Thomas Fusdahl

Vulnerability and Growth in Video Game Narratives

Approaches to Storytelling in Dark Souls 3 and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

May 2019

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Vulnerability and Growth in Video Game Narratives

Approaches to Storytelling in Dark Souls 3 and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Thomas Fusdahl

Thomas Fusdahl

Vulnerability and Growth in Video Game Narratives

Approaches to Storytelling in Dark Souls 3 and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Master's thesis in Medievitenskap
Supervisor: Sara Brinch
May 2019

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Thomas Fusdahl

Vulnerability and Growth in Video Game Narratives

Approaches to Storytelling in Dark Souls 3 and
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Master's thesis in Medievitenskap
Supervisor: Sara Brinch
May 2019

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Faculty of Humanities

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Acknowledgments:

Abstract:

This thesis examines the different approaches to storytelling in *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice.* The analysis reveals how both games are subversive in relation to the most narratives within the video game medium. *Dark Souls 3* more actively uses the game's mechanics to convey meaning to the player, while Hellblade is more directed, featuring fully developed, clear cut characters in its story. The majority of games in the action and roleplaying game genre, enables the player's power fantasies. Though different in design, *Dark Souls 3 and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* makes the player feel vulnerable instead. This creates a larger potential for a sense of growth when the player improves at the game mechanics or is able to complete a story arc by finishing a game's narrative.

Sammendrag:

Denne mastergradsavhandlingen undersøker forskjellige teknikker for historiefortelling i *Dark Souls 3* og *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice.* Analysen avslører hvordan begge spill bryter med vanlige narrative konvensjoner i dataspill. *Dark Souls 3* bruker i stor grad spillmekanikken til å formidle mening til spilleren, hvor *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* er tettere regissert av spilldesigneren for å fortelle en spesifikk historie. De fleste spill i rollespill og action sjangeren lar spilleren leve ut sine maktfantasier. Selv med ulike tilnærminger, får *Dark Souls 3 og Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* spilleren til å føle seg sårbar i stedet. Dette skaper større potensiale for følelse av mestring når spilleren forbedrer seg i spillmekanikken, eller er i stand til å gjennomføre et tilfredsstillende narrativ.

Table of Contents:

1 Introduction

The genesis for this thesis is my general impression and realization that the objective of most of the video games I play is to make me feel good. More specifically they seem to want to empower me. This is a dimension of the medium that seemed vastly more prominent in games than in other recreational mediums like books or movies. Of course, empowerment might be found there as well, but I felt that there was a critical difference that set videogames apart. Because they're interactive, its audience are given power over what happens on screen. Maybe it follows from this that a videogame player feels empowered when he is handed control over certain aspects of the experience. If we establish that this is true, we can move on and focus more on the difference between games, and what the consequences of this empowerment is. In this thesis I want to focus on two games that subvert that common video game trope of pure empowerment, and make players feel vulnerable instead, and how that impacts those narratives compared to those experienced in other games. The analysis will show how *Dark Souls 3* (From Software, 2016) conveys vulnerability through the gameplay and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (Ninja Theory, 2017)* does the same through a more directed storytelling style. Throughout this thesis I will focus on what sets these games apart from both each other, and most other games. What types of design are used to convey a greater sense of vulnerability? What does vulnerability mean in the context of video games, and what are the effects of a vulnerable player on storytelling? To answer these questions in a meaningful way we must establish the differences between types of games, and how they are categorized and consumed by both scholars, media and regular consumers.

1.1 Vulnerability and Growth

Before delving into the discussion concerning these two games, we should establish vulnerability means in the context of this thesis. The term is seemingly broad. After all, there's both the physical and emotional kind of vulnerability. Also, who is feeling vulnerable, the player

or the avatar in the story? It could be argued that there's a relationship between the player and the avatar that puts games in a unique position in relation to other mediums. When a player is heavily engaged in the game and the avatar is in danger of "physical" harm a part of that is transferred to the player. Many times, when playing a first person shooter, I've had the experience of projectiles coming towards the avatar in the game world, making me flinch or try to dodge in real life. The avatar represents the player in the game world and what happens to it can have a profound effect on players. As a result, game developers have a unique opportunity to craft narratives that set themselves apart from the those found in more traditional media.

Much of the value of a game making the player feel vulnerable, is that when they are given moments of safety or triumph, those moments feel even more rewarding. It seems useful then, to discuss how games balance these two opposites to create an engaging whole. In more traditional storytelling mediums like books or movies the characters growth manifests in subtle ways. Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* develops empathy for example. That type of development is uncommon in video games. However, as we look closer at some of the game mechanics utilized in *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice*, we will see how character development and growth can be uniquely leveraged in their specific medium. For brevity's sake, I will mostly be referring to *Hellblade* without the subtitle going forward.

1.2 Selecting the Games

What makes *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade* good examples to use in a discussion about vulnerability in video games? Why not use a game in the survival horror genre? After all, no other types of games go more out of their way to make the player feel vulnerable than the games in the *Resident Evil* franchise or *Amnesia* franchise. Both are examples of popular franchises that excel in terrorizing its players. It mostly comes down to wanting to explore genres where the gameplay wasn't explicitly horrifying the entire time. Both games I'm analyzing, balance on the edge between uncomfortable and comfortable. They provide the player with tools to resist and defeat enemies, while never becoming unchallenging. Also, they are firmly placed in the action genre, where providing the player with power fantasies seem the

most common (maybe along with games in the shooter genre). Additionally, they can be contrasted in certain ways when it comes to storytelling, mechanics and budget, which will all help highlight some various design practices in the industry. Lastly, they are both examples of games that pioneered a few concepts that might prove to be very influential to game design for many years to come. *The Dark Souls* franchise has spawned a genre of games coined "soulslike", and *Hellblade's* themes related to mental illness and unique publishing model, sets it apart from many other games. It also utilizes a setting to further contrast it's themes of vulnerability and introspection. Most games featuring a celtic warrior woman who slays demons as the main character, would be very likely to exclusively empower the player. The subversiveness seems even more effective in that kind of setting.

