knowledge of Federation players and thereby the Federation itself. Even though this sort of emergent gameplay might not have been specifically intended by the developers, it is still primarily an interaction that exists within the affordances of the game; it still happens on the game's terms. By setting aside the disruptive examples of hackers, and by soft-peddalling developer intention in favour of player-environment relations, I assert that player agency is generally bequeathed to the player by the game itself.

A few different games have touched on the issue of player control to date. In the original *BioShock* (2007), you take instruction from a voice on your radio that repeatedly opens with the phrase 'Would you kindly' – for example, "Would you kindly head to Ryan's office and kill the son of a bitch?" Late in the game you discover that your character is programmed to respond obediently whenever someone uses that phrase; the obedience of your character mirrors your obedience as a player, in the sense that you are both doing whatever the voice on the radio says. This plot twist highlights the asymmetrical power relations between player and game. The game sets the rules, and you obey – particularly in single-player story-based games, where you are given a mission and you must go off and complete it to progress through the story. Narrative beats in other games also hinge on the issue of player control: in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), for example, the player takes on the perspective of fictional Saudi Arabian president Al-Fulani. As Al-Fulani, the player is only able to look around from the back of a car while being carried to the site of their execution, which they are powerless to prevent. This lack of player control is sharply contrasted against the violent gunplay that characterises the rest of the game, illustrating again that player agency is only ever what is bequeathed by the game itself.

So far I have discussed this adapted environmental determinism in terms of the overarching game structure, rather than in terms of the virtual spatial environment specifically. The virtual spatial environment does have a clear ludic function; it is a part of that overarching

game structure. At the same time, it also signifies elements of the fictional world. For example, in Anor Londo the level largely takes place in a cathedral – it is a game environment draped in a fictional environment. Schwartz argues that players “not only take in but participate in the geographical ideas that are embedded into the game spaces” (2006, 318), eliciting this duality of fictional geographical space and game-space. Game-space and fictional-space are two conceptual levels of the same virtual environment, and their overlap allows them to mutually reinforce each other. Initially, the Anor Londo cathedral is locked, and the player must break in by climbing up the flying buttresses. In ludic terms, this forces players along a circuitous back-route that culminates in a return to the front door, which they can open from the inside, creating a shortcut between the outside and the cathedral’s main antechamber, which houses the level’s boss. In fictional terms, this back-route emphasises that the player-character does not belong. They are a sneak, an invader, an unwelcome foreigner. The narrative elements can then feed back into ludic elements. For example, while on the buttresses, players are shot at by two silver knights with eight-foot bows firing arrows designed to kill dragons. The narrative elements allow players to contextualise this event as the cathedral guards trying to ward off invaders – they are loyal, not malevolent, and you are a transgressor. The player’s narrow path across the buttresses represents a broader spatial insecurity, a lack of belonging expressed as a lack of safe passage. In this way, fictional and ludic aspects of virtual space mutually reinforce each other.

That said, we must still distinguish between the fictional world and the game. The fictional world is the reality in which the story takes place, while the game is more to do with the ludic framework shaping your engagement with that reality. The distinction can be brought into focus with a consideration of intended pathways. We can infer that within the fictional world, the architects of Anor Londo intended citizens to enter the cathedral by the doors. These imagined architects (they never appear in the game) presumably also intended that when the doors were locked, citizens outside the cathedral would not be able to get in. That is how the cathedral’s intended pathways function within the fictional world. However, on a game level, the player is expected to climb the buttresses and sneak in around the side. We can describe the buttresses as an intended pathway on a game level only – that is, the game expects you to climb in, but the fictional architects did not. We are thus faced with two sets of intentionality: the intended pathways of the fictional architects, and the intended pathways of the game. It is precisely this distinction, this doubled intentionality, that allows video games to comment on architecture (religious or otherwise). Architecture is intended to be used in a certain way within the fictional world, and the game positions you within or against that intentionality. For example, early in *Dark Souls* the player explores the Undead Burg, a small township near the foot of Anor Londo’s

mountain. The Burg is set out as a series of paved footpaths and buildings, and you use the footpaths as they were intended to get to your destination. In this space, the game positions you within the intentions of the Burg's fictional (inferred) architects or urban planners. The intended pathways of the game do not clash with the expected function of the built environment in this instance.

These ideas of intended pathways and adapted environmental determinism may be applied broadly across many games. From here, I will make more specific comments about the use of space and architecture in *Dark Souls*. Much of *Dark Souls*' architecture draws on real-world traditions, including details drawn from specific buildings. The Old Londo Ruins take Mont Saint-Michel as a point of reference, Lost Izalith is based on Angkor Wat, and much of the cathedral exterior in Anor Londo is based on the Milan Cathedral. Parts of the interior take influence from the Chateau de Chambord in France, most obviously with the double spiral staircase – two spiral staircases wrapped around each other that never meet. One leads from the first to the third floor, and the other from the second to the fourth. Further, the archway leading to the end-of-level boss fight (with Ornstein and Smough) is engraved with two figures, who are repeated across the arch. These figures are copies of statues which stand on columns outside the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, namely Benvenuto Cellini and Saint Antonino. Their names, though distorted due to the graphical quality of *Dark Souls*, are still faintly legible underneath each engraving. These statues may be interpreted in many ways, depending on how one envisages the relationship between the fictional world of *Dark Souls* and the world we inhabit. Some players might imagine Cellini and Antonino as purely fictional characters, rejecting any relationship between the historical and fictional characters – that is, beyond name and likeness. Others might imagine a bleed effect between our universe and that of *Dark Souls*, such that we share some form of history. However we determine the relationship between worlds, the vociferous intertextuality of *Dark Souls* developers FromSoftware remains clear. One effect of this intertextuality is the disconnect of actual-world architectural elements from the social, religious, and political environments in which they were developed. For example, as discussed above, the cathedral in Anor Londo is largely based on the Gothic Milan Cathedral. In keeping with the Gothic style, the Anor Londo cathedral has flying buttresses, pointed arches, and ribbed vaults, all hallmarks of Gothic architecture. But we cannot assume that the fictional world of *Dark Souls* had a Gothic period. Even if it did, the ideology and religious beliefs of our Gothic period were deeply connected with Christianity, a religion that does not exist in the world of *Dark Souls*. Therefore, although Anor Londo takes influence from Milan Cathedral, which is Gothic in style,

the meanings of specific architectural features need to be re-contextualised in the *Dark Souls* world.

Alongside this process of re-contextualisation, there are certain tools for analysing architecture that are less useful in *Dark Souls*. For example, Anor Londo is a very old city. We are never told how old, specifically, but it is reasonable to assume thousands of years. However, Anor Londo does not contain the sort of architectural diversity that one would expect given this age. With most old cities, the buildings are a patchwork of different ages and architectural movements, potentially spanning back to the original settlement. The city evolves and changes over time, with decrepit buildings being knocked down to make way for new ones, or renovations or reinforcements added to maintain heritage sites. The usage of space develops and changes over time, often leading to key political or administrative offices changing location. For example, describing the layout of Paris, Lawrence J. Vale writes that the city has “evolved over many centuries and [has] gradually accommodated [itself] to changes in the nature of government,” such as the shift from monarchy to democracy. Subsequently, he argues, “the urban design of Paris provides no overwhelmingly privileged place for the trappings of contemporary parliamentary democracy” (1992, 20). Because the shifting conceptions of government were only gradually accommodated by the city, the contemporary government resides in a location that was not intended by the initial city design. This is the way in which cities develop: the process is messy, and often runs counter to initial plans. The neat and tidy structure of Anor Londo therefore suggests that it did not evolve organically over a period of centuries, let alone millennia. From interviews with the game designers, we know that areas were built around a “feel or tone as far as art direction was concerned” (Soulslore website, 2018). The artists would have then designed the city to suit the tone, rather than to reflect the wild evolution of an actual city. While this design process allows for analysis of the area tonally, drawing on analytical resources from art history, it diminishes the role of theories from urban design and city planning. Within the bounds of the fictional world, it also diminishes the concept of Anor Londo’s history. In actual long-standing cities, the relationships between different types of architecture reveal something of the city’s history, in a way that they do not in Anor Londo.

Examples of the development and interaction of architectural styles can be found in many places in the real world, including, as Vale argues, in the parliament building of the newly independent Sri Lanka in 1982. This parliament building metonymically represents the Sri Lankan people as a symbol of national identity, much as Anor Londo does for Lordran. Vale describes the complex as reflecting Sri Lanka’s hybrid identity as a postcolonial nation: it is “a direct evocation of waterfront temple complexes of the Sri Lankan past,” but also references

“the blocky impregnability of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial forts” (1992, 195). The architecture of this parliamentary complex thus draws on two historical traditions of architecture, and implicitly also the cultures behind those traditions. The influence drawn from colonial forts evokes the history of colonial violence and incorporates it into Sri Lankan national identity. It is an acknowledgement of the past, but also, as Sri Lanka is independent, a symbol of hope for a better future. All of this meaning is only possible because the architect, Deshamanya Geoffrey Bawa, was able to draw on the historical forms of Western and Sri Lankan architecture. It is this sort of historical reference that we cannot study with Anor Londo, due to the way it was constructed by the game designers.

To be clear, history is an important element in the *Dark Souls* games, and in Anor Londo especially. Historically, Anor Londo was a thriving city; when the player arrives, it is populated only by gargoyles and walking suits of armour. The gods have all left. Most of the locations that the player moves through are devoid of human contact: instead, they are filled to the brim with Hollows. Players in *Dark Souls* move through spaces that are no longer being used according to their design. It is only the historical view that begins to reconstruct what the world would have been like. However, this is quite different to the idea of architectural history. There are no new buildings set up in response to this zombie apocalypse – indeed, it represents the decline and eventual collapse of civilisation. Occasionally players can find a makeshift wooden bridge that has been set up in lieu of a collapsed stone one, but this is about the extent of architectural development.

In summary, these are the conditions for analysing the ideological systems supported by the architecture in Anor Londo. To determine the intentions of the fictional architects, we must consider how those architects would have intended the buildings in question to be used. This consideration requires us to set aside the pathway through the environment as set forth by the game designers, because that pathway does not necessarily use buildings according to the architects’ intentions. Further, although architectural features may be taken from the actual world, they do not necessarily hold the same connotations. For the Gothic-inspired Anor Londo, the Gothic framework of meaning is relevant, but not binding. We cannot assume that the architectural history of Lordran mirrors our own. Lastly, the lack of distinct architectural periods in Anor Londo means that the scope of architectural reference is more constrained. The city does not necessarily have the architectural vocabulary to explore, say, how independence from colonial rule affects national identity. Given those conditions, I will now examine the cathedral of Anor Londo in more detail, drawing out the ideological elements of its architecture. The study will begin broadly, considering the position of Anor Londo within Lordran, and then proceed

inwards, examining the position of the cathedral within Anor Londo, and then the design of the cathedral itself.

City of Gods: Religious Architecture in Anor Londo

As a city, Anor Londo is situated on a hill overlooking the rest of Lordran. Verticality is an important thematic element in Lordran: geographically lower areas are more likely to invoke themes associated with darkness (secrecy, burial, and the void), while higher areas invoke themes associated with light (knowledge, divinity, and the sun). There is also implicitly a moral dualism tied to the vertical axis: Anor Londo, at the top, is the home of the gods, while demons and the abyss reside below. This dualism reflects Christian imagery, which often represents the Christian community as a city set on a hill or a high rock (Webber 1971, 240). Location in *Dark Souls* thus points to several key themes. The city's position on the hill signifies its political importance in society: this is where the rulers live. Like many cultures in the actual world, Lordran merges political and religious authority. Remnants of this relationship can be seen in the Sri Lankan capital building, which brings together blocky colonial forts with the waterfront temples of the past. However, where many religio-political cultures see their political leader as a divinely appointed representative, the political leader in Anor Londo is actually a god himself. Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, is king of the gods and ruler of Anor Londo, and thus the highest authority for several systems of social organisation. If we imagine a series of vertical lines representing these governing social structures (political, religious, cultural), then they all lead towards one point, in a triangular structure. The city represents that singularity, the pinnacle at which all hierarchies meet and are absorbed into the supreme figure of Gwyn.

Gwyn's association with the sun fits this pattern, tapping into a long tradition of identifying God or the supreme god with light. For example, in Christian art, Christ is depicted with a nimbus (or halo) from the middle of the fourth century. The halo is of course associated with the sun (Pfitzner 2016, 42). Pfitzner also notes that in the third century AD the pagan emperor Aurelian erected a temple to the sun, promoting the cult of *sol invictus*. At this time, Pfitzner writes, "Sol became the supreme deity of the empire, the source of imperial power, the symbol of the state itself" (46). Gwyn occupies a similar space. Within the vertical framework of symbolism, the sun represents the absolute pinnacle. We may hypothesise a tripartite division within the fictional world's cosmogony: the underground areas, associated with demons and darkness; the face of the earth, where humans exist; and the sky, associated with light and the gods. This cosmogony serves to illustrate the gulf between humans and Gwyn - while mountains

and towers might be high, they are still fundamentally connected to the earth. But the sun is above all things. It is not rooted in the ground – its ontological foundation lies in a higher realm. The placement of Anor Londo at the height of Lordran thus evokes the symbolic height of the sun, further emphasising the supremacy of Gwyn as sun god.

Ideally here I would analyse the location of the cathedral within Anor Londo, comparing it to its surroundings and discussing how it interacts with the environment. However, the need of the game designers to create a functional area for gameplay has compromised the illusion of a working city-space. For example, an early part of the level consists of one large bridge leading up towards the cathedral. About halfway along this bridge, there is a large rotating tower, functionally similar to a railway turntable. It is initially inaccessible to the player – while every other side has a lever to summon the turntable, this side does not, and the player must backtrack around through a chapel. From a city planning perspective, the premise of a giant turntable is ludicrous. The city should really have a stable junction that connects each level to every other one. There are two reasons for not having this junction: first, the game wants to force players ‘out of bounds’. The chapel is reached by climbing along a flying buttress; players are moved off established paths in preparation for the second set of buttresses into the cathedral. Second, Gwyndolin, a hidden god remaining in the city, is in a secret chamber only accessible when the turntable is brought to its lowest setting. While unobservant players will not necessarily notice it, the incidence of discovery would be much higher if there was a fixed staircase leading directly to it. The comedically incoherent turntable design therefore exists for gameplay reasons. The space as a whole has further logistical issues – for instance, there is no obvious connection between the cathedral and the rest of the city. Typically game designers limit the game space to focus and direct the gameplay. In other areas, this is achieved with doors that do not open, or paths covered in rubble or worn away. However, in Anor Londo it is achieved by simply isolating the bridge to and from the cathedral. There are no crumbled walkways or blocked doors providing the illusion of connectivity. I suspect the lack of degraded pathways is a tonal decision by the game designers: they wanted Anor Londo to appear inhabited and well maintained, in contrast to the run-down decrepitude of all lower areas. The trade-off is that it does not make sense as a city, making it difficult to comment on the cathedral in relation to the fictional city-space.

The cathedral in Anor Londo shares the emphasis on verticality found more broadly in Lordran; as an element of the capital city, it exemplifies that geographical theme in architectural vocabulary, giving the appearance of permanence and stability to a spatialised ideology. As noted, it borrows from the Gothic style of Milan Cathedral, bearing hallmarks of the Gothic era such as flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, and pointed arches. However, I have also suggested that the

Gothic framework of meaning must be reinterpreted in the context of the fictional world. Both the flying buttress and the pointed arch feed into the city's theme of verticality. The pointed arch reaches up towards a defined terminus at its peak. This apex is a goal, creating a sense of drama – a clear beginning, middle, and end from the bottom to the top of the arch. By contrast, the rounded arch (also known as the true arch) evokes equality, distribution. Each of the wedge stones (*voussoirs*) forming the arch holds every other stone in place, such that the weight is distributed evenly across the arch. In the pointed arch, pressure is focused on the crucial apex, the point of connection between the two walls. The apex is thus the focal point, its structural significance echoing the importance of Gwyn, who serves as the apex and terminus of socio-political hierarchies. As a whole, the pointed arch may be geometrically conceptualised as a vertical shaft culminating in a triangle. It evokes the obelisk, sacred in Ancient Egypt to the sun god Ra, again introducing sun imagery. The flying buttress serves a similar function. Structurally, the pointed arch is essentially two walls falling against each other. The flying buttress was designed to stabilise the building – it provided support against the horizontal pressures of the pointed arch. In terms of symbolism, the flying buttress continues the triangular motif: there are two layers of external towers on either side of the cathedral, with the buttresses leading up and towards the centre. They do not reach the top of the cathedral; they stop at the final layer, allowing the cathedral to reach higher still.