Now that we've covered why we are using these two particular games; I should also cover why I chose two discuss both games instead of just focusing on one of them. Generally, it's mostly to be able to better convey the analysis of both games by providing context. When both games use wildly different, but still successful designs, to express their content, we can contrast the two to better understand each game individually.

1.3 Agency and Ludonarrative Dissonance

We've discussed the connection between making the player feel vulnerable before giving them an opportunity to feel growth. The first can potentially enhance the other. This growth is reliant on the players ability to interact with the game's fiction. This ability has been termed: player agency. Some scholars have made the case that agency isn't just about being able to perform a wide variety of actions in the game. That agency "...is instead about expressing intent, and receiving a satisfying response to that intent." (Tanenbaum, K., & Tanenbaum, J. 2009, s.8) A game with a high degree of agency gives the player the opportunity to commit to a "satisfying" action. When buying a stealth game, the player shouldn't be given the option to charge without thinking. If the marketing department have set the right expectations the player should be roughly aware of the available choices. A good stealth game offers the player multiple

interesting ways to sneak past enemies. Crafting a video game narrative then, is sometimes to balance giving the player agency while still creating a compelling story.

When people discuss the quality of games the often refer to two different aspects. Gameplay and story. Gameplay is expressed through a game's mechanics, how high can you character jump, or how many hits can you take before you die and so on. Often, much of the story is expressed through the dialogue, expository text, or the games visuals. As we will see going forward though, separating gameplay and story becomes a problem when the games mechanics have an impact on how the narrative unfolds in a game. Sometimes there is a direct manifestation of this when the player-controlled protagonist is given a choice that changes the story. However, it can also be argued that gameplay elements like animation of jumping or attacking, affects the players perception of the story. During the last ten years, there's been an increasing interest in the relationship between gameplay and story. In 2007 Clint Hocking, a game developer working for LucasArts, coined the term Ludonarrative dissonance. It describes the feeling the players get when there's a conflict between the story told by the game mechanics and the story told through the regular narrative avenues. In the Assassin's Creed franchise for example the player can dive from the tallest castles and cathedrals into a flimsy cart filled with straw and pop out unharmed. This clashes with the game's rather serious tone, and visual style. You could argue that the believability of the world and therefore story, is sacrificed for convenience's sake. The player desperately needs a quick way to get down from these towering structures.

1.4 Motivation and Usefulness

Throughout my life, pure escapist fun has been the primary motivator for consuming the media content I enjoy. This is doubly true for video games where my avatars command armies or save the world on a regular basis. Feeling powerful in these types of scenarios was always part of the appeal. As I've matured, I have also enjoyed a certain subsection of games that make me feel like the complete opposite. I've explored oppressive environments where one wrong step leads to certain doom. Sometimes I´ve had my heart beating out of my chest, just barely surviving a

difficult boss fight. In following pages, I want to examine and contrast these two types of game experiences. The comfortable escapist breeze and the vulnerable nail biter. I'm motivated by my impression that many games narratives are too similar, and that designing a weak player character, at least at the story's beginning, leads to a more dynamic an interesting narrative. I want to categorize and examine small but impactful design decisions relating to this feeling of vulnerability. Gaming can immerse you in a different perspective, and I think that there's a real importance connected to how stories are perceived and discussed in this medium both on the side of the game designers and the players. Both games achieve success in unique ways that should inspire other developers, but that's not at all saying that all games should be striving to make the player feel vulnerable. There are certainly times where I personally don't have the extra energy, and simply want a relaxing game where I can feel comfortable.

As well as giving the player the power to defeat enemies, games can give the player the power to explore, to craft, to communicate or to change the game world itself. There are plenty of other ways to empower the player that doesn't involve violence or the subjugation of a different party. This other type of empowerment is found in both the games were discussing. Among other things, *Dark Souls* gives the player an opportunity to explore both the environment and story, while *Hellblade* has the player solve different puzzles to progress.

When playing *Dark Souls,* I noticed that there were certain times when my heart would race like nothing I've ever experienced any other game. As I finally beat a boss, I had been struggling with I would do victory laps around the apartment I wanted to explore why this was happening to me. Why was I so emotionally invested? As I pondered the question, I couldn't land on one single thing that could answer it. It became clear to me that the answer was a combination of many things which made me want to analyze and discuss them. When playing *Hellblade* later the same year I was deeply immersed and felt a deep connection with the character. The feeling however, was wholly different from *Dark Souls*, but similar in that both games placed me in a disadvantaged and vulnerable position, prompting me to want to compare and contrast the two. I be going more deeply into the choice of those two specific games later.

2 Theory

In this chapter we will establish an understanding regarding some of the concepts we use to describe video games. Some of these concepts are used in other mediums but are given a unique context when used in a discussion about video games. "Without a basic understanding of how different types of games are structured on a formal level, we will not be able to understand any of the complexity or representational messiness of game aesthetics as expressed through different technologies, genres and gaming situations." (Klevjer, 2007, s.48) A common understanding regarding some concepts, is in other words useful, before venturing into a discussion regarding specific games.

2.1 Narrative

In this part we will examine how the relationship between games and narratives have been understood by scholars in the past. The term stems from literary theory but is often used when discussing other storytelling mediums. In fact, the language of games scholarship at large is heavily influenced by the groundwork laid down by both literary theory and film studies. One of the things that some literature and games inarguably have in common is that they both create fictional world. It follows that some of the language that has been used to understand fiction in other fields in the past are now brought to bare on video games. "One of the advantages of literary theory is that it has a long history of studying the relationship between the real world and the fictional worlds of literature". (Julian Kucklich, 2006, s.98) Let's therefore use what literary theorist J. Hillis Miller calls the "basic elements of all narratives" to understand how the term can be understood. He names three core elements: Situations, Character and Patterns. (J.Hillis Miller, 1990, s.75) According to Miller, all narratives starts off with an "initial situation" that changes into something else. This change reveals something to the audience of the narrative. These are the events of the story and how its development is perceived by the audience. Character does not, in this case, refer to fictional characters within the story but a "personification" through which the story is told. Without the written or oral presentation there can be no narrative. Lastly, he claims that all narratives have some sort of pattern that

repeats themselves. This can be both themes represented or actual story beats throughout the narrative.

More than just describing what a narrative is, he examines what function narrative performs in culture. "Why do we need stories?... Reading or watching fictive stories is, when one thinks of it, a strange activity. The reader of a novel detaches himself or herself from the immediately surrounding world of real life obligations." (J. Hillis Miller, 1990, s.68) We immediately identify a link to the video game medium, which is most often see as pure escapism. He goes on to describe a loftier reason for us to create narratives. That we through fictions are able to make sense of our world. "With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life. (J. Hillis Miller, 1990, s.68) He makes the point that we might be "inventing" meaning from our fictional narratives. Do these stories create our perception of love, honor or evil or are these universal concepts that are strictly revealed to us? Either way, it seems difficult to overstate the importance of narratives to human culture.

To what degree narrative as a concept is useful in relation to game studies has been a contentious subject among game scholars. The "ludologists" who argue that the interactivity found in games make video game stories something that should be interpreted differently than other mediums. The player's input greatly affects the text. In fact, the game's content isn't even accessible without input from the player. So rather than the consumer being presented with a pre-created narrative, the player will himself affect the narrative in a significant way. In traditional media the contents of the story will always be the same for every individual consuming the text, but in games, every playthrough will be at least marginally different (Nielsen, Heide Smith, Pajares Tosca, 2008, s. 172) Secondly, some games have an extremely limited narrative scope. This was the case for almost all games when simple 8-bit graphics limited what could be done in the medium. That's excluding early text adventure games of course, which had their start in the late 70s (Kucklich, 2006, s.96) Nobody focuses on the narrative of *Space Invaders* (1978), *Snake (1997)* or *Geometry Wars* (2003). In these games we are given almost no context that provide some meaning to the game. Almost all the enjoyment

derived from these games have nothing to do with narrative, and everything to do with the mechanics. Prevailing against a challenge is much more important in these kinds of games. It doesn't really matter if we control a snake, worm or other oblong creature in *Snake (1997)*. What's important is that our avatar grows longer as we run into the "food" that spawns in the environment, and that we avoid the increasing challenge of running into the walls surrounding the game board or our own growing body. There are of course video games on the opposite side of the spectrum that only provides the player with priorities pertaining to the narrative and ignores challenging the player entirely. That will be covered later in the section regarding difficulty.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman devoted a chapter of their book: *Rules of Play: Game design fundamentals* (2003) to "games as narrative play". In this chapter they ask the following questions: "Where do narratives in a game reside? How can one design games as narrative experiences? What kinds of narrative experiences do games make possible? What is the role of narrative in the design of meaningful play?" (Sale & Zimmerman, 2003, Ch. 26 s. 2) They knowingly avoid discussing whether games are narratives to begin with. (ibid) Earlier we covered how narratives in games are hard to pin down, due to how different gaming experiences can be from each other. Salen and Zimmerman point out that narratives in just a single game can take many shapes. A "proliferation of forms" where the narrative of a game can be conveyed through the non-interactive cutscenes, the title screen, the play itself or the management of in-game resources, or even through the game's presentation outside the game world, like the writing on the back of the box. They conclude that "each of these elements contribute to the narrative play of a game in their own unique ways." (ibid)

2.1.1 The "Realness" of Video Games

In Espen Aarseth's "A Narrative Theory of Games" he attempts to morph narrative theory so that it can be applied to stories in games. This theory helps us establish what a narrative even is when we use it in the context of games. Aarseth points out that many scholars have argued for the need to expand what the term narrative means in relation to games because storytelling techniques are ingrained in all the uniquely interactive elements found in the medium. But there are downsides to expanding the term because it becomes increasingly unclear what exactly is meant when we use it. It becomes less and less precise. It might be especially harmful to narrative as a concept because of its is quite broad to begin with. Aarseth states:" At some point it gets hard to distinguish narratives from any other worldly experience," (Aarseth, 2012) Therefore I will attempt to use the term sparingly and only in relation to a games larger overarching story. Other terms like fiction, can be utilized when discussing how games can immerse players in a game world.

When creating a groundwork for a definition of narrative in games, Aarseth uses four elements that games and stories all contain: World, agents, objects and events. These four elements are again categorized with further subsections. A game world for instance, can be linear or more open, and this will have a profound impact on the potential storytelling opportunities in a game. This corresponds closely with my own experience playing both *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade. Hellblade's* world is significantly more linear, and this makes it more likely that the "agents" or characters are more "round and rich" as Aarseth calls it. Why this is the case will be discussed in detail when we examine the differences between the two games. He ends up with a comprehensible model that we can use to categorize the "type" of narrative found in games. Furthermore, he establishes a vernacular we can use to describe very particular concepts in video games connected to their narrative.

Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games (2007) is another work by Aarseth that discusses the appeal of stories in games. His argument is that simulations in games are "real", in

a way that differentiates games from other mediums. He compares the Dragons found in *Everquest (1999)* with the dragon Smaug, from Tolkien's *The Hobbit (1937) "*One dragon is clearly fictional, but the other is simulated. One is there to read about, or watch on a TV or movie screen, the other is there to be played with". (2007) He goes on to describe how this play can provide the player with a singular personal relationship with the dragon. The simulation will react in a certain way to the player's specific input. Aarseth argues that the dragon in *Everquest* is no longer fictitious. The simulation is almost something real depending on your definition on what qualifications are required to fit that description.

This argument is further served by how many games feature currency that can be bought and sold with regular "real" money. (Aarseth, 2007) If this is true, how can we argue that the game's currency is any less real than the one we use in every-day transactions.   In more and more games you can both sell the currency used in the in-game universe, or you can sell the your account containing your collected loot and gear. This is mostly true for Massively Multiplayer Online Games that according to *Aarseth: "..., balance between the virtual and the real".

This last feature is not relevant to the two games I will focus on in this text, but it does illustrate how features that could be construed as immersion-breaking because of their obvious relation to the game's mechanics can actually help ground the game into something quite close to reality. This is important to consider when we examine the sophistication of *Dark Souls 3*'s simulation, versus the one found in Hellblade.