Alongside the pointed arch and flying buttress, both of which evoke the triangular structure, Anor Londo is littered with towers and turrets, which further evoke the triangle. Geometrically, a turret is a cone, which is a right-angled triangle rotated around the vertical axis. By drawing on a mixture of Egyptian and Christian imagery, I read this triangle motif in the cathedral's exterior as symbolic of Gwyn and the social hierarchy that he oversees. In the work of the fifteenth-century Christian theologian Nicholas of Cusa, for example, “the triangle is the symbol of the manifestation of God in the Trinity” (Hendrix 2003, 71). While the Trinity is obviously not a relevant theological concept in *Dark Souls*, the game still uses the triangle to symbolise the divine. Further, Hendrix argues that for Nicholas of Cusa, God's relationship with the world was represented by the three-dimensional pyramid. The single apex symbolises the unity and singularity of God. It reaches down to the four corners of the pyramid, which symbolise either the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) or the organization of space (the first corner represents zero dimensions, and then the remaining three the first through third) (72). The triangle thus either represents God directly or represents the descent of God's self-revelation into the material world. The Ancient Egyptian tradition is similar, except the triangle represents the ascent of the dead kings into the afterlife. Hendrix argues that “as a giant stairway

to the heavens, the pyramid represents the belief in a single creator, a sovereign architect. It also represents a belief that the universe has an order and that it corresponds to an architectural hierarchy” (8). In the fictional world of *Dark Souls*, I suggest that the triangle evokes a similar social order through the vertical architectural hierarchy. The singularity of the sun matches the singular apex of the triangle, emphasising the sole sovereignty of Gwyn. Further, the link with the sun makes the social hierarchy seem natural, an inherent quality of the universe rather than something socially constructed. The imagery and symbolism of Anor Londo support the social hierarchy that privileges the authority of Gwyn. The spatially-framed ideology of verticality finds its apotheosis in the architecture of Anor Londo, the brick and mortar manifestation of social order.

Having analysed some of the symbolism of Anor Londo’s architecture, I will now analyse how the game positions the player within that architecture. Earlier I insisted on the distinction between game and fictional world, a significant distinction that allows architecture to function as an obstacle for the player to overcome. For example, in games that incorporate parkour elements into player movement, the player-character exploits the physical affordances of the cityscape to facilitate travel. Flower beds become springboards and rooftops become pathways. The juxtaposition of the city’s (fictional) intended pathways and the pathways used by the player (or rather, by the game) reveals something about the relationship between player-character and city. Anor Londo illustrates the point perfectly: by situating the player as an outsider, the game emphasises the city’s power and grandeur – and, tacitly, the power of the player who is able to overcome it. While the player is marginalised within the environment, this disadvantaging serves as a type of indirect empowerment. It creates a sense of drama, increasing the odds that the player needs to overcome. The player struggles not only against enemies, but against the oppressive weight of the city itself. The relative positions of the city’s inhabitants and the player are aesthetically exaggerated by the degrees of empowerment provided by the city structure. The gods who normally inhabit the city are made to look more powerful by their ability to comfortably navigate it. The player, by contrast, is made to seem small and insignificant, a tiny creature navigating the architectural skeleton of Anor Londo. The successful player is thus one who overcomes marginalisation and achieves victory despite this disadvantage – a classic underdog story writ large across the cityscape.

Contrary to what might be expected, then, the game indirectly uses marginalisation to make the player feel powerful. Initially, the game positions the player as an outsider by blocking all the expected routes through the environment. For example, the fictional architects did not intend for the chapel to be accessible from the far side of the bridge. The player must venture

out onto the flying buttresses, and make their precarious way up to a broken window, from which they can gain access. They exploit the affordances of the architecture; the environment does not welcome them. The game thus marginalises players by pushing them outside of the normal bounds of the city's pathways. Other areas contribute to this feeling of marginalisation: once inside the chapel, for example, players are unable to reach the floor. Instead, they must make their way across thin decorative beams reaching across the chapel ceiling. These beams form trusses that support the hammerbeam roof and the chandelier in the centre of the room. They also allow the player to cross from one side of the chapel to the other. Both the beams and the flying buttress are very easy to fall off; they are unstable ground, metaphorically representing the unstable position of the player within the city. The buttress leading to the chapel has no parapet, no protective railing to stop the player falling to their death. Similarly inside the chapel, the player is at great risk of falling off the high beams – a risk only exacerbated by the chapel's guardians, who attempt to knock the player off. By distancing the player from the floor, the game reminds players of their character's alienation from the city at large. The player-character exists outside the protections and stabilities of the legitimate citizen – protections such as stable footing and safe pathways through the environment.

The exaggeration of these relative levels of empowerment ultimately emphasises the enormity of the player's victory: they win despite these overwhelming odds. The spatially emphasised narrative of the worthy underdog supports the revelation at the end of the Anor Londo level: after defeating the end-of-level bosses, Ornstein and Smough, the player ascends into the chamber of the sunlight princess, Gwynevere. She tells the player that it is their fate to succeed Gwyn, king of the gods and her father, as the new Lord of Sunlight. By this point the player has usurped the spatial function of the city, and usurpation of Gwyn's role as leader of the city seems only like the natural next step. The player usurps the city's spatiality by redefining the process of navigating through the city. They have taken on a role similar to what Geoff Manaugh sees as the architectural role of the burglar: "Burglars reveal with often eye-popping brutality how buildings can really be used – misused, abused, and turned against themselves – introducing perforations, holes, cuts, and other willful misconnections, as if sculpting a building in reverse" (2016, 14). There is a control that the burglar exercises over an environment, a counter-control that resists the authority of the building's designers. We should not give the player too much credit for this redefinition – really, they only followed the path laid out for them by the game designers. However, purely within the bounds of the fictional world, the player-character has renegotiated the cityspace and given its constitutive elements a new function, such that they are able to move throughout the otherwise locked city and into the cathedral. In following the path

laid out by the game designers, the player-character exercises a form of counter-control against the hegemonic spatial control of the city's fictional architects and ultimately against Gwyn himself. This counter-control legitimises the player-character's authority over the environment – that is, over the capital city and heart of government in Lordran – as they have twisted it to suit their own ends. These ends in turn are still only those intended by the game design, bequeathed to the player by the game.

To summarise the argument so far: I have analysed the architectural design of Anor Londo and shown how the forms and motifs of the city tie into a specifically religious ideological structure. This structure uses verticality as a framework to position Gwyn as the highest being, both literally and symbolically. Within this spatially bound ideology, the game pits the player against the environment. The player is distanced from the normal pathways of the city, and is thus able to move around and against the dominant ideology, repurposing the affordances of the city to make their own pathways. When the player-character discovers that they are to succeed Gwyn as the Lord of Sunlight, they have already usurped the function of the cityscape. The control of a city that symbolically represents Gwyn's power prepares the player to kill Gwyn and inherit his mantle. Game pathways and architectural symbolism work together to communicate Lordran's religious ideology and the place of the player within it.

Within and Against: Control and the Optional Pathway

So far I have focused on the primary narrative of *Dark Souls*. Players struggle through Anor Londo, overthrow its guardians, and come face to face with Gwynevere, the princess-goddess at the top of the cathedral. Gwynevere tells the player-character that they are to succeed Gwyn and become the next ruler, thus initiating the next phase of the game – the quest to kill Gwyn. From this point, it is possible for a player to carry on to the next area with the impression that they are out to fulfil an ancient prophecy and become the next Lord of Sunlight. However, it is also possible to discover evidence suggesting that this prophecy is an elaborate fiction. If the player attacks Gwynevere, she immediately dissolves into mist. She is an illusion placed by Gwyn's youngest son, Gwyndolin, to persuade Undead who reach the cathedral to fight Gwyn and link the fire. The player is led to believe that linking the fire will cause them to become the new Lord of Sunlight, when really they will be consumed by the flames. The strength of their soul will fuel the First Flame and allow the Age of Fire (and the human race) to continue. Gwyndolin is thus tricking Undead into sacrificing themselves in order to preserve the Age of Fire. The grandeur of

Anor Londo and the spatialised drama of the underdog narrative lure players into an uncritical acceptance of what they are told by the game.

In a sense, *Dark Souls* is exploring the theme of control in religion through an architectural lens. It presents the religious ideology of Anor Londo in terms of architecture, which governs the environment through a spatialised framework of meaning. *Dark Souls* also positions its game pathways as a form of control, as they locate the player relative to the environment. The player who follows the required game pathways exercises a form of counter-control against the seat of Gwyn's power, making the idea of succession more believable. By then subverting the ostensible primary goal of succession, *Dark Souls* draws player attention to the elements that helped construct that goal in the first place. It foregrounds the process of architectural control, both in the game and its fictional religion. This foregrounding may be read as a rebuke of unquestioning obedience. Religions construct their ideologies through architecture, and we must foreground and interrogate the methods by which they convey their ideas and shape different spaces. The same goes for video games – they present ideas spatially, through methods such as intended pathways, and we must foreground and interrogate those methods. Here *Dark Souls* runs up against the limits of its own form: can video games escape these forms of spatialised control? Or are players like rats in a maze, forever compelled to operate under the spatial control of the game?

Dark Souls gestures towards this issue of spatial control in video games, and uses the structure of optional and compulsory game-spaces in an attempt to subvert spatial control. While it is not entirely successful, the game indicates the importance of questioning spatialised authority in video games more broadly. The key element in this analysis is the distinction between optional and compulsory game-spaces. Many games have compulsory pathways, routes that players must take to move through an area. In Anor Londo's chapel, players must travel across the ceiling beams to reach the other side. However, there are also optional pathways, routes that are available but not compulsory. For example, the chapel also contains a large painting; players who have a specific item can be sucked into the painting, where they find a hidden level (the Painted World of Ariamis). Players are not required to complete this hidden area to finish the game; indeed, players who do not have the required item might never know that the area exists. The Painted World is available to access, and is intentionally included in the game, but is not a compulsory experience for the player.

In *Dark Souls*, then, a key to unravelling the lie of Gwyndolin is found in an optional area. As discussed above, the compulsory pathways largely support Gwyndolin's lie – they

suggest that the prophecy is true and that the player-character really is the Chosen Undead. It is only once the player steps outside those compulsory pathways that they begin to explore alternate worldviews, alternate perspectives on the fictional world of *Dark Souls*. Gwyndolin himself is hidden away in the Darkmoon Tomb, an area not immediately apparent to new players. For players who do reach the Tomb, a further illusion (a massive statue of Gwyn) cloaks Gwyndolin's chamber. To dispel the statue, players must either have the Darkmoon Séance Ring from the Catacombs (a distant area of the game), or attack and dispel the illusion of Gwynevere (making Gwyndolin irrevocably hostile). Those with the Darkmoon Séance Ring may access a small antechamber, where Gwyndolin speaks to players from behind a wall of fog and allows them to join the Blades of the Darkmoon covenant, a multiplayer group who carry out specific online tasks for Gwyndolin. Upon becoming a Blade of the Darkmoon, players receive a special ring; its description explicitly says that Gwynevere is an illusion created by Gwyndolin. This information then calls into question the game's entire story arc. Are you really the Chosen Undead? Will you really succeed Gwyn? The game has the player carry on and fight Gwyn anyway, but the significance of this action becomes uncertain. The ideology of Anor Londo's architecture, seemingly supported by the game's compulsory pathways, comes unstuck.

Certain optional pathways in *Dark Souls* thus have the potential to destabilise the worldviews contained within the compulsory pathways. Of course, these alternate world views are themselves still products of the game – the player is not really stepping fully outside of the game's narrative offerings by investigating Gwyndolin and the Darkmoon Tomb. In this sense, the player never really escapes the game's spatial control. But there is an interesting spatial dynamic between 'doing what you are told', or following the compulsory pathways, and 'exploring things for yourself', or going into optional areas and considering information that might contradict the dominant narrative. This dynamic has special purchase within a religious framework where certain forms of authority might be held as essentially unquestionable. Even though the player does not move outside of the game's control, players who explore things for themselves may discover elements that call into question the ostensible main goal of the game.

In summary, it is only by exploring the cathedral that the player is able to discover the truth that belies the (architectural) religious ideology of Anor Londo. One might interpret this move as a suggestion that religions are false and require ideological dismantling. This is not quite right: Gwyn does exist, and the gods are real. The ideology contained in Anor Londo's architecture is simply outdated, at least from the perspective of the player. It points to a culture that no longer exists in any significant way. By its very nature architecture is vulnerable to this sort of shift. It can make manifest certain ideologies or social orders, but it is largely locked into

the time of its production. It does not necessarily reflect subsequent social or cultural changes. Anor Londo's architecture does not reflect the fact of its abandonment, and therefore Gwyndolin is able to exploit it, perpetuating a narrative that suits his agenda. Through this story element, *Dark Souls* raises the intersection between the religious elements of architecture and social, political, and economic forms of power. It suggests that religion exists within a socialised discourse that inevitably includes constructed ideology, some of which is open to manipulation. It also suggests that we are shaped by the spaces we inhabit, whether virtual or physical, and that those spaces might exert influence over the way we perceive the world.

Killing in the Name Of: Religion and Violence in *Dark Souls*

Introduction

The issue of religious violence has come rushing to the fore in the wake of 9/11 and the ongoing religious terror attacks across the globe. For some, religion is necessarily violent; it is a relic of a brutish and unenlightened past that barely understood science or reason. Even outside of the New Atheists (such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris), this view is sometimes implied in the work of those who study religion professionally. For example, Kevin McCaffree, a scholar studying the decline of religious belief in America, refers to “the shackles of traditional dogma” (2017, 9), and contrasts “tribal religiosity” with “unwavering commitment to free expression, human rights, and a technological progress that finally brings humanity in touch with our nature, and with nature” (272). These reductive binaries are criticised by writers like William T. Cavanaugh, who argues that ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are political categories belonging to the modern West. For Cavanaugh, religious violence is a myth used to justify secular violence against Muslim countries: “Their violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. Our violence, on the other hand, is secular, rational, and peacemaking” (2016, 178). Liam O’Dowd and Martina McKnight consider Cavanaugh’s argument to be helpful in deconstructing the false binary between religion and the liberal, secular, democratic state, although they suggest Cavanaugh “perhaps overstates his case” (2013a, 263). Even so, O’Dowd and McKnight proceed to draw out the ethno-national aspects of so-called religious violence in Northern Ireland, following Cavanaugh in questioning the extent to which that violence can properly be thought of as religious: “Few, if any, in the recent Northern Ireland conflict have killed on the command of God, or died on behalf of their religion as opposed to their community, nation or state” (2013b, 357). It is unclear whether the phrase ‘religious violence’ is particularly productive or accurate.