2.1.2 The Avatar

The avatar is the focal point to the players influence on the game world. In Rune Klevjer doctorate called: "What is the Avatar" he defines it "…as an embodied incarnation of the acting subject" (2006, s.87) The player is represented through a model within the game world. This model varies wildly and Klevjer describes how the differences between avatars "define the possibility-space of the player's fictional agency within the game." The avatar is therefore at the

center of any video game fiction. (ibid) you could argue about certain exceptions. The aforementioned abstract games like *Tetris (1987)* can be said be lacking any form of avatar.

At the very least It's possible to distinguish between games where the player controls an avatar and games where the player exerts their influence more directly. In this case, the avatar might not be in the players field of view or the avatar's identity is unknown. Developers of strategy or simulation games normally avoid using an avatar for a variety of reasons. In a city building simulation games for example, there are few good ways to contextualize the players point of view from the sky looking down on the environment. Similarly, there are few ways to contextualize an avatars almost omnipotent influence over the game world. Many simulation games still attempt to provide the player with a formless avatar. Games in the *Simcity* franchise (Maxis) give the player the title of "mayor" through various advisors or citizen's complaints. But playing a *Simcity* doesn't quite resemble being a mayor. The job is not performed floating on clouds above the city. *Black and White* (Lionhead,2001) solves the problem by making the player a god in the context of the game's narrative. Imagining a god floating in the sky, looking down on us, and influencing events in the game world fit with many cultures perception of what a god is like.

"The data seems to suggest that it is much more common for individuals to use avatars as facilitators for experimentation than for vehicles for direct projection. "(Hart, 2017)

Dark Souls 3 and *Hellblade* are both avatar-based games. But the avatars represent very different approaches in design. In *Hellblade* the player takes control over a set character called Senua, whose name is even featured in the games extended title: Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. This character is voice acted and reacts to the events of the story in a specific way. In Dark Souls 3 the player gets to customize how the avatar looks, choose a class and give the avatar whatever name they desire. I will argue how these differences impact the narratives presented in each game.

2.1.3 Identifying with the Avatar

Research performed by literary scholars Paul E. Jose and William F. Brewer, confirmed that the more an audience identified with the protagonist, the more suspense was felt throughout the story. (1984, s20) In games, especially role-playing games, the player is often given the opportunity to create their own character. That is also the case in the *Dark Souls* franchise. In Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice though the player controls the titular character. She is predefined in both looks and backstory before the player picks up the controller. Created by the player or designer there are certain characteristics of an avatar that could increase the potential for the player identifying with the character. Some things affect the avatar spill over onto the player in real life. For example, the position of the avatar will affect the loudness and direction of audio in the characters vicinity. Additionally, performing any action in a virtual world makes the player embody the character. Senua then, becomes a mix between the players representation in the game world, and separate character with her own motivations. As we compare the two games will be looking at how this impacts the two games potential for immersion and storytelling.

2.2 The MDA Model

At a series of workshops at the Game Developers Conference from 2001 to 2004 Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubeck developed the MDA model. This model aims to separate three different elements that determine what a game is. Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. However, all three of their definitions for these words differ quite drastically from their frequent use in today's discourse, which is likely to cause confusion.

2.2.1 Mechanics

Mechanics cover the underlying and unseen digital code that the game consists of. The player does not register these mechanics directly, they are thousands of mathematical algorithms that allow the simulation within the game to happen. Dynamics on the other hand, represent what happens in the game and is registered and affected by the player. Where the mechanics are

static algorithms, the dynamics are what happens when these algorithms interact based on the players input (Nielsen, Smith, Tosca, 2008, s. 38) Their definition of mechanics differs quite drastically from the way it's used colloquially. In his article *Defining Game Mechanics,* Miguel Sicart confirms this when describing how players use the term in relation to taking cover from enemy fire in *Gears of War* (Epic Games 2006). "Seasoned players would probably not hesitate to call the cover system a "mechanic", something that connects players' actions with the purpose of the game and its main challenges."(Sicart, 2008) So normally, mechanics are used to describe elements of the gameplay like moving, shooting or platforming.

Sicarts own attempt at a definition, more closely resembles how it's more commonly used by these "seasoned gamers". "game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state." (ibid) He goes on to explain how "agents" can refer to both a human interacting with the game's system, or a computer system doing the same thing through agents like AI controlled characters within the game. He goes on to also define his own modified version of two subcategories of mechanics: primary and secondary mechanics.

Primary mechanics "can be directly applied to solving challenges that lead to the desired end state." (ibid) Often these mechanics are what places a game in a certain genre. Shooting for example would be one of the primary mechanics in a first or third-person shooter. If a player is required to use a mechanic to progress in the game, it can be defined as a primary mechanic.

A secondary mechanic would encompass those supplementary actions performed by the player. The definitions of a supplementary mechanic would be very reliant on the game. For example, in many games the player can make the avatar perform a dodging roll move. In most games mastering this move would not be required to finish the game and could then be classified as a secondary mechanic. In other games successfully performing a dodge roll consistently could be crucial to making progress in a game, which would make it a primary mechanic.

2.2.2 Dynamics

Dynamics are what happens when the player interacts with the mechanics of the game. Rolling two six-sided dice will determine how far you move your piece in monopoly, for example. Sometimes in games with complex simulation, the player's action can have complicated consequences where different agents within the simulation will interact. Removing or changing a road while playing a game in the *Simcity* franchise *(1989-2014)* for example, can lead to the citizens getting in a traffic jam, not getting to work, and whole neighborhoods losing its tenants because they can pay their rent. This term is most useful when discussing specific changes to a game's mechanics. How will changing the mechanics for instance, affect the dynamics. This term is mostly conflated with mechanics both colloquially and in academia. It's therefore unlikely that it will gain momentum as model

2.2.3 Aesthetics

Aesthetics "covers the favorable emotional responses invoked in the player as he or she interacts with the game" (ibid) They include narrative as one of the 8 factors that can attract us to games. "A Game will usually offer some of these pleasures, but not all of them." (Egenfeldt Nielsen, Heide Smith, Pajares Tosca, 2008, s. 39) What type of attraction is present, depend largely on what genre the game falls into. In most contexts aesthetics encompasses the visual presentation of a thing. Changing it to include this wide array of different elements has certain obvious pitfalls. Maybe the MDA-model would be more useful if it utilized different words that didn't already had established and accepted definitions.

2.3 Genre

Too accurately discuss some of the features in both *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade* we need to establish an understanding of what type of games they are. How are they categorized and understood, relating to other games that seem similar? There are a lot of ways to categorize games. But a genre isn't just a category. Andreas Gregersen frames it this way: "it is quite possible to create a category of works of popular art with the word "Dead" in their titles, but

this category is obviously not a genre." (Gregersen, 2013, s.5) He goes on to sum up what he thinks is the most important thing that turns a mundane category in to a full-fledged genre. Categories and genres are separated by the shared knowledge of what the category entails. Most people for example, make certain assumptions when something is described as a western or a drama. This clearly contrasts with Gregersens earlier example of popular art with "dead" in the title. We can make very few accurate assumptions based on that information alone.

So how are games categorized? You can base the genre on the theme or the actions that the player do within the game world. In a addition you can focus on how the game is controlled or what platform it's played on. We can categorize games based on long list of variables depending on various gameplay mechanics and themes. The video game website Gamespot, enables the option to browse games by 50 different genres that range from the general descriptor "action" to the extremely specific category of "cricket". The way games are categorized, at least on this website, is not following an established or well-known format. It does excellently highlight however, the difficulty of categorizing games. What a game can be, varies so dramatically based on the platform it's played on, the method by which it's controlled, or what perspective its content is presented in. You could easily argue that some type of video games resemble movies or books more than certain other games. The "visual novel" genre, where you exclusively make choices that affect the story doesn't fall into most scholars' definitions of what a game is. Yet thousands of these products are sold on digital video game marketplaces, along with other media products that are inarguably defined as games. Examples include *Emily Is Away* (2015) and *Danganronpa* (2010)

2.3.1 Ontology of Video Games

Jesper Juul proposes five types of games on dependent on if the game world is abstract or representational or something in between. He uses *Tetris (1984)* as an example of a representational game. (Juul, 2011, s.131) Though even that franchise has representational elements. In the Gameboy version from 1989 the player was awarded with a short video of a space rocket taking off, if they got a score above a certain threshold. It's possible to then

interpret the game mechanics as the player building a rocket by placing the tetris-blocks. Adding any form of representational elements can make the audience imagine connections between the mechanics and what's being represented. For most people though, the blocks dropping from above are nothing, but shapes used in an abstract puzzle. The two main games discussed in this thesis are the polar opposite. Juul would place them in the "coherent world games" category. "Nothing prevents us from imagining them in any detail." (Juul, 2011, s.132) If almost all the game mechanics are given a fictional reason for existing the game belongs in this category. In other cases, game designers will strip away almost all interactive systems to the point where many question if they can be called games anymore. They are coherent worlds, but are they still games?

Brendan Koech makes the claim that some scholars have been too concerned with defining some pure singular archetypal definition of a game that separates it from traditional media. (Brendan Keogh, 2014) Doing this implies that quality of a game is strictly related to more interactivity. It gazes forward into the future where games have been unshackled by the limitations of the past. Koech makes the claim that: "...Game studies broadly, has been more concerned with defining what video games should be than understanding what they are,."(ibid) The discussion has certainly not been limited to games researchers. Several games media personalities have also spent time trying to define what games are. Popular youtuber and video game critic John Bain, also known as Totalbiscuit argues that for something to be considered a game it needs to have a "failure state", the most common one being where the avatar dies and gets sent back to a previous checkpoint or save. He qualifies this by arguing that failure states don't have to be "binary". He uses *Beyond Two Souls (2013)* as an example. In this narrative focused game, the player is never confronted with a game over screen. Rather things can go poorly for the avatar in a more dynamic way. To some small extent the game challenges the player interactively. He uses the term "interactive installation" to describe a game where this doesn't happen, where the player simply navigates through the narrative by moving the character forward. This is no less challenging than turning the pages of a book for example. Whether the product is still "good" is seemingly a different discussion, but in Bains video he heavily critics a game for failing to utilize the

interactive options inherent and unique to videogames. This theme will be heavily featured in the upcoming comparison of *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade.*

2.3.2 Steam Tags

In practice, what we define as games is mainly determined by the platform that provides access to the product. And we categorize these games by mixing different genre tags together to as succinctly as possible convey what the game is. Movies can mostly be categorized by one word, or sometimes two describing the movies tone: Like comedy or action comedy. If the theme or setting is something out of the ordinary, we can imagine something like a western, romantic comedy. Game genres are almost never derived from the games tone. Tags like rpg, strategy or fps let us know how the game is controlled and from what perspective the game world is perceived. Simon Dor points out that: "There is a clear distinction between strategy *in* games and strategy games: only the latter refers to a genre." (Dor, 2018) The player makes plenty of strategic choices in rpg's or shooters but if the game is not played from a perspective looking down on the action from above, you would almost never refer to it as a strategy game. All this gives us the impression that the story is secondary to how the game plays. In fact, games that defy the norm, and have few gameplay mechanics are often given genre tags like "story rich" on steam implying that games lacking this particular tag, is lacking in the "story"-department. This might not be the case at all though. What we more accurately can infer from the "story rich" tag on steam, is that the other gameplay mechanics like combat or platforming are rather simple or absent altogether, which allows the player to more reasonably focus on the story.

We have established some of the challenges in accurately and succinctly categorizing video games through traditional genre descriptors. the "Steam tags" system were introduced in 2014 to help solve these challenges. Now the players themselves could apply tags to games and if enough people applied the same tags it became an "official" genre descriptor on the store page. With this system the descriptors become much more specific to each individual game. The top four most popular steam tags used to describe *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* are: atmospheric, psychological, female protagonist and story rich. Having these descriptors in

addition to the action, adventure genre description really helps to inform potential buyers what they are getting into. The tag: "story rich" also highlights what sometimes separates games from traditional mediums. Calling a novel or a movie story rich would be mostly confusing. They wouldn't really function if they lacked a story. But "story rich", is an informative and descriptive term when describing game because of the varying degree to which games contain a story.