Of course, saying that ‘religious violence’ is a troubled concept does not prove that religion is resolutely non-violent. Cavanaugh accepts that “given certain conditions, they [religions] can and do contribute to violence” (2016, 178), and Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts and Michael Jerryson note that while “adherents of most religious traditions almost universally regard their own faith as pacifistic... it is precisely foundational religious teachings that are claimed to sanctify violence by many of its perpetrators.” Juergensmeyer et al. ultimately describe the relationship between religion and violence as “vexing” (2016, 2), not least because violence

and religion themselves are overwhelmingly contested terms. The contested definition of religion is highlighted by Cavanaugh, who rejects the claim that “there is something out there called ‘religion’ that is a constant in all human societies across time.” He argues instead that “the religious/secular divide is a modern Western construction, not embedded in the nature of things, but subject to being constructed in different ways for different purposes in different times and places” (187). The difficulty of Cavanaugh’s position is that he wants to acknowledge the importance of studying religiously motivated violence without submitting to the claim that ‘religion’, imagined as some trans-historical phenomenon, contains the seeds of violence. This is a claim he finds in Juergensmeyer, who, for example, argues that “religion often provides the mores and symbols that make possible bloodshed – even catastrophic acts of terrorism” (Juergensmeyer 2003, xi). Cavanaugh and Juergensmeyer have scuffled directly over this point, with Cavanaugh arguing that Juergensmeyer treats ‘religion’ as a largely unproblematic category (Cavanaugh 2016, 186).

With these tensions and theoretical conflicts in mind, I will show in this chapter that *Dark Souls* is concerned with criticising different types of ‘religious violence’. *Dark Souls* allows ‘religion’ and ‘violence’ to remain broad terms, made unwieldy by the incorporation of additional social and political factors. I will also suggest that while *Dark Souls* does criticise certain types of violence, it cannot itself escape the systems of violence it critiques. In the first section, I argue that *Dark Souls* criticises the psychological violence of the Undead Asylum, the first level of the game. A religious sect known as the Way of White consider Undead to be accursed creatures, and so lock them up in the Undead Asylum, causing complete mental degeneration in many prisoners. The game criticises this psychological violence, and particularly the worldview that underpins it. The Undead are not really cursed – they simply do not fit into the worldview of the Way of White. *Dark Souls* complicates this criticism by suggesting that the Way of White may not have understood the psychological damage that would be inflicted by the prison architecture. It also suggests that the violent and dangerous Hollows might be quite reasonably locked away. Next, I will show how *Dark Souls* criticises the physical violence legitimised by religious worldviews, focusing on how the Way sends adherents on violent missions. Again I suggest that the criticisms levelled by *Dark Souls* mostly land on the worldview justifying and legitimising religious violence. The game objects to religious authorities that usher adherents towards violence, rather than objecting to violence per se. In my third section, I draw out *Dark Souls*’ own participation in systems of violence. Although I am not concerned here with the psychological effects of video game violence (that is, whether violent games encourage violent behaviours in the real world), I will suggest that *Dark Souls* and video games more broadly have trouble

critiquing violence while also using it as a primary game mechanic. I argued in the previous chapter, that *Dark Souls* is interested in the relationship between architecture and control, and gestures towards ways of resisting that control without managing to fully enact them. Here, I argue that *Dark Souls* is restricted in a similar way: it wants to comment on the negative effects of (religious) violence, but it makes violence a core part of the gameplay. The criticisms of religious violence must be evaluated in terms of the game's dependence on violent gameplay. Ultimately its commentary, I suggest, is hampered by its form.

It might be reiterated that neither of these proposed types of violence (psychological and physical) is inherently religious. This is one of the perplexing things about so-called religious violence: parallel instances can often be found outside a religious context. As I have suggested, whether and to what extent religion causes violence is a matter of great dispute. In many cases, analysts point to underlying socioeconomic or political causes. For example, the Taliban arose in the context of years of civil war in Afghanistan, which itself has roots in the Cold War and political interference from both Soviet and American powers. Daniel Philpott raises further possible causes for so-called religious violence, including economic injustice, colonial history, national and ethnic identity, the social instability of rapid urbanization, and oppressive regimes propped up by international powers (2016, 398-404). The significance of religion among all these other factors is yet to be determined.

Although the violence criticised in *Dark Souls* is not uniquely religious, violence and religion are thematically close throughout the *Dark Souls* games, often united within a framework of political power. In *Dark Souls 2*, the merchant Maughlin describes a powerful religious group in his homeland of Volgen: "A group calling themselves the Blue Sentinels have gained much power in Volgen. You can't even run a shop without their blessing. They claim to be working for the greater good, oh... but it's absolute hogwash" (2014). The suggestion is that the Blue Sentinels are disingenuously strong-arming merchants – those without the Sentinels' blessing presumably have their stock or storefront destroyed. In *Dark Souls 3*, the violent aspect of religion is emphasised in the Spiked Mace wielded by Evangelists (a type of enemy). According to its item description, the mace is the "choice weapon of the evangelists of the Cathedral of the Deep." We are told that "its long, sharp spikes cause great pain and bleeding," a pointed comment associating the religious process of evangelism with violence and pain (2016). In *Dark Souls*, this thematic cluster does exist, but it must be more delicately reconstructed by the player. The intro cinematic tells us that "in this land, the Undead are corralled and led to the north, where they are locked away." It is not clear what "this land" is or who the corallers are, but evidence suggests the religious group known as the Way of White. The Way of White sustains a

caste-based religio-political structure in Thorolund, a region mentioned in the game. This is evidenced by the White Séance Ring item description, which says that the head bishop of the Way of White is “one of the great royals of Thorolund.” The ring description also suggests that the Way of White worship the deity Allfather Lloyd. According to the Lloyd’s Talisman description, cleric knights associated with Lloyd are widely praised for their Undead hunts. These hunts must end with the Undead being corralled and led to the north by the Way of White. Power and religion are thus combined in the political structure of Thorolund, which commits a social violence against the Undead by vilifying and imprisoning them in the Undead Asylum. It is precisely that Asylum which forms the subject of the first part of this chapter.

Architectural Violence: The Undead Asylum

In the previous chapter, I looked at the constructive aspects of architecture, punning on the dual meaning of construction (architectural and ideological). This first section examines the violent uses of architecture, showing that *Dark Souls* criticises the psychological violence caused by the Undead Asylum – a religious asylum serving as the first level of the game. The idea of a building’s ‘violent uses’ is slippery, but it is important to distinguish between these different architectural elements. Crudely, the distinction drawn here is between the symbolic elements of the building, and the practical function to which the building is put. Obviously these two can never be fully severed: form and function are always intertwined. A building’s symbolic meaning is often part of its function; for example, prisons are used to house prisoners, but also to deter future offenders by communicating architecturally the power and authority of the state. Similarly, the functional elements of a building often have symbolic value. The walls of a prison might function to keep prisoners isolated from society, but they also evoke a complex discourse around power, freedom, punishment, and control.

Despite this close relationship, there are key points where the poles of form and function are thrown into sharp relief. While an abandoned prison might retain its form, its architectural shape, it is no longer functioning as a prison. It is not being used in the same way. The point can be further illustrated with reference to any site of historic violence that now serves as a memorial; Auschwitz is perhaps the starkest example, but we might also note, for instance, the memorial at the execution site in Tower Green, at the Tower of London (Historic Royal Palaces, 2017). Alternately, there are instances where form and function are mismatched – for example in emergency or wartime situations where halls or church buildings or even private residences might be requisitioned by the government or military factions. In these instances of

appropriation, the form of the building does not necessarily match the ad hoc use to which it is put. These examples elicit the poles of form and function, which take shape briefly before fading back into the mist. Without attempting to separate the poles completely, this first section focuses primarily on how *Dark Souls* criticises the violent functions or uses of religious architecture in the Undead Asylum.

The Undead Asylum is the first level of *Dark Souls*. It is a small prison that stores Undead, who are rounded up and imprisoned by the Way of White. Aside from the player-character, almost all Undead inhabitants of the Undead Asylum have become Hollow. As a brief reminder, the Undead are technically undead human beings that retain their mental faculties. Hollows are Undead that have lost their minds – that have ‘Hollowed’ – for one reason or another. For example, they might have Hollowed in the face of the existential ennui of undeath. Alternately, Hollowing might have been caused by being locked in a cell and abandoned, unable to die, for thousands of years. The latter is the psychological violence caused by the Undead Asylum. By making the player explore the Asylum, the game critically portrays the psychological violence caused by the architecture of this religious prison.

The architecture of the prison must be analysed with an eye on the game’s genre. Despite the medieval setting of *Dark Souls*, it is primarily a fantasy game, meaning we should not expect the prison’s function to adhere to that of the historical medieval prison. While games or other texts set in our medieval history are not obliged to reflect the historical function and ideology underpinning the Western medieval prison either, the fantasy genre operates as a formal disconnect from our history. In addition, it might be better to speak of medieval prison functions and ideologies in the plural, rather than the singular, as the medieval world “reveals a chaos of uneven developments in penal theory and practice” (Cassidy-Welch 2011, 6). I will let *Dark Souls* take centre-stage and introduce penal theories and practices where they shed light on the game’s portrayal of psychological violence.

The Undead Asylum defies many norms of prisons throughout history. For instance, it is not monitored by any sort of prison worker. There are a couple of wild demons, but it is unclear whether they are guards or just wandering strays. Additionally, the asylum is not intended to facilitate rehabilitation. Players are told in the opening cinematic that the Undead are locked away in these asylums “to await the end of the world,” so clearly rehabilitation is not a priority. The asylums are also not designed for deterrence: those who become Undead become so purely by chance. Deterrence makes no sense. Given that the asylum is intended to be neither rehabilitation nor deterrence, I suggest that it functions primarily as enforced isolation, sharing

many structural similarities with solitary confinement wards in contemporary supermax prisons. The theme of isolation is made evident through the asylum's location on a mountaintop, separated from any other human-built structure. This social seclusion echoes and exaggerates the supermax prison, which removes prisoners from society as part of a process of dehumanization. Lisa Guenther describes the supermax as "cold storage" or "warehouses," noting that most of the supermax prisons she visited for her research were situated in industrial zones (2013, 162). Guy Geltner argues that medieval prisons, by contrast, often played a significant part in urban life, pointing out that the medieval prisoner was never fully cut off from society (2008, 57-58). The isolation of the Undead is emphasised by the lack of prison staff: there are no guards, no medical staff, no administrators. One Undead soldier patrolling the entrance to the west wing might be a guard, as (unlike the other inhabitants) he is armoured and equipped with a shield, but if so, he is completely Hollowed – any distinction between jailer and inmate has been erased. The Asylum is also in a state of mighty disrepair, with several cells collapsed into rubble and Undead roaming freely around certain areas. Guenther's comment about warehousing is here literalised: the Undead are stored and abandoned. The relative freedom of those who have escaped their cells ironically exemplifies their isolation – nobody cares if they get into the wider prison.

That said, *Dark Souls* is primarily focused on the mental degeneration associated with the supermax prison, rather than, say, the neo-liberal spatial efficiency touched on by *Dark Souls 2*. Guenther argues that the "control prison" employs a neo-liberal rhetoric that privileges efficiency, among other things, in an attempt to represent control as "a legally acceptable administrative tool rather than as an instrument of outright punishment" (2013, 162). We see this efficiency spatialised in the Lost Bastille of *Dark Souls 2*, where corridors are lined with four-foot cells, or cells too narrow to sit in. Many Undead are kept in large ceramic jars, like human babushka dolls. By minimising the space assigned to each Undead, the Lost Bastille maximises the number of cells, imitating the way in which supermax prisons maximise profits. It draws on and models a neo-liberal prison ethic, exaggerating the already dismal conditions as a form of social commentary. However, the spatial efficiency modelled in the Lost Bastille is not found in the Undead Asylum. Based on what we see in the game, the asylum could have as little as ten or twenty cells. It is reasonable to assume that we do not see the whole asylum: it is the game's introductory level, and is therefore a tightly focused experience, zipping players through the core mechanics of a brutally hard game. However we choose to imagine the parts we do not see, the game does not emphasise the cramped quarters or packed cells of the supermax – certainly not in the way that *Dark Souls 2* does with the Lost Bastille. The different games touch on different aspects of the same environment.

The most relevant connection between the Undead Asylum and the modern supermax prison is the damaging effect of solitary confinement. At the beginning of the game, all the inmates in the asylum (bar the player-character) have Hollowed. Some of them were possibly already Hollowed when they were captured, but there can be no certainty about the proportion of Hollows to un-Hollowed. We know that the player-character is not Hollow, suggesting that there may have been other rational Undead imprisoned here as well. It is therefore highly probable that some of the Hollows around the Asylum became Hollowed as a direct result of their solitary confinement. Accounts of solitary confinement from American and other prisoners often refer to their detachment from reality and, fittingly, their sense of living death. Guenther writes that for these prisoners, “a meaningful sense of living embodiment has for the most part drained out of their lives; they’ve become unhinged from the world, confined to a space in which all they can do is turn around or pace back and forth, blocked from an open-ended perception of the world as a space of mutual belonging and interaction with others” (2013, 165). She recounts the “ontological derangement” suffered by “70 to 90 percent” of all prisoners held in solitary confinement (166-7), and refers to a famous court case where the judge, Hugh Bownes, condemned the “enforced diet of idleness” as a “numbing violence against the spirit” (*Laaman v. Helgemoe*, 437 F. Supp. 269 (1977)). Bownes went on to say that enforced idleness “leads to degeneration because it severely undermines self-confidence, and the natural reactions to lowered self-esteem are either mental illness or antisocial behaviour” (293). The insanity of the fictional Hollowed in the Undead Asylum reproduces the psychological damage done to real prisoners placed in solitary confinement.

Imprisonment in the Undead Asylum reflects many but not all attributes of imprisonment in solitary confinement. Parallel attributes include the lack of human touch, although not the lack of human contact, insofar as prisoners can talk to each other in cells immediately opposite, and possibly hear other inmates down the corridor. Consequently there is not the sensory deprivation commonly associated with solitary confinement: other human beings (or Undead, rather) are clearly visible in the opposite cell. Enforced idleness is an obvious parallel: if there are no guards, there is no regular exercise, no meaningful labour, and no access to a library or gym. Inmates of the asylum are kept in their cells at all times, thus exaggerating and literalising the seeming timelessness of imprisonment. These inmates are here to await the end of the world. To repeat Bownes, this enforced idleness constitutes a numbing violence against the spirit. It leads to degeneration, and undoubtedly to the eventual insanity of imprisoned Undead.

Having established the psychological damage caused by the Undead Asylum, we now turn to the jailers, the Way of White. In the Introduction to this chapter, I briefly explored the evidence suggesting that the Way of White controlled the Undead Asylum, arguing that they hunt Undead and lock them away in the Asylum, which is functionally a prison. The impetus to imprison the Undead stems primarily from a religious ideology that positions them as accursed sub-humans. The psychological violence of the prison is therefore tied to religious ideology, but is not a type of violence exclusively found within religion – there are plenty of state-run prisons with no religious affiliation. The prison’s isolated location also marks a different attitude to religious violence, one of secrecy rather than public performance. Some of the most significant religious acts of violence in this century have been terror attacks, which are often performative. Juergensmeyer raises the symbolic importance of terrorist attacks, claiming that they are a form of short-term counter control exercised against a space controlled by an enemy group: “terrorism is meant to terrify... the public response to the violence – the trembling that terrorism effects – is part of the meaning of the term” (2003, 5). In another work, he defines terrorism as explicitly performative: the violence committed in one space symbolises an attack on the group as a whole (2016, 287). For example, the attacks on the World Trade Centre can be seen as an attack on American globalisation, or on American sovereignty and finance. Religious violence in games like *BioShock Infinite* and *Witcher 3* is often similarly performative: in *Infinite*, you attend a public stoning of an interracial couple (although because of the American setting, you throw baseballs), while in *Witcher 3* an early encounter with religious sect The Church of the Eternal Fire sees two figures burned at the stake. Because the violence of the Asylum in *Dark Souls* is secret, happening in the isolation of the mountains, it does not carry the same performative value among the general populace. It is not a public act in the same way as terrorist attacks, or even public punishments such as flogging or hangings. The mental deterioration of the prisoners is not placed on display as public gratification or warning. The act of capturing the Undead is probably quite public and performative, as the Lloyd’s Talisman item describes wide praise for the cleric knights who hunt the Undead – but the actual act of imprisonment and the violence of the prison happen elsewhere, out of the public eye, and are therefore far less performative.