2.3.3 Video Game Communities and Memes

It's hard to separate a popular video game from the culture surrounding it. Much of the vernacular used to describe and discuss various elements building the game originates on internet message boards and forums. This affects the experience of playing the game itself. This is doubly true if the game is played online as well since the game is directly shaped by the influence of not just the primary consumer, but others as well playing at the same time. Before the development of internet culture, the author's intent could differ substantially from the interpretation of its audience. Now that interpretation is galvanized by communication within the game's community. Innocuous details might spawn a meme that gets a life of its own online. The developers might then reference that meme in dlc or sequels. There are quite a few elements in *Dark Souls 3* that can be interpreted as "fan service", meaning things put in the game by the developers because of its perceived popularity online, rather than to improve the game's quality.

2.4 Immersion

Immersion commonly describes the way a player feels like a part of a game's world and its story. Even if were emotionally engaged by the fantasy, there is still a notable separation between the player and the avatar. We don't breathe the same air or feel the alien gravel under our feet. Game designers often aim to lessen this separation as much as possible. This will strengthen the impact of anything that conveyed through the games story, visuals or audio, like vulnerability which is why it's so relevant to this thesis. Strengthening the feeling of immersion can be done in a variety of different ways. Laura Emri and Frans Mäyrä distinguish

between three kinds of immersion. "Sensory immersion" is based on the raw audio-visual perception of the game. Large screens, VR headsets or surround sound speakers and headsets all enhance this type of immersion by shutting out the material world. (2005, s.7) "Challenged based immersion" gets the player involved by providing a level of challenge that keeps them invested in the gameplay. The challenge can be based both on motor skills or mental skills used to make strategic decisions or solve puzzles. Often the challenge involves both at the same time. (2005, s.8) Lastly, there's "Imaginative immersion." This is the part of immersion that where the player gets emotionally involved in the game's world and narrative. They imagine themselves actually exploring the environment and completing epic quests, and their "immersed" in that experience (ibid).

There are certain aspects of the design that are crucial to a game's immersion. Firstly, the controls must feel intuitive and responsive. Many different games share button configurations so that experienced players can transfer their knowledge to newly acquired games. Beyond that, controllers are designed with specific genres and player actions in mind. *"In first- and third-person shooter games, the right shoulder button typically maps to firing a weapon. Since the button is pressure-sensitive, it can mimic pressing the trigger of different types of firearms and does in this specific regard resemble (part of) guns as a specific outside-of-game referent."* *(Blomberg, 2018)* In certain genres that have emerged with motion controls, the connection between the movements performed by the player and the avatar are close to negligible. In the Kinect game, *Dance Central (2010)* the controller is simply a camera that detects how closely the player is able to mimic the dance moves performed by the on-screen-avatar. This was preceded by the Nintendo Wii, which accessed an expanded audience because of its motion controller. Swinging the controller to mimic the movements of swinging a tennis racket was much less than the usual hurdle of memorizing buttons, sticks and pads on a traditional controller. In a addition to how the game controls, the players immersion is also affected by a variety of visual and auditory factors, many of which will be analyzed and discussed during the examination of *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice.* But let's establish some basic concepts first.

Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy describe immersion as "the loss of sense of time, place or self…". (Jason Rutter, Jo Bryce, 2006, s. 141) It's a metaphorical term that equates consuming media with being submerged in liquid. While this feeling can be experienced both in the movie theater and in the library as well, they insist that being immersed in a game world is something different. This stems back to gaming's unique interactive quality. You are not merely observing another character on screen. You inhabit that character. Though this is only true for avatar-based games, in strategy games for example the player inhabits a displaced perspective overseeing the action from above. Even in cases like this the player inhabits the game world, and in most cases such a perspective allows for even more interactive possibilities. At the opposite side of the scale and where games are arguably at its most immersive, is the first-person game where the player inhabits the physical perspective of the avatar. As videogame technology progressed, perspectives like this where the player can navigate a 3d environment, became increasingly common during the late 90s and on. "The shift in design is indicative of an overall trend to make desktop video games feel more like virtual reality"(Alison McMahan, 2003, s.67) More recently the goal to make video games as immersive as possible continues with the release of virtual reality platforms like the oculus rift, HTC VIVE, and PSVR in 2016. Here motion controls gaming is combined with VR glasses to create a convincing approximation of a real life surroundings that the player can interact with using physical movement.

In addition to the players perspective, realism also has an impact on immersion. McMahan divides realism into two subcategories. "…social realism (the extent to which the social interactions in the VRE matched interactions in the real world), and perceptual realism (how closely do the objects, environments, and events depicted match those that actually exist)." (Alison McMahan, 2003, s.67) Social realism can be achieved either having the player interact with a convincing AI or with another player online. Perceptual realism is more straightforward in that its achieved by having the game world seem as photo-realistic as possible. Therefore, increased graphical fidelity leads to a higher degree of immersion. But achieving a true to life and realistic graphical style in a game is both extremely time consuming to develop and taxing

on the platform running the game. Also, when a game tries and fails to achieve realism, a player can lose their sense of immersion even worse. Designers who pursue the goal of photorealism risk causing jarring breaks to games "reality". If the game glitches out or if parts of the visual aesthetic don't quite live up to its ambitions. Facial animations for example, are infamously hard to pull of realistically, and can sometime venture into uncanny valley territory. *Mass Effect: Andromeda (2016)* by Bioware is an emblematic example illustrating this challenge. Characters faces often twist into exaggerated expressions. For several months following the release of the game, Bioware adjusted the facial animations in downloadable patches.