If we read the public torture of the Middle Ages as a communal reaffirmation of societal rules and structures, then the imprisonment of the Undead constitutes a communal forgetting. Alongside the legitimate physical danger posed by Hollows, the Undead more broadly represent a threat to the established order. Their physical bodies destabilize the life/death binary through the display of undead flesh. They are not heretics, because heresy can be conceptually contained within a binary of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, of self and other. In the face of heresy, we would

expect to see the Way of White double down on their symbolism and ideology – we would expect a reaffirmation of the self over and against the other. But the Asylum has no religious imagery, no symbols or tokens. There is no attempt, architectural or otherwise, to maintain the binary opposition. This is because the Undead represent hybridity, a halfway point between life and death that deconstructs the opposition. This deconstruction cannot be tolerated by the Way of White, but nor can it be easily eradicated, due to the Undead’s capacity for resurrection. The isolation of the Undead therefore allows the Way to utilise an out of sight, out of mind policy that encourages forgetting and ultimately the preservation of their religious worldview.

Although *Dark Souls* offers criticism of the Way of White, it is wrapped up in a series of complicating social and political factors. There is a concerning religious ideology that attempts to erase the Undead from society, and the Asylum undoubtedly causes psychological violence to the Undead through enforced idleness, eventually causing most of them to Hollow. However, as I have suggested, it is unclear what proportion of the Undead were already Hollowed upon imprisonment. It is also unclear whether the Way of White are malevolent or simply ignorant of the damage their Asylum would cause. Because the Way of White are focused on forgetting the Undead, I suggest that the psychological violence of the Asylum is largely unintentional. The Way probably did not intend for the Undead Asylum to drive the more rational Undead into insanity. I doubt whether they even understood the degenerative effects of enforced idleness. They are ultimately responsible for the psychological violence of the Asylum’s architecture, but this is not the malevolent religious violence found in other games. One might charitably go as far as to call it accidental. Further, the imprisonment of the Undead is not in all cases unjustified. Hollows are dangerous, rabid creatures that cannot be put down – as undead, they have passed beyond the life/death binary, such that if they are ‘killed’, they will be resurrected at a nearby bonfire. Their incarceration is a wise and pragmatic decision – indeed, probably the only possible decision to ensure the safety of the wider populace. The Way do not necessarily distinguish between Hollows and Undead in their hunts, and the overriding logic for imprisonment remains the erasure of the Undead from public consciousness. However, it is hard to fault them for imprisoning Hollows. Ultimately, *Dark Souls* does not allow us to attribute the problem of violence to ‘religion’ in any simple sense. It raises other significant factors, such as the physical danger posed by Hollows and perhaps plain human ignorance, and shows that ‘religious violence’ is a complex and multi-faceted problem, irreducible to any one element.

Physical Violence: The Undead Quest

As well as employing architectural violence as a form of social control, the Way of White sends its clerics out into the world on violent missions. In Firelink Shrine, the cleric Petrus tells the player-character that “Undead clerics are given a mission to seek Kindling.” The Rite of Kindling allows the Way of White to feed Humanity (a consumable item, representing some sort of soul or fundamental human nature) to bonfires, which are linked to the First Flame. According to Petrus, the Way of White believe that the act of Kindling will eventually grant them “magnificent powers.” Although it is unclear whether Kindling actually grants these powers, we know that it fuels the bonfires and extends the Age of Fire. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, I suspect that the promise of power is a falsehood, clothed in religious garb to encourage the act of Kindling and the continuation of the Age of Fire. If the promise were false, it would fit with the pattern of religions in the *Dark Souls* games offering false narratives to veil the vested interests of religious leaders, as with Gwyndolin and the lie of the Chosen Undead. However, the pattern is again somewhat complicated by the fact that the Way of White’s religious leaders are not necessarily motivated by entirely base desires: rather than lying for political or economic gain, they lie as Gwyndolin lies, to preserve the Age of Fire and the existence of humanity.

At any rate, the Rite of Kindling has been stolen, and Undead clerics are sent to recover it. This recovery is premised on violence authorised by religion. It is framed as a typical hero’s quest that ironically echoes that of the player. Clerics must navigate through the catacombs, overcoming skeletons and necromancers, and ultimately must face down the thief himself: Pinwheel, a cloaked necromancer wearing three masks. Diplomacy is never an option with these opponents. They must be fought and killed. Violence seems the only tool available to the clerics, such that those who are not skilled in violence are presented as deeply vulnerable. Early in the game, the player meets Rhea of Thorolund, a priestess in the Way of White. Recently made Undead, she is banished to Lordran to seek the Rite of Kindling, along with protectors Vince and Nico (who are much more military-looking cleric knights). During the journey into the catacombs Vince and Nico become Hollow, and Rhea is left stranded. With no skill in violence, she is trapped near her former companions. The player is able to save her by killing her companions and creating a safe route back to Firelink Shrine. Upon her return, she tells the player “My prayers did them [Vince and Nico] no good. It is my ignorance, my frailty that has sealed their fates.” Rhea’s faith is here proven ineffectual. She laments her frailty, invoking a discourse of strength and weakness to explain the events in the catacombs. Her prayer is tellingly associated with weakness, as it has not been weaponised. Violence is more efficacious than simple faith.

To be clear, violence and faith are presented as overlapping spheres, not binary opposites. There is a military arm of the Way of White, and that arm does all the heavy lifting on the Undead Quest. This quest can be completed by those outside of the faith – in fact, the player must travel through the catacombs, defeat Pinwheel, and retrieve the Rite of Kindling to finish the game. It is a compulsory game pathway. Thus the game emphasises again that the type of violence in question is not intrinsically linked to religion, despite being coded as religious in the Undead Quest. Ultimately that violence is most successfully performed by the player-character, who may or may not be religious themselves; the player-character's relationship with religion is never codified in strict ludic terms, and therefore depends on how the player imagines their character.

Even though violence and faith are not presented as opposites on the Undead Quest, violence is clearly presented as primary. Violent faith is a viable path to success, but violence is an essential component, while faith is not. Thus violence comes into focus as the Way of White's *modus operandi*. It takes on two aspects: physical violence, with swords and armour, and violent miracles, which exist in the game but are minimally attached to the Way of White. There are eight miracles identified by item description as belonging to the Way of White. Of these eight, four are healing miracles, and only two offensive: one that pushes enemies backwards ('Force'), and one that pushes them backwards and deals some damage ('Wrath of the Gods'). Offensive miracles are somewhat marginal in the Way of White's library of miracles. Much more prominent are the healing spells, which play an ancillary role in Way of White combat. Physical violence is by far the more important element.

I suggest the physical violence of the Undead Quest is best contextualised against the literary intersection of medieval quest and medieval pilgrimage. It is certainly not a war in any serious sense. Historically war referred exclusively to inter-state conflict, to the point where some international relations scholars considered the announcement of the war on terror to be figure of speech (Detter and Hensel 2013, 12). However, Siniša Malešević argues that "as social orders change, so does the nature of warfare" (2017, 145). Today it seems impossible to deny that the conflicts with al-Qaeda or ISIS are not in some meaningful sense wars. Even taking this wider definition, it seems a stretch to call the situation in the Catacombs a war. The Way of White is not massing its forces and sending armies against the necromancers – rather, small groups of three or four clerics enter at a time. The necromancers do not seem particularly bothered by the whole affair either – there are no defensive structures, and no organised military presence. The intersection of quest and pilgrimage adequately accounts for the type of violence found in the Catacombs. The clerics are, by and large, cleric knights, pairing religion and quest in a manner

reminiscent of the knights of King Arthur, most specifically Perceval. Phillip C. Boardman writes that in the Perceval tradition, Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail begins with an awareness of his own spiritual insufficiency (2008, 133). The sin at hand in *Dark Souls* is the Undead Curse: drawing on the Christian doctrine of retribution (similar to the popular conception of karma), we can infer that for the Way of White, those clerics who have fallen prey to the Undead Curse must somehow deserve it. As with Perceval, the quest for the Rite of Kindling (or in Perceval's case, the Grail) has a spiritually redemptive element.

The Undead Quest also bears resemblance to medieval pilgrimage rites, which Anne Osterrieth characterises as both “social institution and individual quest” (1989, 145). Osterrieth sees the individual motivation of historical pilgrimage as one of three things: a quest for salvation, for a cure for the body, or for revelation, with the salvation-quest being the dominant factor (146). Traditionally, Perceval quests for knowledge: in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* he sees the Grail but does not ask about it. As Norris J. Lacy notes, “if he had asked about it, his question – not the answer, but the very act of seeking and questioning – would have miraculously healed the [sick] king” (2000, 117). Lacy goes on to argue that in the logic of the story, the question is not in itself powerful – rather, it is the “spiritual maturity and purity of the questioner” (118). Perceval does not develop by knowing, but by the act of seeking knowledge: “the process is more important than the product” (121). To remain a seeker, Perceval's quest must be unfulfilled. He must be perpetually questing, an eternal pilgrim. By contrast, the pilgrimage of the cleric knights has a clear terminus: they seek salvation and bodily healing, the physical stigma of undeath being a sign of lost salvation. The Undead Quest is thus a social institution as well as individual quest, because the social institutions of the Way of White construct a worldview that sees Undead as accursed in the first place. The individual desire to be purified stems from the socially constructed dichotomy of purity and impurity. Pilgrimage is woven into the structure of the Undead Quest: like Perceval, the cleric knight errs and then makes pilgrimage towards redemption. The combat aspects of the Undead Quest align it more closely with Perceval's quest than the pilgrimage, but the pilgrimage more fully emphasises the quest's clear terminus and the religious institutions by which the quest finds value.

The merging of pilgrimage and quest is reflected in the spatial metaphors surrounding the journey to Pinwheel, the chief necromancer who stole the Rite of Kindling. If the poles of the vertical axis represent heaven and hell, good and evil, then the pilgrimage might be conceived of as a journey upwards, towards the purity of enlightenment and the holy city. We have already established the motif of verticality in the design of Anor Londo, as well as the sun imagery that suggests spiritual enlightenment. However, the journey to Pinwheel takes the cleric knight

downwards. The Undead cleric's transgression against the life/death binary is mirrored by the enemy necromancers, who resurrect or reanimate skeletons (another form of undead). The journey down into the catacombs is a journey into the fallen soul of the self: the cleric knight fights against symbols of their own transgression and must ultimately overthrow the arch-transgressor, the leader of the necromancers. Even though the cleric knights move spatially downwards, they uplift themselves through the cleansing of their own spirits, a process actualised by violence. Michael Swisher notes that in Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century romance *Parzival*, the titular protagonist comes to grace through the confrontation of his own sin and guilt: "Parzival [or Perceval] is able to attain a state of Christian redemption precisely because he has sinned and thereby come to a recognition and a love of God" (1999, 253). The purgation of evil, specifically the type of evil found within oneself, is antecedent to the progression upwards to the heavenly city. Thus the journey down into the catacombs must precede the return to society for the Undead cleric knight.

It should be apparent that the frameworks governing the violence of the Undead Quest are thoroughly religious. The concepts of salvation or redemption that govern the medieval pilgrimage reveal the depth of integration between religion and violence here. For a medieval fantasy game, this is somewhat unsurprising: Leo D. Lefebure writes that "throughout the Middle Ages, religion played the dominant role in either authorizing or challenging the exercise of authority and violence" (2004, 37). Although one would be hard-pressed to find a game in which religion is shown challenging the exercise of violence, there are a host of games where violence is authorised by religion. Not only is the Undead Quest instigated by the Way of White, but the spiritual and social rewards (purification and reintegration into society) are framed in religious terms. Significantly, the religious discourse invoked by the Way is implied to be broadly false; the grim secret of the Undead Quest is that the final redemption and return to society does not exist. The Rite of Kindling does not cure the Undead Curse. While the medieval knight adventures to redeem himself, the Undead cleric is irredeemable – at least by the measure of the Way of White. For the Undead, there is no way back to the innocence of the life/death binary. The violence of the Undead Quest can still benefit the Way of White, as the successful cleric would return the Rite of Kindling to the Way's control, but presumably they would not be allowed back into society. It is unclear whether the Way understands this fact – that is, whether it is knowingly sending clerics off with false hope of return. Further, there is no direct evidence that the Way has promised reintegration for the successful cleric, although it does fit the structure of the quest. As argued above, the violence against those necromancers who transgress the life/death binary is self-purifying. There is no point to self-purification if there is no hope of

return to society. The lie of reintegration reinforces *Dark Souls*' motif of deliberate religious falsehood. I suspect that the Way of White is intentionally giving Undead clerics false hope for similar reasons. Both lies reveal the veiling of vested interests within a religious framework.

Physical violence thus serves as the structuring logic of the Undead Quest. Faith and violence are presented as interlocking spheres, although violence is the more crucial component. Faith is subordinated to violence, with the paucity of offensive miracles and the extensive range of healing miracles positioning the miracle process as supplementary. The Way of White employ violence to achieve political ends, although these ends are far more modest than those of crusading Christianity. There is no concentration of military forces to retrieve the Rite of Kindling. Rather, small groups of Undead cleric knights venture into the catacombs, on a religious quest/pilgrimage that serves the Way's political agenda while doubling as a form of faux spiritual cleansing – so called because it does not work. *Dark Souls* criticises the violent furthering of religious political agendas by showing how the false promise of spiritual cleansing is used to justify and encourage the Undead Quest.

Criticisms of Violence in a Violent Game

The issue of violence in video games is endemic to much of the medium. What meaningful criticism can be made on violence by a medium that largely revolves around the performance of violent acts? One option is to represent violence from a dystopic perspective; thus games like *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) show violence as a self-destructive spiral that is unheroic, unproductive, and ultimately dehumanizing. However, *The Line*'s portrayal of violence is essentially phrased in negative terms. There is no constructive alternative offered. For *Dark Souls*, the critical commentary on religious violence is significantly modified by the broadly unproblematic exercise of violence throughout the rest of the game. This section shows that *Dark Souls* does not object to violence in principle; rather, it finds something objectionable in the disingenuous political agenda of the Way of White.

For the player in *Dark Souls*, violence is a normative framework. The game's plot is framed around violence: the player-character travels to the First Flame, killing anyone or anything that gets in their way. Once at the Flame, they are consumed by it, allowing the Age of Fire to limp on. The efficacy of their sacrifice is determined by the strength of their soul, and as their soul is made stronger by killing, the extended length of the Age of Fire directly correlates to the number of other souls murdered and absorbed. The moral question of whether to extend or

extinguish the Age of Fire does present itself to the player, who is allowed to either sacrifice themselves to the First Flame or let it die, ushering in the new Age of Dark. However, the parameters of this question as posed to the player are too subjective to be of any use. After defeating the final boss, players can decide whether preserving the Age of Fire is appropriate, given factors such as the required violence. But some players might not acknowledge violence as a relevant moral issue, and others might not perceive the moral question in the first place. After all, various characters have led the player to believe that they will inherit the throne and lordship of Gwyn, encouraging actions that lead to the First Flame and, crucially, to uncomprehending self-sacrifice. Because of the fractured narrative of *Dark Souls*, it is difficult to commit the game to one cohesive position on violence.

Two different portrayals of violence, however, can be found in the portrayal of Hollows and of Sif, a compulsory boss. On the one hand, Hollows, who make up the bulk of enemies, do not garner a great deal of sympathy through their behaviour. They are violent, mindless, and hostile to the player. Where the sight of a scared animal might generate sympathy in an onlooker, the sight of a Hollow arouses readiness and expectation of conflict. Pity might be a secondary or deferred emotion, something put on hold until the threat has been eliminated. The emotive criticisms of violence are here made largely inaccessible: Hollows elicit neither our sense of common humanity nor the sympathy we reserve for vulnerable creatures. By contrast, the battle against Sif elicits both a sense of kinship and sympathy. Sif is a greatwolf guarding the grave of her master, the powerful knight Artorias (Sif's gender is never clarified within the game, but her namesake, the Norse goddess, is female). The player is attempting to take a trinket from the grave of Artorias to access a particular area. Sif defends the grave and tries to fight the player off, and so the trinket is only accessible with Sif's death. The tragedy of the battle stems from Sif's integrity: she is portrayed as a good and noble beast who faithfully protects her master's honour. Once the player wears down her health beyond a certain point, she starts limping and attacks less effectually. Her progression is from noble servant to vulnerable creature, ticking both of the boxes that Hollows broadly fail to meet. Successful players, on the other hand, must put down a wounded, vulnerable Sif. They are no longer the underdogs, so to speak, fighting against bigger and stronger monsters. They have invaded this graveyard and shown no mercy. Violence, in this moment, is tragic.