As often as we hear about being immersed in a game, we also hear about something in a game "breaking" the immersion. Often this is when a glitch happens, or maybe bad voice acting. Anything really that reminds you that you're playing the game rather than inhabiting the game world. Naturally the game designer has to balance the immersion and gameplay convenience. Most avatars don't have to eat, sleep or go to the bathroom, and if they do, then in-game time is sped up for those sections. But content isn't just removed from the game to make it more convenient, it is also added. In a chapter about fiction in games Jesper Juul asks: "Why does Mario have three lives?" (2011, s.123) In *Donkey Kong (1981)* There's no context provided to explain it. As Mario is struck by a barrel or lit on fire, he simply reappears at the start of the level, one life closer to game over. Juul refers to an informal study where participants explained the reasons why Mario had several lives. "With only one life, the game would be too hard" (ibid). They decided to refer to rules instead of giving any reasons that would make sense in the game's narrative.

Many games remove parts, or all the interface to achieve an increased sense of immersion. The idea is that elements like a health bar or minimap will remind the player that they're "just" playing a video game. This is one of the differences that separate *Dark Souls* and *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice*. Later, we will closely examine this difference in the section comparing the two games.

2.5 Difficulty

One of the more obvious way to communicate both power, and lack thereof is through the degree of difficulty that the player faces trying to conquer the game's challenges. You can design the game so that an average player will fail several times before eventually succeeding through learning the intricacies of the challenges pitched against him. In theory, this will give the player a sense of growth and mastery. This relies heavily of course, on him not giving up on trying to progress in the game. A danger to the enjoyment of the game, according to Jesper Juul, is that a game is too easy. He performed a study where a certain degree of challenge was seen as a priority by the participants. He also identified a perceived connection between easy games and games that lack depth. (Jesper Juul, 2009, s.7) A game might facilitate several possible strategies that can be used to win and complete the game, but if the player breezes through employing just a single strategy he might not realize or care. Juul makes the case that failure is "central to player enjoyment of games." (Jesper Juul, 2009, s.11) It allows the player to improve at the game and feel growth. There are many games where this assessment will feel strange. If a game is entirely narrative based where different outcomes have ambiguous subjective values, and the player himself must determine whether he succeeded at the game. Here, failure too becomes vague and unclear. Though rare, a game's story can also be a tragedy. Is it appropriate to say that a player wins in these cases, where his avatar fails? A game that has a tragic ending represent a contrasting polarity where on the one hand, the player was successful, but the character failed. How is a player supposed to feel in this situation? In other forms of media, it's not that uncommon for the creators to leave the player with conflicting emotions. There are open ended endings where the audience is forced to imagine what happened to the characters of the story. That's rare in video games, but what's even more rare is for the story to have an outright tragic ending. It is almost never the case in video games because of the incongruity that i described earlier. One well known exception to this is the game *Spec Ops the Line* a retelling of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness which garnered plenty of positive attention for subverting expectations. But of course, that only works when there are expectations to subvert.

Secondly, many other games can be less goal oriented. *Minecraft (2009)* for example, is more a sandbox where the player is expected to create his own goals. These goals can be as challenging as the player desires. Some of the creative feats performed in *Minecraft* are absolutely staggering. Recreating the fantasy city of King's Landing from Game of Thrones was an exceedingly difficult task, but the parameters of failure and success were set by the players themselves, not the designers like in most other games. Lastly, there are narrative games that don't have any ways for the player to fail at the game. In *Dear Esther* (2012) for example, you complete the game just by moving forward on a linear path consuming the story through audio clips.

3 Method

The following pages will consist of a qualitative analysis of the two games. Each game will be analyzed in turn starting with *Dark Souls 3*. A discussion on different unique aspects of each franchise, will be followed by a chapter where we compare and contrast some of the most important differences that separate the two games. The discussion about each of the two games will focus on different subject matter. The chapters about *Dark Souls 3* will have focus heavily on the mechanics while the chapters about *Hellblade* will be more focused on the game's narrative. My priorities line up with each of the games. *Dark Souls 3* wants to engage players with a profound system of intermingling mechanics, while *Hellblade* wants to convey a very specific story. Hellblade uses gameplay to effectively sustain that story. But it would be hard to convey the core of the game without devoting a large portion of time to the narrative itself. Selecting what elements of the games to focus on in general, are one of the biggest challenges when writing this thesis. Both games have a gargantuan amount of content deserving of discussion. But obviously I've done my best in selecting the parts I think are most relevant to vulnerability growth and immersion.

There are certain unique challenges to analyzing games. A books pages, or the frames of a movie, will generally stay the same between different consumers. A playthrough of a game, however, can look wildly different depending on the player. Depending on the level of a game's interactivity, a game can feature different stories, strategies and modes of play, all depending on a player's previous experience and personal preferences. These are challenges when discussing a games content. It's important that the person performing the analysis is mindful about taking other ways to play into account. There are however some elements of the game that stays the same regardless of who's playing. Throughout the thesis it's therefore to separate those parts from those that can be different from player to player. At the very least it's something that we must be mindful of when discussing video games with a large degree of interactivity.

4 Analysis of Dark Souls 3

Dark Souls 3 is a Japanese action role playing game franchise produced by *From Software* and published by *Namco Bandai.* The first *Dark Souls* game was released in 2011 and was a spiritual successor to *Demon's Souls (2009)* created by the same company but published by *Sony.* The franchise is infamous for its degree of difficulty. This was used heavily in the marketing when they released the *Dark Souls: prepare to die edition* for the PC a year after the original's home console release. The avatar is very vulnerable to attacks and traps and is expected to die many times during a playthrough. This is part of the game's appeal. When the player succeeds in the face of these harsh challenges, he is meant to feel a sense of accomplishment and growth. Character growth is a regular part of storytelling, and here it's implemented in the gameplay mechanics itself, rather than in just the story told by the game's writers. We will throughout the analysis of the game examine the parts of the game's design that help convey a sense of vulnerability, and how that in turn impacts the broader narrative of the game.