Other minor encounters in *Dark Souls* range between these two poles. Some Hollows in the Undead Asylum are too preoccupied to bother with you – it is possible to attack them, but if left alone they are quite harmless. These Hollows serve as tutorial enemies: their preoccupied state gives the new player a chance to initiate combat on their own terms. More seasoned players

might pass these Hollows by – they are pitiable, harmless creatures, barely worth the effort. Other largely passive ‘enemies’ include Crossbreed Priscilla, a friendly half-dragon who asks you to leave the area peacefully, and the pisaca, a group of women mutated into snake-octopus hybrids by the mad dragon Seath. The pisaca attack the player (and Seath’s guards) when an alarm is sounded, but once it is turned off, they passively return to their cell. From there they will defend themselves if provoked, bar two who remain passive regardless. When killed, these two drop miracles that reveal them to be Gwynevere’s handmaidens, kidnapped and experimented on by Seath. If the player listens closely, it is possible to hear them crying. Both Priscilla and the handmaidens occupy a midway position between the Asylum Hollows and Sif – they are not compulsory enemies, but killing them yields significant benefits, in the form of new weapons from Priscilla and new miracles from the handmaidens. It is tragic death that lacks the inevitable logic of the battle with Sif, as the player must freely choose to kill these non-aggressive characters. In these instances, player violence is tragic, but perhaps for some players a tragedy that must take place for ludic advantage.

However, the discomfort of violence in these moments does not set a precedent for player attitudes across the rest of the game. Ultimately, the tragedy of violence in these moments can be read as essentially the misfortune of being in the way. The game uses these moments to identify moral gaps in the ludic framework of violence, but is largely content to carry on regardless. The strategic aspects of violence in *Dark Souls* dominate any moral concerns. Moment to moment gameplay is characterised not only by self-defensive violence, but also pre-emptive attacks against enemies that might initially seem non-hostile. An undead dragon in the Valley of the Drakes appears to be dead until the player gets too close; attacking from a distance or before the creature properly rises is therefore good practice. The same is true of the Demonic Foliage enemies in Darkroot Garden – these enemies hide under the ground, disguised as small bushes. The player who locates them can strike pre-emptively, usually getting one or two hits in before the Foliage leaps up and begins its own attack. Player violence is deeply strategic: foreknowledge of traps and ambushes allows players to lure enemies into vulnerable positions, just as knowledge of enemy attack patterns allows players to neutralise or dodge different attacks. The goal-oriented strategies of *Dark Souls* privilege results over moralism.

Violence in and of itself, then, is not a problem for *Dark Souls*. There are moments where violence may be tragic, and perhaps moments where it might be condemned, but there is no blanket judgement against it. The condemnation of religious violence must therefore depend on some special condition, potentially outside of the sphere of violence. I suggest that *Dark Souls* criticises the Undead Quest of the cleric knights because the clerics are manipulated into violence

by dishonest religious authorities. The clerics themselves are portrayed as devout believers in a compromising position: Vince, one of the knights, says “The Catacombs aren’t exactly my idea of a good time, but... what can one do?” He sees no choice in the face of the spiritual rhetoric employed by religious authorities. The arc of the player who believes in the prophecy is very similar to that of the clerics. There is an overruling religious structure that sets out instructions or prophecy and causes individuals to act in a certain way, usually contrary to their own survival. The clerics foreshadow the story arc for the player, acting out in miniature the dangers of blind obedience to religious authority. The task for the player is somewhat more fatalistic than for the cleric knights – while the knights might plausibly retrieve the Rite of Kindling, the obedient player will inevitably self-immolate in the First Flame. The critique of violence attached to the clerics might plausibly also be carried over to the player: in the process of following the false prophecy, the player kills just about everyone in *Dark Souls*, some (such as Sif) under tragic circumstances. When these deaths are carried out under the false religious auspices of prophecy, are they not equally as tragic as those caused by the Undead Quest?

While we might recognise *Dark Souls*’ criticism of ignorant religious violence, there remains a further issue. What, in the view of the game, is the moral state of players who have come to understand the falsity of Gwyndolin’s prophecy? What does the game have to say about players who, for instance, consider the deaths justifiable in sustaining the Age of Fire? What about those who wish to kill Gwyn and bring the cosmos into the Age of Dark? What resources does the game offer us to deconstruct or analyse these attitudes to violence? Really there is very little – and perhaps that is the point. In *Dark Souls*, religion offers a comfortable existential certainty. You are the Chosen Undead; you must travel to Anor Londo and receive a prophecy from Gwynevere; you must travel to the Kiln of the First Flame and succeed Gwyn as the new Lord of Sunlight. The violence involved in these trials, as in the trials of the Way’s Undead Quest, are considered justifiable means to a holy end. But for players who move past the comfort of religious metanarratives, the game offers nothing. There is no higher meaning to be found. Players are thrown back on themselves to provide their own systems of meaning, their own values and beliefs. *Dark Souls* lacks completely the extradiegetic morality systems of games such as *Dishonored* (2012) or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003). While some might consider those morality systems artificial or rigidly imposed, we can at least assert that they exist. It is unclear whether *Dark Souls* takes any strong position beyond the condemnation of ignorant religious violence.

Covenant Sacrifice: Modelling Religious Commitment in *Dark Souls*

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that *Dark Souls* uses the multiplayer mechanic of ‘covenants’ to model and comment on sacrifice in real religions. However, I suggest, one’s interpretation of the specific comment being made will depend on the resources deployed in understanding the notion of sacrifice. I begin by introducing and contextualising the covenant in *Dark Souls* as a feature of online multiplayer. I then explore how it is positioned within a religious framework, arguing that it models the process of sacrifice as might be found in real world religions. However, I argue that the precise comment being made by the game is unclear. One’s interpretation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* depends on the cultural resources brought to bear on the text. I argue this point with reference to Hesiod’s Prometheus cycles, and a debate over legalism in Judaism. I show how each tradition theorises sacrifice, and argue that the different conceptualisations result in different interpretations of sacrifice in *Dark Souls*. In Hesiod’s Prometheus cycles, religious sacrifice is a self-interested economic exchange, a gift offered under the expectation of divine blessing. From this perspective, sacrifice in *Dark Souls* is modelled quite accurately. A different conclusion is reached by drawing on a particular tradition in Christian thought that sees Judaism as legalistic. I explore this portrayal of Judaism with reference to the tenth commandment, and Augustine’s account of biblical interpretation. According to the resources of this tradition, the representation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* is similarly legalistic, and therefore also inauthentic spirituality. The Greek and Christian accounts of sacrifice thus result in wildly different interpretations of the comment being made by *Dark Souls*. Covenant sacrifice in *Dark Souls* might be read as either a critical comment on empty ritualistic legalism in real religion, or as a positive and accurate depiction of legitimate spirituality, depending on the resources brought to bear on the text.

The Ludic Context of the *Dark Souls* Covenant

Covenants are a feature of *Dark Souls*’ multiplayer, which revolves around entering into another player’s game or having another player enter into yours, either for co-operative play or for player vs player (PvP) combat. The fictional framework for these multiplayer sessions is provided by

Solaire, a character met early in the game. He tells the player that “the flow of time itself is convoluted, with heroes centuries old phasing in and out... there’s no telling how much longer your world and mine will remain in contact.” The games of different players are conceptualised as different worlds – perhaps most accurately thought of as alternate dimensions. Accessing another player’s game is therefore conceptualised as crossing “the gaps between the worlds,” as Solaire puts it.

Further, online players are locked into certain actions based on how they were summoned. Players summoned for co-operative play appear as white phantoms, and cannot damage the host. This does not stop a certain degree of subversive behaviour – for instance, one online video shows a player in *Dark Souls 2* collaborating with a friend to destroy white phantoms – that is, to destroy players who are summoned for co-operative play (Krazy 2014). The friend invades the host player as a red phantom, able to deal damage to both the host and any allied white phantoms. Then, an unwitting white phantom is summoned into the game. The host player leads this white phantom to an item placed on a cliff edge, and when the phantom goes to pick it up, the red phantom fires a powerful bow that hurls the white phantom over the edge of the cliff. Examples in the video cited can be found from the 1:25 mark, although the covenants in *Dark Souls 2* are more complex – so while the friendly ‘enemy’ phantom is always red, the allied phantoms are often colours other than white. Even though red phantoms are positioned as enemies within the game structure, then, they do not always behave as enemies. Similarly, co-operative play is not always very co-operative. Nevertheless, there are constraints on what players are able to do depending on how they enter into a host’s game. They are coded as either hostile or allied, and their ability to impact the world depends on that coding.

There are a series of basic multiplayer modes available to everyone through certain items. For example, Solaire gives players the White Sign Soapstone, essentially a piece of chalk that allows players to create a summon sign in other games. If a summon sign is activated, the player who made the mark is drawn into the world of the player who activated it, where they can both play co-operatively. A covenant, then, is a gameplay mechanic allowing players to further focus their multiplayer experience with specialised multiplayer modes. For example, some covenants, such as ‘Darkwraith’, are oriented around invading and killing other players. Other covenants, such as ‘Way of White’, are said to decrease the chance of invaders and increase the chance of

players joining for co-operative play (Dark Souls Wikidot, n.d.²), although at least one fan website treats these details as unconfirmed (Dark Souls Wikia, n.d.).

When players align themselves with certain covenants, they often receive items which allow them to activate the multiplayer mode associated with that covenant. For example, players in the Darkwraith covenant receive the Red Eye Orb, which allows them to invade random players at will. However, while covenants provide these additional avenues for multiplayer, they do not preclude the basic forms of multiplayer engagement. For example a player of the Darkwraith covenant can still use the White Sign Soapstone to be summoned as an ally. They are not restricted from using the basic forms of multiplayer – rather, they possess additional multiplayer avenues that they may or may not use alongside those basic forms. The relationship between players online thus depends primarily on the item used to initiate the multiplayer experience. If a Darkwraith invades using the Red Eye Orb, they will appear as a red phantom sent to kill another player. Alternately, as I have noted, if a Darkwraith uses the White Sign Soapstone, they will appear as a white phantom and play co-operatively.

With that brief primer on covenants in the broader context of multiplayer, I now turn to the religious connotations of the covenant structure. One might recall the above reference to the Way of White covenant, where the player may formally associate themselves with the Way of White, the religious group discussed in the second chapter. There are nine covenants in *Dark Souls*, and each is associated with a god or particular character – in this sense, the Way of White covenant is largely normative for the broader covenant system. While the Way of White covenant is explicitly associated with a religion, this is not the case for all covenants. Many are quite plainly religious: Blades of the Darkmoon, Princess's Guards, and Warriors of Sunlight are respectively committed to Gwyndolin, Gwnevere, and their elder brother, the unnamed firstborn son of Gwyn. Other covenants are honour-based – for example, the Forest Hunters stand guard over the tomb of Artorias, a famed knight. Players who join the Forest Hunters covenant are given the Cat Covenant Ring, which, when worn, automatically sends the player to defend the tomb of Artorias from trespassing players in other games. There does not seem to be anything particularly religious about this covenant, unless it is framed as a sort of religiously-motivated medieval chivalry. Will Hasty argues that for Bernard of Clairvaux, chivalric action is best justified by “a religious purpose that envisions and occupies the world and heaven according to the absolute perspectives of good and evil, and the complementary imperative that chivalry must

² These pages are from two separate wikis with the same name: 'Dark Souls Wiki'. To avoid confusion, I have cited the websites they are hosted by (Wikidot and Wikia respectively).

transcend a sinful, inferior, material (sensual) form to become a higher spiritual mission” (2008, 54). Chivalry of course refers not to our contemporary ideas of politeness or courtesy, but to the medieval code of knights. Arguably one could frame the Forest Hunters covenant as a chivalric pursuit – guarding the tomb of a noble fallen knight – and suggest that chivalric behaviour in *Dark Souls* is best understood within a religious framework, as in Bernard’s conception. But as I said, this seems to be taking a rather loose approach to the covenant’s religiosity. I would rather suggest that the Forest Hunters covenant denotes honour and nobility on behalf of the adherent, and keep the religious dimension as optional.

Beyond these instances, the third and final type of covenant has less to do with organised institutional religion, and more to do with philosophical or existential beliefs, which may or may not have a spiritual dimension. The Darkwraith covenant is led by Darkstalker Kaathe, a giant serpent who appears in the murky Abyss. Kaathe provides an alternate interpretation of the history of Lordran, which I will briefly recount here. I have already explored how the grey equilibrium of pre-history was disrupted by the advent of Fire, which introduced disparities such as the life-death binary. However, it seems that the fading of Fire will not restore the world to its previous state of equilibrium. Rather, it would mean yin without yang, darkness without light. According to Kaathe, this is a good thing. He refers to the post-Fire Age of Dark as “the age of men,” and urges the player to become the Dark Lord and “usher in the Age of Dark.” Much of the symbolism surrounding Kaathe and the Darkwraiths holds traditionally negative connotations. Kaathe describes himself as a “primordial serpent,” evoking Satan in the Garden of Eden, and the imagery of darkness connotes evil or sin. Kaathe is even found in an area called the Abyss. Even so, it is difficult to clearly attribute a moral or philosophical value to Kaathe’s vision for the future. *Dark Souls* has already bucked trends with its reinterpretation of the Undead as something not necessarily negative. It is therefore uncertain whether the imagery associated with Kaathe should be taken at face value. The exact metaphysics are also somewhat difficult to parse – even in my brief description of Kaathe and this hypothetical Age of Dark, I am pushing up against the borders of what can be authoritatively said about the fictional world of *Dark Souls*.

The Darkwraith covenant is a clear example of the philosophical covenant. It might be conceived in religious or spiritual terms by some players, but in its simplest form it requires a commitment to a certain philosophical idea – that the Age of Dark represents the fulfilment of humanity – rather than to an explicitly religious figure or to an organised or institutional religious group. Again: the Age of Dark as the fulfilment of humanity may be conceptualised by the player in religious terms, but it does not need to be. The Warriors of Sunlight covenant is best thought

of as religious because it involves commitment to a god. The Way of White covenant is best thought of as religious because it involves commitment to an organised religion (the Way of White) and, tacitly, its god (Allfather Lloyd). The Darkwraith covenant is best thought of as philosophical, because it involves commitment to an idea. These divisions are obviously not absolute: those players committed to the Way of White might also be motivated by particular philosophical ideas about the fictional world of *Dark Souls*. But ultimately the Darkwraith covenant can be conceptualised without recourse to religious terms or frameworks, while the Way of White covenant cannot.

Even though the *Dark Souls* covenants are not always framed in a religious way, they can nevertheless be brought into the orbit of religion. The term ‘covenant’ alone evokes a Judeo-Christian heritage – God makes covenants with Noah (Gen 9.9), Abram (Gen 17.2), and the people of Israel through Moses (Ex 24.8). The New Testament is also often called the New Covenant – in the NRSV, for example, the title page for the New Testament reads “The New Covenant, commonly called the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (American Bible Society 1989, 1145). The covenants of *Dark Souls* are called covenants because they involve some sort of exchange between the player and the relevant deity or chief point of contact. For example, members of the Blade of the Darkmoon covenant (serving Gwyndolin) receive Souvenirs of Reprisal after successfully invading and killing a player who has dispelled the illusion of Gwynevere. The Souvenirs can be traded for special powerful items at Gwyndolin’s chambers. Clearly this task aligns with Gwyndolin’s interests – he is responsible for maintaining the illusion of Gwynevere, and seeks to punish players who violate it. Only two covenants do not hinge on these exchanges: the Way of White covenant, and the Princess’s Guard covenant. Players committed to the Princess’s Guard covenant are able to use two special healing miracles – Soothing Sunlight and Bountiful Sunlight – while players committed to the Way of White are believed to have a decreased likelihood of being invaded by red phantoms. Neither of these covenants requires anything from the player, and they offer very little in exchange.

With the exceptions of these two covenants, then, covenants in *Dark Souls* revolve around a sacrificial exchange between the player and a character in the world. Often these sacrifices involve combat – either killing other players, as in the Blades of the Darkmoon covenant, or helping players kill bosses, as in the Warriors of Sunlight covenant. Upon achieving the relevant goal, the player automatically receives a token, such as the Souvenir of Reprisal discussed in the previous paragraph. The Souvenir is essentially an ear cut from the body of the victim, although curiously there is no animation showing the ear’s removal. It simply shows up in the inventory. According to its item description, “the knights called the Blades of the Darkmoon

punish the guilt-soaked offenders of the Gods and take this [ear] as proof of their conquest.” Other tokens seem to simply leap into existence *ex nihilo*; for example, members of the Warrior of Sunlight covenant automatically receive a Sunlight Medal upon helping a player defeat a boss. These Sunlight Medals are bestowed by the (unnamed) firstborn son of Gwyn, and again there is no particular animation or visual clue as to how the token comes into the player’s possession. It is simply bestowed upon them.

As I have suggested, when players receive these tokens, they may exchange them with the relevant deity or chief point of contact for further reward. *Dark Souls* thus uses the covenant system to model the practice of religious sacrifice in real religion. The player carries out a task for the leader of their covenant, and offers proof of the accomplished task in exchange for a reward – usually new items or weapons. But what is *Dark Souls* trying to say with this representation? Is it criticising sacrifice in real religion, or is it providing players with an aesthetic experience of sacrifice – a sort of aestheticized insight into real religious practice? I suggest that the player’s interpretation will depend on the cultural resources brought to bear on the text.

Interpreting Covenant Sacrifice

In this section I offer resources from two religious traditions, showing how the interpretation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* changes depending on the resources utilised. The first set of resources come from the Prometheus cycles in the works of Hesiod. Here, I argue, sacrifice is portrayed as a self-interested economic exchange carried out between an individual and a deity. With these resources, one might think that the representation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* is a relatively accurate modelling of how sacrifice works in real religion. The second set of resources come from debates between Christians and Jews about the nature of the Jewish religion. I explore a strain of Christian thought that sees Judaism as a legalistic and inauthentic form of spirituality, arguing that the resources provided by that strain of Christian thought might interpret the sacrifice modelled by *Dark Souls* as similarly legalistic and therefore also spiritually null and void. Obviously this strain of Christian thought is controversial, and I do not want to discuss its merits or flaws. Rather, I use the resources provided by that tradition, along with the resources provided by Hesiod’s Prometheus cycles, to show how the player’s interpretation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* may be affected by the cultural resources brought to bear on the game.

Hesiod’s Prometheus cycles are found in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. In these texts, Hesiod presents an aetiology of Greek sacrificial practices using the thematic motifs of gift and trickery. The first sacrifice is itself presented as a type of gift, albeit a disingenuous one. In the *Theogony*, Prometheus divides an ox into two parts. He hides the good meat “near the hide, half-

hid by the ox's/ Belly," while to Zeus "he served white bones, which by artifice and low/ Cunning he dished up disguised in the glistening fat of the bullock" (2008, 511-13³). Prominent here is the theme of the bad faith gift: the good meat is hidden in the unappealing stomach, while the white bones are concealed in rich juicy fat to make them seem like the better part. Zeus takes the fat and bones, and is outraged that he has been tricked. Hesiod goes on to explain in an aside that this "is the reason the races of humans all over the earth burn/ White bones to the blessed immortals on incense-redolent altars" (528-29). The story is thus an aetiology of sacrifice as well as a meditation on the gift exchange.

There is a slightly odd element to the story: Hesiod is at pains to maintain Zeus's all-seeing character in this scene, and so Zeus is portrayed as both tricked and not tricked, creating a certain psychological inconsistency. When Prometheus offers the parts to Zeus, we are told that "Zeus, whose reflections/ Are indestructible, knew and was quick to see through the deception,/ And he foresaw in his heart much evil to follow for humans" (522-24). Even knowing as he does, Zeus takes the pile of fat and bones. He then discovers the trick and becomes angry, even though he already knew about it: "Anger possessed his mind the minute he noticed the ox's/ White bones underneath and discovered Prometheus's crafty deception" (526-27). Discovery of the trick is thus impossibly portrayed as happening both before and after the event.

The exchange of bad faith gifts is completed when the angry Zeus responds with the creation of Pandora. He first withholds fire from humanity, but Prometheus tricks him again and steals it. In response to the theft, Zeus crafts Pandora with the help of other gods. Deborah Lyons describes Pandora as "created to be given in revenge for an act of 'negative reciprocity'" (2003, 99). In a sense, this negative reciprocity is an inverted but fundamentally appropriate response – Prometheus has given a bad gift to Zeus, who responds in kind with a bad gift for humanity. Further, just as the fat and bones seemed appealing, Pandora is presented as deeply beautiful, as a "beautiful bane" (Hesiod, 556). She is clothed in silver by Athena and crowned with wildflowers and gold (546-49). And yet she represents a great evil visited upon humanity. Hesiod waxes eloquent on what he sees as "the pestilent races of women" (562). They are like drones in the hive who stay at home and "gobble the labour of others" (568). They are "bad for mankind, in cahoots in all manner of tiresome mischief" (570). JP Vernant argues that the Prometheus cycle offers a definition of the nature of human beings, "midway between the beasts and the gods" (1979, 183). Among other things, human nature is characterised by sacrifice, a gift

³ I am citing line numbers rather than page numbers for Hesiod's works.

offered to the gods as something seemingly voluntary and disinterested, but really obligatory and self-interested.

Since Hesiod, religious sacrifice has been repeatedly theorised as a type of gift, primarily by Marcel Mauss, who associates the ritual of sacrifice with the economic exchange contracts between human beings (2011, 13). In his famous work *The Gift*, he argues that while gifts seem “voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous,” they are in fact “obligatory and interested” (1). Thomas Blanton agrees, arguing that within Mediterranean antiquity, “systems characterized by reciprocity served to reproduce forms of social and political order” (2017, 15). While the exchange of gifts was “not conducted on a mercantile basis” (15), the obligation to repay a gift was significant. Blanton quotes from Seneca, who suggests that “sometimes, not merely after having received benefits, but because we have received them, we consider the givers our worst enemies” (17). That said, Blanton notes that “the countergift need not be repaid with the same currency,” suggesting that material gifts were sometimes repaid with social support or public honours (18). In a religious context, a sacrifice to the gods might similarly be made in anticipation of repayment, for example in the form of good fortune or strong harvest.

By drawing on the cultural resources provided by Hesiod, then, one might interpret the depiction of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* as remarkably accurate. It is often an exchange between a human and a divine being – within the bounds of the fictional world, that is. It might seem voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous, but as Mauss points out, is really a self-interested form of economic exchange. Players who gather Souvenirs of Reprisal for Gwyndolin, for example, will receive items and rewards. There are clear ludic benefits to the process of covenant sacrifice. Even when the chief point of contact is not a deity within the fictional world, the process of accomplishing tasks and exchanging tokens for rewards is still framed within the broader context of the covenant system, with all its attendant Judeo-Christian connotations. For scholars such as Mauss or Blanton, and perhaps for Hesiod himself, the process of sacrifice as modelled in *Dark Souls* would seem to accurately capture something of the nature of real religious sacrifice in real world religions.

However, another point of view may be found by adopting the resources of a particular strain of Christian thought. In very crude terms, Christianity sees itself as the fulfilment and completion of the Jewish faith; thus the Old Covenant is superseded by the New. Inherent in this self-image is the concept of Judaism as necessarily incomplete. One strain of Christian thought expresses this supposed incompleteness by portraying Judaism as a legalistic and

therefore inauthentic religion.⁴ If the representation of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* can similarly be described as legalistic, then the resources of this Christian tradition would suggest that the representation put forward by *Dark Souls* is similarly inauthentic.

Before reaching a conclusion on that front, I must consider the portrayal of Judaism as legalistic in more detail. Alexander Rofé explores this portrayal with reference to the tenth commandment, ‘You shall not covet.’ The commandment’s basic ambiguity is this: does it ban covetous actions, or does it ban covetous thoughts? If it bans the covetous thought, why are none of the other commandments framed in terms of thoughts – for example, ‘you shall not want to kill someone’ instead of ‘you shall not kill’? Rofé notes that the differing interpretations of this commandment sometimes depended on the reader’s attitude towards Judaism: “At least some of the Christian scholars, predisposed by the sermon on the Mount, expect to find in the Decalogue... those elements of the legalistic approach which they ascribe to Judaism” (1990, 49-50). Cultural assumptions about Judaism thus inform the reading of the text: for some, Rofé argues, the tenth commandment is legalistic because Judaism is legalistic.

At the heart of this binary between legalism and spirituality is a question of religious authenticity. Jews and Christians are arguing in this instance over whether Judaism represents authentic religious striving towards the divine, or just legalism. In terms of the tenth commandment, Rofé notes that some Jewish commentators try to interpret it as a psychological instruction purely in response to the charge of legalism (1990, 50). This approach marks an implicit acceptance of the premise that legalism is not properly spiritual. But by drawing on Hesiod’s account of sacrifice, one might contrarily argue that the tenth commandment is spiritual precisely because it is legalistic. What is the motivation for interpreting legalism as inauthentic spirituality?

The beginnings of an answer may be found in the Sermon on the Mount. In the extract quoted above, Rofé cites the Sermon on the Mount as a factor predisposing some Christian scholars to see Judaism as legalistic. This famous sermon of Christ is found in Matthew 5-7, three chapters comprised of one long speech. Throughout the speech, Jesus repeatedly invokes a Jewish law from the scriptures, only to offer his own alternative law. The technique is framed with repeated phrases: Jesus begins “You have heard that it was said,” cites a law, and then offers his own version: “But I say to you...”. So for example Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable

⁴ I noted in the introduction that I am from a low Protestant tradition. As a disclaimer, the strain of Christian thought discussed here is presented from a scholarly perspective and not as something that I myself adhere to.

to judgement.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say ‘You fool’, you will be liable to the hell of fire.” This extract activates the controversy over the tenth commandment. Jesus invokes the commandment about murder, an action, and reorients the prohibition towards the psychological. It is not murder that is wrong, he suggests, but the underlying emotion of anger, which underpins not just murder but also more mild behaviours such as insults. The sermon on the Mount therefore energises the argument over the meaning of the tenth commandment, and, for some Christian thinkers, over the meaning and value of Judaism. If the commandment about murder is reoriented by Jesus away from the action and towards the psychological, they might argue, then surely the tenth commandment is similarly focused on the action. This repeated Jewish focus on the action is seen as legalistic, as more concerned with external laws and rules rather than an internal spiritual development towards goodness.

As a secondary example, one might turn to Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, or *On Christian Doctrine*. In this text, Augustine discusses a methodology for Biblical interpretation, citing Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 – “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” He uses this quote to create a distinction between the bondage of legalism and the freedom of relationality, of direct living relationship with God. For example, he cautions against taking figurative phrases literally: “And nothing is more fittingly called the death of the soul than when... the intelligence... is put in subjection to the flesh by a blind adherence to the letter” (2011, 86). Augustine describes the Jews as falling under this “miserable slavery of the soul” through their adherence to the laws of the Old Testament, but he also suggests that the Jewish case is actually better than that of the pagans: “although they paid attention to the signs of spiritual realities in place of the realities themselves, not knowing to what the signs referred, still they had this conviction rooted in their minds, that in subjecting themselves to such a bondage they were doing the pleasure of the one invisible God” (86-87). Thus for Augustine the Jews are not inauthentic per se, but wrong-footed; they are bound to systems of legalism and cannot engage in authentic spirituality.

Some might describe Augustine’s division between authentic spirituality and base legalism as anti-Semitic. The charge is a serious one: Christian Wiese argues that the history of Christian anti-Semitism “forms part of the history of the murderous anti-Semitism of the Nazis” (2017, 54). However, the division has a great deal of cultural purchase even outside of references to Judaism. Similar divisions exist within *Les Misérables*, for example: Jean Valjean is a convict granted mercy, the high spiritual quality, while Javert is a policeman unable to move beyond the letter of the law. Lisa Gasbarrone suggests that “*Les Misérables* is a deliberate, sustained account

of what happens when various characters... encounter, grapple with, and finally accept or reject faith” (2008, 18). The character who rejects faith is Javert – unable to accept faith and move beyond (spiritually inauthentic) legalism, he ultimately throws himself to his death.

As a cultural resource, then, the binary of legalism and spirituality might cause players to interpret the portrayal of sacrifice in *Dark Souls* as legalistic, and therefore spiritually inauthentic. One might describe the sacrifices as mechanistic, as a sort of base materialism. Three kills for the Forest Hunters will cause the player to be rewarded, quite mechanically, with a Ring of Fog. A focus on the materiality of sacrifice is criticised by Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*: he writes that when one bound to the law hears of sacrifice, “he... does not carry his thoughts beyond the customary offerings of victims from the flock, and of the fruits of the earth” (2011, 86). There is no consideration of the higher spiritual significance of the sacrificial act. One might argue that players in *Dark Souls* are similarly bound to material things – they carry out sacrifices not with any spiritual awareness, but in a brutish mechanical way, seeking ludic advancement over true spiritual enlightenment.

In some ways the problem of interpreting sacrifice in *Dark Souls* is typical of the problem of interpretation in *Dark Souls* generally. It is often quite easy to describe the events or processes going on at any given moment. It is often much harder to say what those events or processes mean. The procedures around covenants and sacrifice are in many ways mechanistic, and one might reasonably claim that the mechanistic nature of those procedures serves as a comment on sacrifice in real religions. The sacrificial process is stripped down to a core of gift and counter-gift, of economic exchange with the divine. But what does this representation mean? What is the comment being made? Player interpretations will differ depending on whether one approaches with a Graeco-Roman concept of sacrifice, or a Christian one. Those with a Graeco-Roman approach might be inclined to view the representation quite favourably, as a relatively accurate modelling of the economic self-interest at the heart of sacrifice in real religion. Those with a Christian approach might be inclined to see the process as empty legalism, as an implicit criticism of that same economic self-interest. A further question for consideration, of course, is whether *Dark Souls* could have represented fictive sacrifice in any other way, given the constraints of the video game medium. Perhaps its depiction of sacrifice as systematic, as having strict parameters and pre-determined rewards, was the easiest depiction for a medium rooted in systems and subroutines. Perhaps, even further, it was the only form of depiction available.

This question touches on a key issue in video game studies today. Clearly the medium of video games has a special affinity for modelling systems and procedures. In the introduction I

noted Daniel Vella's argument that a theoretical over-privileging of procedurality neglects the non-procedural elements of video games, such as mystery or the sublime – if such things can even exist in video games. The interpretive question set forth here thus hinges largely on one's understanding of the video game medium. Is *Dark Souls* portraying fictive sacrifice as systematic because it wishes to highlight empty legalism in real religion? Or because it is incapable of any other type of portrayal? Drilling down further, is it correct to interpret *Dark Souls*' portrayal of fictive sacrifice as systematic in the first place, or is that a bias introduced by a false emphasis on procedurality to the neglect of some other factor? A further question might be whether a portrayal of systematised sacrifice is really even a criticism of sacrifice in the first place. Is that not to privilege the Christian view of sacrifice, the Christian hostility to what is seen as empty legalism, over a Greek view of sacrifice as economic exchange? Without seeking to resolve any of these questions, it is clear that the relationship between the spiritual and the systematic is heavily contested. *Dark Souls* depicts fictive religion in order to comment on real religion, but the nature of that commentary is tied up in deeper theoretical questions about both the video game medium and religion or spirituality.

Coda

Moves in Mysterious Ways: Inference and Mystery in *Dark Souls*

Throughout the thesis, an underlying assumption has been that religion and video games have certain structural similarities. These similarities, I have suggested, allow video games to depict religions in an interesting way, but also allow video games to comment directly on the functions of religion. For example, I have shown how the religious architecture of Anor Londo is not only a depiction of a fictive religion's architecture, but also how *Dark Souls* deconstructs that architecture and encourages players to recognise the methods by which religious architecture communicates its meaning. However, it is important to note certain boundaries and limits to the structural comparison. One very simple difference is highlighted by the title of an article by Kevin Schut: "They Kill Mystery." Schut argues that video games have a mechanistic bias – that they exist within machines as a series of binary 1s and 0s, and that the computational logic of video games pushes its depictions towards the systematic and away from mysterious or transcendent supernatural elements (2014, 256). Vella argues a similar point, although for Vella the issue is not so much with the procedural nature of video games – what he calls their "computational materiality" (2015) – but with the propensity of video game scholars to only theorise video games from within a procedural framework.

In some ways, Schut's article represents the logical outcome of a theoretical over-emphasis on the procedural: it is the suggestion that video games kill mystery, that they are almost structurally incapable of dealing with the non-procedural. Video games obviously are heavily procedural entities. However, as Vella argues, scholarly study of video games perhaps needs to shift away from the formal functions and components of game objects, and towards the game as experienced from the player's perspective (2015). This is perhaps the location where mystery and the non-systematic can be better theorised and understood.

Strictly speaking in terms of the formal components of the game object, then, Schut's argument has a great deal of validity. In *Age of Mythology* (2002), for example, players can move their civilisations through different ages by dedicating themselves to different gods. While each god offers different miraculous powers to the player, those powers are contained within the ludic systems of the game. For example, if a player commits to Zeus, they receive a thunderbolt which can instantly kill one single unit. Hero characters – unique demigod units such as Perseus or Hercules – are also given 25 percent more health. The mystical powers of the gods are thus given

numerical value within the game systems of health and damage. They are contained within a ludic framework, whereby they can be relied on and anticipated by the player. Players know that choosing Zeus will always provide a thunderbolt and 25 percent more health for their heroes. There is no mystery here. The rule applies broadly across a whole host of games: in the religious brawler *Fight of Gods* (2017), where players can fight as religious figures including Anubis, Moses, and Jesus Christ, each divine character has a given set of attacks and a given pool of health. Each attack will have a predetermined range, speed, and damage. In other games, such as *Okblor: Omega* (2016), *Apotheon* (2015), or *God of War* (2005), the gods are enemy combatants that can be directly fought and killed. In some ways we might characterise video games as the apotheosis of the divine watchmaker view of the universe. The gods (or the game developers, rather) have created a perfect machine, a finely tuned environment that mechanically obeys set laws of health pools and hit boxes. They have turned their creation loose and left it to its own devices, left it to tick away until the end of all things. There are no miracles in video games, we might say; everything functions according to the rules.

Schut's argument therefore does raise a key issue for the depiction of religion in video games. It is important for scholars of video games and religion to show how different games are trying to think about the divine, whether within – or, as Vella suggests, beyond – the constraints and logics of ludic structure. I have suggested already that *Dark Souls* is engaged in this attempt to go beyond the limits of the video game medium. Where it comments on the propensity of religious architecture to shape the perspective of its inhabitant, it also reflects on the propensity of video game architecture to do the same. Its criticisms of religion are to some extent self-criticisms; *Dark Souls'* concern with religion and the supernatural is therefore partly emblematic of its broader desire to get beyond itself, to supersede the limitations that it identifies.

In this coda, then, I suggest that *Dark Souls* looks to get beyond the mechanistic bias of its medium by imbuing its item descriptions with a surplus of indeterminate meaning. This critical move reflects the shift suggested by Vella. While the formal ludic structure exists within a strictly mechanistic framework, *Dark Souls* introduces the mysterious within an epistemological frame. That is, while players might be able to say what an item does, they cannot necessarily say what it means. In the first part of the coda, I demonstrate the role of inference in the item descriptions of *Dark Souls*. I show how the player is lured into an inferential hermeneutic that denies closure or certainty, and argue that the mystery of *Dark Souls* stems from the indeterminacy of these item descriptions. I then draw on the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion in the Old Testament and show how *Dark Souls* deploys that same literary technique to sustain the mystery associated with the item descriptions. Ultimately, I argue, *Dark*

Souls draws on a technique found within real religion to create an atmosphere of mystery, which in turn opens up possibilities for the representation of fictive religion in video games. This coda reverses the flow of the rest of the thesis: rather than showing how *Dark Souls* uses fictive religion to comment on real religion, it shows how *Dark Souls* draws on a technique found in real religion to further the representation of fictive religion in the video game medium.

Inference and Item Descriptions

This coda marks a shift towards textuality, as I largely set aside the gameplay elements of *Dark Souls* and consider how it deploys textual resources instead. The game has a series of item descriptions that can be found in an equipment menu; taken together, these descriptions form a network of written entries. All items in the game (such as weapons, armour, and consumables) have a textual description – this is quite a common feature for video games, and particularly for Role-Playing Games (RPGs) such as *Dark Souls*. Item descriptions provide a short blurb on an item, explaining what it does and how to use it. In the original *Final Fantasy*, for instance, the item ‘Potion’ has an item description that simply reads ‘Restores 50 HP’ – HP being Health Points, or health (1987). But item descriptions are not always so functionalist. In some cases, they contain jokes or knowing winks – for example, in *Witcher 3* players can learn about different areas by purchasing a Lonesome World Guide (riffing on Lonely Planet). In *Dark Souls*, item descriptions go further, and often contain narration about the history of Lordran or specific people. Some of the detail is best understood as description, rather than narration. For instance, the text for Velka’s Rapier tells us that it is “a symbolic, powerful thrusting sword used by the pardoner serving Velka, Goddess of sin.” This is not narration in the sense that it does not depict action. However, other item descriptions are more clearly narratorial. For example, the item description for Ricard’s Rapier traces the story of Ricard’s life: “He was born into royalty, but wandered the lands in a fateful ill-conceived journey. He became Undead, and disappeared up North.” The item descriptions thus constitute an alternate mode of engaging with the fictional world of Lordran: players can play through the virtual world, or they can piece the world’s history together by studying the written entries. These modes are not autonomous, of course: items are embedded in the virtual geography of Lordran, while the item descriptions explain each item’s gameplay function. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between playing through the virtual spaces of *Dark Souls* and reading through the network of textual entries.

I suggest that *Dark Souls* imbues its item descriptions with a surplus of indeterminate meaning, and looks to move beyond the system-oriented gameplay by encouraging interpretation

and creative reconstruction of meaning. Some points of the lore are quite clearly established by the item descriptions; for example, in the description for the ‘Darkmoon Blade Covenant Ring’, players are explicitly told that “Gwyndolin... created the illusion of a sister Gwynevere.”

However, the game is not always so forthcoming. Other item descriptions are much more vague in their narrative details. For example, one consumable item in the game is called ‘Humanity’. It is a small black sprite that, when used, allows players to become human again – visually, they transition from looking like zombies to looking human. Its description reads:

“Rare tiny black sprite found on corpses. Use to gain 1 humanity and restore a large amount of HP.

This black sprite is called humanity, but little is known about its true nature. If the soul is the source of all life, then what distinguishes the humanity we hold within ourselves?”

The second paragraph here is cryptic. Which soul is being referred to? The titular dark soul? Perhaps the term is used in a generalised sense, in the same way as we might say ‘the head is the seat of the brain’. But if so, in what sense is it the “source” of all life? Another consumable item, the ‘Soul of a Lost Undead’, has a similar description with a slight variation: “Souls are the source of all life, and whether Undead, or even Hollow, one continues to seek them.” The shift here is from the singular to the multiple. The soul is replaced by souls. Arguably the description for Humanity could be understood in terms of this second item description: saying that the soul is the source of all life could mean that the soul in each living creature is the wellspring of their being. One might invoke a strict binary where the transient physical body is essentially a sleeve for an immortal unchanging soul. But should the second item description really be treated as a normative variant of the first? Or rather are they both supposed to co-exist as two separate but similar descriptions telling us different things about the fictional world? Is the distinction perhaps a translation issue? *Dark Souls* was originally published in Japan; does the distinction exist in the original Japanese language version? If it does not, should the Japanese version be treated as authoritative, or should the English version be treated as an independent text? Further, why is the soul juxtaposed against humanity? The item description rhetorically asks what distinguishes “the humanity we hold within ourselves” if the soul is the source of all life. What does humanity need to be distinguished from? Other types of life? And what is the term ‘humanity’ used in reference to here? Does it refer to the item Humanity, or to a more metaphorical human nature, to a bio-spiritual sense of identity and community? We use sentences like ‘He was an inhuman monster’ to imply that someone has abandoned morality or is inhumane; could “the humanity we hold within ourselves” be meant in that sense?

Clearly, there are no simple answers to these questions. The interrelated nature of the questions also means that to answer one often requires answering many others. Seemingly innocuous questions can quickly balloon into monstrous, unwieldy narrative reconstructions spanning the entire scope of the *Dark Souls* universe. In some ways, these questions are ultimately irresolvable. There are interpretations within the community, but they exist only as interpretations. There is no one authoritative meaning. When it comes to unravelling broader questions about the metaphysics or backstory of the *Dark Souls* universe, then, *Dark Souls* resists the singular or imposed interpretation by presenting the player with a series of fragmented, vague item descriptions, thus forcing players into the realm of inference.

While this focus on the Humanity item reveals some of the deep interpretive issues surrounding *Dark Souls*, more minor examples of inference are also present. For example, I suggest that the term ‘cleric’ is exclusively used with reference to Way of White clerics. Vince and Nico, who were referenced in Chapter Two in the discussion of the Undead Quest, are warrior clerics in the Way of White. They wear an armour set simply called ‘Cleric Armour’, which is described as “armour worn by the clerics of the Way of White.” Further, the miracles that make reference to clerics in their item descriptions are only sold by adherents of the Way of White. These adherents, Petrus and Rhea, sell nine miracles between them; eight mention clerics in their item descriptions. The term does not occur in any of the other miracles sold by or identified with characters from different religions. Because the term ‘cleric’ is clustered around these Way of White miracles, and because the Cleric Armour is only worn by Way of White adherents, we can infer that the term ‘cleric’ is only used with reference to clerics from the Way of White. It is not certain, in the sense that the game does not explicitly tell us one way or the other – but the argument is strongly evidenced.

While the construction of meaning required by *Dark Souls* is in some ways similar to that required by a Janet Frame novel, or Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the process of inference in *Dark Souls* extends outside the merely textual. I noted above that this coda marks a shift towards the textual, with special attention given to the textuality of the item descriptions. However, in my discussion of the term ‘cleric’, I drew evidence from visual elements such as character design, as well as the location of different miracles within the virtual world. One might equally draw on audio cues or soundtrack to make certain points, or on the ludic structure of the game itself. The game is implicated in the issues of construction of meaning just as much as the literary or visual elements familiar in other narrative contexts. While *Dark Souls* is thus not impenetrable to methods of inference borrowed from literary or filmic contexts, the totality of the game is best approached with a multimedia focus that incorporates all of the elements discussed here, with special focus

on ludic structure. Interpretation in a ludic context is often troubled by a tension between the fictional world and the game rules. Jesper Juul notes that “rules and fictions can rarely match completely; there are many examples of jarring mismatches between them” (2005, 163). In *Dark Souls*, it is unclear how far players should go in their attempts to incorporate game rules into the fictional world. Most players would agree that at some point, one must stop searching for coherence and accept the jarring mismatch of form and content. But there are significant disagreements about where this point is. Further, much of the tension between rules and world is attached to quite high-level metaphysical concepts, meaning that to some extent players are cast into a world that they do not and perhaps cannot fully understand.

Dark Souls has structured its item descriptions so that players who study the lore can construct theories about the fictional world while also being conscious of the limits of a theoretical construct. Players develop a framework or lens that allows them to make sense of the fictional world; they fill in the gaps in the historical record and locate game elements like Humanity and miracles within an inferential framework of meaning. Of course, *Dark Souls* resists closure, often raising more questions than it answers. It emphasises the fragile and constructed nature of interpretation, inviting playfulness and multiplicity over finality or resolution. For *Dark Souls*, interpretation is an ongoing task. It is rooted in the context of the player, and the ever-changing contexts of players – indeed, of humanity more broadly – ensures the constant need for interpretation and reinterpretation. *Dark Souls* encourages players to interpret with an eye to the nature of interpretation as construction.

Narratorial Intrusion and the Old Testament

If *Dark Souls* emphasises the unknown and mysterious in its item descriptions, then it is not purely through the arrangement of vague threads of narrative. It is also through the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion. This technique allows players to not only develop their own understanding of the game’s narrative world, but also perceive that understanding to be a construction, rather than simply as the ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ story. It foregrounds mystery and the unknowable, making them available for the depiction of fictive religion over and against Schut’s provocative claim that video games kill mystery. I argue that minimal narratorial intrusion is a literary technique found, among other places, in the narrative sections of the Old Testament. By drawing on an element found in real religion, *Dark Souls* creates an avenue away from mechanistic bias, which might in turn be fed back into the depiction of fictive religion.

To be clear, the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion is not found exclusively in the Bible, or even exclusively in the domain of religion. However, none of the topics discussed so far are found exclusively within the domain of religion. As I have repeatedly suggested, *Dark Souls* is aware that ‘religion’ is not some hermetically sealed realm of human life, with no interplay with any other area. Commentary on religion almost necessarily spills over into other areas of life. I am convinced that religion is a guiding theme throughout *Dark Souls*; ultimately, this thesis argues that the representation of fictive religion serves as a focal point that activates a critique of real-world religion and perhaps inadvertently reveals some of *Dark Souls*’ concerns with the shape of its own medium. By positioning the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion within a religious context, I show that it is relevant to the theme of religion in *Dark Souls*. The argument is not that it is only found in religion, but that it exists within religion, and is therefore pursuant to the study of religion in *Dark Souls*.

Narratorial intrusion is when a narrator interrupts the story to pass comment on different characters or situations. Chris Baldick suggests that an intrusive narrator must be omniscient, and that they will also sometimes “reflect more generally upon the significance of the story,” citing George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy as particular examples. He further suggests that the intrusive narrator “allows the novel to be used for general moral commentary on human life, sometimes in the form of brief digressive essays interrupting the narrative” (2015). Gerald Prince, by contrast, does not require the intrusive narrator to be omniscient, but simply “a (distancing, engaging, ironic or earnest) narrator commenting in his or her own voice on the situations and events presented, their presentation, or its context; a narrator relying on and characterised by commentarial excursions or intrusions” (2003, 46-47). Warren Motte points out that this definition does not create a strict binary of intrusive or non-intrusive: “clearly enough, this is a matter of degree rather than one of absolute kind.” He convincingly argues that “any utterance bears some trace of the speaking subject, however minimal, and thus any narrative act testifies to the presence of a narrator” (2007, 190). Given that the narrator is always present in the act of narration, the intrusiveness of the narrator becomes a matter of degree – one best explored through specific examples.

In his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (2011), Robert Alter explores minimal narratorial intrusion as practised in the Old Testament. He begins by distinguishing between narration and dialogue. Old Testament narration, he argues, often has a “highly subsidiary role... in comparison to direct speech by the characters” (81). He cites an extract from 1 Samuel 21.1-10, which he suggests is a “fairly representative biblical rendering of an event” (80). The extract opens with a brief narratorial contextualisation: “David came to Nob to the priest Ahimelech.

Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him..." (1 Sam 21.1). Most of the rest of the scene is direct dialogue, with only one break in verses 6 and 7. Verse 7 introduces another character, while verse 6 is a gloss, a brief comment where the narrator explains the legality of a request made by David in the preceding verses. Alter argues that "narration is thus often relegated to the role of confirming assertions made in dialogue" (82). George Savran corroborates Alter's argument, noting only further that the narrator occasionally contradicts speakers as well (1985, 2). In 1 Kings 13:18, for instance, the narrator states that an old prophet is lying.

Alter argues that the balance of dialogue and narration in the Old Testament is due to "the writer's desire to give each fictional situation, with minimal authorial intrusion, a marked thematic direction as well as moral-psychological depth" (2011, 109). Notice that Alter refers specifically to minimal *authorial* intrusion – he has not necessarily drawn the distinction between narrator and author. Within the framework set forth here, his argument is better understood as referring to minimal *narratorial* intrusion. For Alter, then, minimal narratorial intrusion is a technique that allows characters to make their own moral judgements without the narrator providing a running editorial commentary on the nature of right and wrong.

Alter expands at length on this organising logic of biblical narrative:

"Every human agent must be allowed the freedom to struggle with his or her destiny through his or her own words and acts. Formally, this means that the writer must permit each character to manifest or reveal himself or herself chiefly through dialogue but of course also significantly through action, without the imposition of an obtrusive apparatus of authorial interpretation and judgement. The Hebrew narrator does not openly meddle with the personages he presents, just as God creates in each human personality a fierce tangle of intentions, emotions, and calculations caught in a translucent net of language, which is left for the individual himself to sort out in the evanescence of a single lifetime" (2011, 109-110).

Some might find it odd to claim that the biblical narrator in the Old Testament does not moralise or interfere. As Savran notes, the biblical narrator is clearly making conscious and intentional editorial decisions, and therefore "bears ultimate responsibility for the actions of his characters." However, Savran continues, "much of the effectiveness of biblical narration derives from the mimetic qualities of the story in general, and from the actual dialogue of the characters themselves in particular" (1985, 1). The narrator does not intrude to pass judgement on characters, or to dictate how their actions should or should not be received.

In this regard, the narrative sections of the Old Testament are often far less heavy-handed and didactic than one might expect. For instance, Mary Mills describes the story cycle of Genesis 12-24 as often vague: it “tells some parts of a story in detail but leaves other aspects undeveloped” (2008, 283-284). One commonly cited example is that of Abraham during the Binding of Isaac narrative. Abraham is asked to offer his son as a burnt offering in Moriah, but readers are not presented with his thoughts or his reaction: “He [God] said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey... and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him” (Gen 22:2-3). Jonathan Jacobs argues that “this concealment by the text and passivity on Abraham’s part is especially conspicuous against the background of his combative reaction upon hearing of the decree to annihilate Sodom and Gomorrah” (2010, 548). The decision not to reveal Abraham’s inner mental state is the sort of editorialising that Mills refers to; in this sense, the narrator is clearly impacting the story-telling process by refusing readers access to certain parts of the story-world.

However, as noted above, my argument is not that the narrator has no impact on the narrative, but that the narrator does not constantly interrupt to offer moral judgements. I suggested above that the question of narratorial intrusion is one of degree; by way of comparison, then, we may compare the role of narratorial intrusion in the New Testament, where it is much more frequent. For example, in the first chapter of Acts we are told that after betraying Christ, Judas “acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness” (Acts 1.18). Characters in the next chapter are judged based on their response to the miracle of tongues: “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’” (Acts 2.12-13). There is a clear division between the good, those who are struck with wide-eyed wonder by the miracle, and the bad, those who are cynical, who sneer and who do not recognise the miracle. The narrator’s language becomes equal parts more pejorative or glowing depending on whether the group or individual in question is acting in accordance with a specific moral or spiritual standard. In both the Old and the New Testament, then, the narrator impacts the narrative, but the Old Testament contains less of what Alter describes as an “obtrusive apparatus of authorial interpretation and judgement” (2011, 110).

Mills argues that by refusing to include this obtrusive apparatus, the Old Testament foregrounds imagination as a basic exegetical tool: “An imaginative engagement with a biblical text is not an avoidance of reality but a means of approaching reality from an alternative

perspective” (2008, 281). She quotes Kathryn Tanner, who suggests that “Texts that speak to every time and place are able to do so because of their indeterminacies... such texts are always reaching out to new readers by their failure to give a definitive account of themselves” (Tanner 1998, 126). Thus the gaps or ambiguities in the Old Testament narratives are treated as an essential part of its design. This positive reading of the inferential or imaginatively reconstructive elements of biblical hermeneutic is carried further by Trevor Hart in his book *Making Good*, where he argues that the human process of constructing meaning is not only foregrounded in biblical hermeneutics, but is in fact a divinely ordained process. The biblical Creation, in Hart’s view, is “a project divinely begun and established, yet one that is handed over to us with ‘more to be made of it yet’” (2014, 8). He quotes Iris Murdoch, who contends that “the world is not given to us ‘on a plate,’” but rather “given to us as a creative task” (2003, 215). Hart agrees: the world is “shaped and reshaped by what Creator and creature together make of it” (8). Adam’s act of naming the animals in Genesis 2 is a prime example of how human creative or imaginative acts are “part and parcel of God’s project to establish a world (which in this sense comes ‘unfinished’ from His hand).” Our construction of meaning is a lively participation in the created order, an ongoing act of co-creation that “continues beyond the threshold of the day of divine rest” (7). Crucially, the act of naming the animals comes before the Fall: it is not an element of human life discovered after the introduction of sin, but in the purity of the Garden of Eden.

This lively participation is equally present in *Dark Souls*, which operates according to a similar logic of minimal narratorial intrusion. As a video game, it is not entirely comparable to the textuality of the Bible, although there are points of intersection. For instance, typically video games do not have narrators – in the same way that films usually do not have narrators. Some games use spoken narration as a stylistic device – in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003), for example, the action depicted on the screen is framed as a story told to a listener by the titular Prince. Every time the player dies, the Prince says something like “Wait, that’s not how it happened,” and the game is rewound to before the player’s death. However, this is an unusual technique for video games. In *Dark Souls*, the only spoken narration is found in the game’s introductory cut-scene. All other speech is character dialogue, which is sometimes unreliable as a guide to the fictional world. For instance, in the Undead Asylum, the game’s first area, players are told by an unnamed knight (called Oscar in the game files) to travel to Lordran and ring the Bell of Awakening. Upon arriving in Lordran, the first character one meets reveals that there are not one but two Bells of Awakening. Characters in *Dark Souls* are thus not always reliable guides to the fictional world. They give unreliable instructions to the player without corrective intervention from an omniscient narrator.

The item descriptions in *Dark Souls* prove the most instructive parallel in terms of minimal narratorial intrusion. The item descriptions achieve the effect of minimal narratorial intrusion by presenting value judgements from the perspective of characters or cultures in the game. Thus the description for ‘Toxic Mist’ tells us that it is a “unique pyromancy crafted by Eingyi, considered a heretic even at the Great Swamp.” Eingyi is not directly called a heretic by the narrator – rather, the narrator attributes this moral judgement to the inhabitants of the Great Swamp. Similarly, in the description for the miracle ‘Vow of Silence’ we are told that the mysterious goddess Velka is “considered to have a great range of influence even as gods are concerned.” This is a classic example of meaning mediated through point of view. For most practical purposes, players can assume that Velka does actually have a great range of influence. But technically this information is not delivered with narratorial endorsement. More specifically, the narrator only states that Velka is *considered* to have a great range of influence. We are not presented with facts about the world, but facts about the point of view of a given fictional culture. The narrator describes the beliefs of that culture – and presumably in this instance they are reliable, but there is still a level of presumption involved. This example is precisely the sort of minimal narratorial intrusion that *Dark Souls* deals in. The ‘Vow of Silence’ item is by no means anomalous either. For instance, the ‘Crimson Robe’ tells us that a group called the Sealers were “once *known* as healers.” Alternately, the ‘Dingy Robe’ is specifically only “*thought* to have once been the white robe of a maiden.” Even in instances where direct facts are reported, subjective beliefs are still sometimes introduced as motivation. For example, the Knight Lautrec’s ‘Helm of Favour’ tells us that “during his solitude, he forsook everything, for he believed in the goddess’s love for him.” Did this mysterious goddess actually love him? Readers are only enlightened as to Lautrec’s belief on the matter.

While the item descriptions typically attribute value-judgements to characters or cultures within the fictional world, there are some exceptions. I suggest that these exceptions are often best understood as free indirect speech, and are therefore still associated with the value-judgements properly belonging to characters and cultures. The clearest example is in *Dark Souls III*, where the item description for a set of armour belonging to Patches (a recurring character throughout the series) is written in narratorial voice but focalised through Patches’ point of view. In *Dark Souls III*, Patches wears ‘Black Leather Armour’. Players can access this item by buying it from him, or by taking it from his corpse. Its description reads: “The wearer of this fine attire was admired by friends and enemies alike, for his skills were unmatched, and his heart was true as gold. As its new owner, you have quite the shoes to fill” (2016). The player is obviously not supposed to take this seriously. Patches is a rascally character who shows up in each game to

trick the player, usually by kicking them off a ledge. The suggestions that he has unmatched skills and a heart of gold are only reflective of his view of himself – they are not to be treated with the authority usually attributed to the item descriptions. Clearly, in the Black Leather Armour description, free indirect speech is used for comic effect.

Other examples are deployed in *Dark Souls* to try and lure the player towards a particular view. To return to the Toxic Mist example, the second paragraph asks “Why was Eingyi driven from the Great Swamp? One only need cast this pyromancy, a perverse diversion from the art of fire, to find out.” I argue that the narratorial voice here does not necessarily cement Toxic Mist as a perverse diversion. Rather, I read it as an example of free indirect speech, as an instance of narrative voice being focalised through the perspective of the pyromancers who drove Eingyi out of the Great Swamp. Another example is the ‘Darkmoon Séance Ring’, which is related to the Darkmoon Blade Covenant Ring discussed in the first and third chapters. According to the Séance Ring description, “The Dark Sun Gwyndolin is the only remaining deity in Anor Londo. His followers are few, but their tasks are of vital importance.” Of vital importance to whom, one might ask. Is this focalised through Gwyndolin’s perspective, or is it meant to carry the authority of the narrator? The debates and varying interpretations stemming from this lack of certainty place the Ring closer in type to the ‘Vow of Silence’ miracle. Where the miracle expresses the value-judgement of characters in the fictional world (“she... is considered to have a great range of influence”), the meaning attributed to the Darkmoon Séance Ring or to Toxic Mist depends on the value-judgement of the player.

The item descriptions discussed here demonstrate that *Dark Souls* distinguishes between those that authoritatively reveal cultural belief, and those that hover around the borders of free indirect speech, trying to tempt the player into rash over-commitment to a given view. I have argued that the item descriptions bear more than a passing resemblance to a literary technique that features heavily in the Old Testament – that of minimal narratorial intrusion. The precise form of that technique naturally changes across the different mediums. In the Old Testament, much of the prose is given over to character dialogue, whereby the characters reveal themselves through their actions. In the item descriptions in *Dark Souls*, the prose is narratorial, but it limits itself to reporting the beliefs and values of cultures, rather than endorsing those values as objective or necessarily true within the fictional world. Furthermore, because this prose is largely narratorial, the item descriptions can toy with the line between free indirect speech and straightforward narratorial endorsement. This playfulness creates a game of cat and mouse between *Dark Souls* and players, who try to develop their own value judgements about the fictional world with – or perhaps in spite of – the slippery narratorial voice. In this sense, not

only does each character manifest themselves through word and action, but each player also develops their own set of values and understanding of the fictional world.

In summary, then, I argue that the item descriptions in *Dark Souls* create a sense of mystery. They require an inferential approach that resists closure or any sense of certainty, partly through the literary technique of minimal narratorial intrusion, a technique with roots in the Old Testament. In *Dark Souls*, this technique offers value judgements from the perspective of cultures and individuals within the fictional world instead of from an authoritative non-diegetic narrator. By way of closing, I suggest that acknowledgement of the indeterminacy and plurality of meaning is not to be taken as a substitute for commitment. I do not think that *Dark Souls* wants players to abandon the goal of understanding the history of Lordran. The first item received by the player is the 'Dungeon Cell Key', the key which allows them to escape the Undead Asylum and begin their journey to Lordran. Its description notes that "A mysterious knight, without saying a word, shoved a corpse down into the cell, and on its person was this key." It then initiates and contextualises the process of asking questions about the fictional world: "Who was this knight? And what was his purpose? There may be no answers, but one must still forge ahead." The player is told with the very first item that there may be no solutions to any of the questions raised within the game. And yet, *Dark Souls* says, one must still forge ahead.

Over the course of this thesis, I have made many interpretive decisions about the world of Lordran that other players would disagree with. Wherever possible, I have indicated those interpretive decisions or allowed them to remain as indeterminate spaces within the fictional world. If Hart is correct in his argument that God's Creation is handed over to us as an interpretive task, as something "shaped and reshaped by what Creator and creature together make of it" (8), then perhaps the act of speaking about *Dark Souls* is itself a religious act – albeit one exercised in the context of a fictional world. Perhaps it is entirely appropriate that interpretive differences exist. It is a reminder that the game resists closure, resists the easy moral absolutes of religious fundamentalism. At the same time, a lack of total consensus is not treated as a reason to abandon the search for meaning altogether. One must still forge ahead.

I therefore argued that *Dark Souls* teaches players to interrogate the ideologies presented in religious architecture. I showed how the game inducts players into believing the prophecy of the Chosen Undead, and how it allows players to discover the lie of that prophecy by exploring the environment in Anor Londo. Once players discover that the prophecy is false, I argued, the

mechanisms by which the belief was sustained become apparent. Anor Londo's religious architecture is one such mechanism. I also argued that *Dark Souls* criticises religious violence, drawing on the psychological violence of the Undead Asylum and the physical violence of the Undead Quest carried out by the Way of White as examples. While both of these instances contain complexity and nuance, *Dark Souls* deplores violence committed for disingenuous political reasons yet cloaked in religious justification. I further complicated this critique by suggesting that *Dark Souls* is not necessarily all that bothered by violence in general – rather, it finds something offensive about the disingenuous political agenda of the Way of White. With my next argument, I gestured towards some of the problems of interpretation in *Dark Souls*. I argued that *Dark Souls* modelled the process of religious sacrifice in order to comment on sacrifice in real religion. However, I suggested, the precise interpretation of that comment depends largely on the resources brought to bear upon the text. Different religious traditions theorise sacrifice in different ways, and so players may come to different interpretations based on the frameworks deployed. Finally in the coda I argued that *Dark Souls* draws on a literary technique used by real religion to construct its item descriptions. The practice of minimal narratorial intrusion allows *Dark Souls* to draw the player into an inferential mode, whereby a sense of mystery is created and epistemological closure is resisted. Even though the item descriptions are not framed in a religious way, *Dark Souls* deploys a technique borrowed from real religion that has the potential to enrich video game depictions of fictive religion. The coda also made concrete some of the methodological steps underpinning the rest of the thesis, especially regarding the evidence drawn from item descriptions.

This study of fictive religion in *Dark Souls* has thus explored several techniques by which *Dark Souls* uses fictive religion to comment on real religion. It has revealed some of the structural affordances of the video game medium and shown how those affordances are used in the representation of fictive religion. The ongoing intellectual maturation of video games has also been brought to the fore. As I suggested in the introduction, *Dark Souls* is not engaged in a basic valuation of religion as good or bad. It rather interrogates the processes by which religions reproduce their world views, and the interplay between religion and other spheres of human life, thus contributing to our broader understanding of both real religion and the medium of video games.

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⁵ These are two separate wikis for the game, not one duplicated reference. While the URLs and hosting websites are different, the header on each website simply reads 'Dark Souls Wiki'. There is also a third wiki by the same name (<https://darksouls.wiki.fextralife.com>), but I did not cite it in this thesis.

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⁶ The slight changes in the publisher's name are intentional; Bandai Namco have changed their name three times over the past twelve years.

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