4.1 The Genre of Dark Souls

Initially I described the game as an "action role playing game". This means that the game has prominent rpg elements. The player can allocate skill points as he accumulates XP throughout a playthrough and collect new weapons and armor that affects the players stats and animation move set. From the "action" tag we can infer very little. We know that the game has an element of hand eye coordination and an element of timing. The combat is experienced in real-time, rather than through a turn-based system. Turn-based combat systems functions similarly to a game of chess, each side exclusively deciding and performing their actions on their own turn. If the combat was turn-based, the player could leave the gaming console without pausing, for an indefinite amount of time and return without risking any harm coming to the avatar. But in a real-time system, that would very likely result in death for the player character, at least if roaming enemies are close by. In addition, there's also very likely a movement system that involves dodging, rolling and/or jumping when a game receives the action genre tag. That doesn't really tell us all that much about how the game plays. Action rpg cover a wide spectrum

of games. Especially lately, as rpg elements like skill-trees are incorporated in a variety of different types of games that didn't include them before. Examples include the Assassin's Creed franchise that were purely stealth/action or sports games like FIFA or Madden. You can divide rpg's into two subsections based on whether the combat is turn based or not. If the rpg is turn-based the game is often referred to as a jrpg (Japanese roleplaying game). Both because Japanese game companies pioneered this type of game in the 80s, and because they still produce most of these types of games today. Turn based combat cycles between the player and computer each making strategic choices of what to do in combat. *Dark Souls* is ironically more like a traditionally western rpg with real time combat and even a western medieval and fantasy aesthetic and in spite of being developed by a Japanese studio.

4.2 If You Get Frustrated

The *Dark Souls* franchise is often used as an example of one of the more challenging game franchises produced during the last decade. This is excellently illustrated by a paragraph in the game's instruction booklet with the headline: "if you get frustrated".

Dark Souls is hard, make no mistake. But don't despair. Dying is totally ok. The worst that can happen to you is losing some saved Souls and they can be replenished. Equipment you find and upgrade, shortcuts you unlock, and attributes you increase are all permanent, and most importantly, the knowledge you gain exploring and fighting improves your gameplay even as your character gains strength. If you are having a really tough time, take a break, cool your head and come back refreshed. Think about what you're having trouble with. Try a different approach or explore a different area entirely. Use your items, use your spells, try different weapons or armour and experiment with new tactics.

Other paragraphs in the booklet include: "Death Lurks Around Every Corner "and "Do Not Relax. Ever." Game manuals have after the advent of digital distribution, become increasingly simpler. They normally just explaining the game's controls and basic gameplay concepts, but apparently, this would be inadequate for a *Dark Souls* game according to *From Software*. The

paragraph reflects the games image as a difficult, and it uses quite personal language in an attempt to really connect with the player in order to stop them from giving up on progressing in the game.

So far, we have taken for granted that an increased difficulty result in a heightened sense of vulnerability. It immediately makes sense, because the player inhabits and relates to the avatar, so when the avatar is in danger, we can assume that the player feels that threat too. This might not be the case in the long run though. Familiarity with the environment and challenges the player is faced with, changes their emotional impact. You could compare it to seeing a horror movie several times in a row. The viewer would after a while be more prepared for the jump scares and creepy visuals and audio. An experienced player would learn where the enemies lurk and where the traps are hidden and would feel less vulnerable, but that would also happen even if the player made little to no progress. The most common scenario is for the player to be stuck fighting a boss over and over again, unable to defeat it. In this situation the difficulty would make the player feel frustration, but not tense and vulnerable in the way we've been discussing.

It seems imperative that the player eventually makes progress through the game, or the game loses its luster completely and the player quits without ever seeing the story through. Many of these problems originate in the varied skill levels of different players. A player experienced in the genre of game, or a veteran of the *Dark Souls* franchise, will have a much easier time getting through the third game in the series than a beginner. Many other games offer different difficulty options for the player to choose from. Maybe the developers didn't implement this in *Dark Souls 3* because they thought it might strip the franchise of its "hard core" reputation. The phrase: "I completed *Dark Souls*" would mean less if they gave the players an option to cruise through on an easier setting. It's also a lot of additional work to balance a game multiple times. *Dark Souls* does make a few design decisions to make the game less frustrating for players with less experience, and a few lessons can be learned from the *Dark Souls* franchise in balancing the difficulty so that this is less likely to happen:

- *Dark Souls* leverages the rpg elements to allow the player to power up their character and come back to a difficult section later. Completing most of the games encounter rely primarily on controlling the avatar skillfully, but upgrading weapons, armour and character statistics will make the game's harder sections slightly more forgiving. The player can go back and fight easier foes to boost their strength before returning to the harder section. Going back to tackle an easier task will also break up the monotony of failing over an over at the same task and allow the player to come back and tackle the problem with a fresh perspective next time.

- Sometimes *Dark Souls* offers alternate paths through the game. If an encounter with a boss is proving to challenging, then it's sometimes possible to simply try out a different path through the game to see if that's easier. The player can then return with more experience later and hopefully have a less frustrating time. This also serves the function of breaking up the pace of the game and giving the player something else to do while powering up.

- While there isn't an easier difficulty setting in the game, summoning another player outside a boss room will make it a lot easier. The boss having two targets to focus on makes it much easier for one of the players to be aggressive in combat with a lot less risk of taking any damage in the process. In fact, a determined player can summon a skilled helper to fight every single boss for them while hiding in the corner. So a player could conceivably "trick" the game to get through and see the credits after the last boss. Of course, they would themselves know they didn't "earn" it.

4.2.1 Responsibility and Failure: Lesson of the Mimic

Completing a difficult game can feel rewarding to the player. But it seems very important for games to temper that challenge with fairness. After failing the player should be aware of why it happened and what must be done next time to avoid it happening again. "...player appreciation of the game was tied positively to feeling responsible for failure." (Juul, 2009) *Dark Souls 3*

usually provides clues that help the player prepare for traps or ambushing monsters. An enemy called a "mimic", serves as an example to illustrate this. There are plenty of chests containing valuables scattered throughout the game world. But hidden among them, masquerading as an inanimate object, hides the mimic. Its flexible body lies coiled inside its Chest-like head. When the "lid" opens it reveals rows of razor-sharp teeth and a disturbingly long and thick tongue, that dangles out when it springs up and tries to eat the avatar.

Its plan is to lure unsuspecting players in, and as they open up the lid of what they think is chest it will chomp down on the avatar doing massive damage. If the players health total is low enough it might kill them in a single hit. Being up against an enemy like this might seem unfair, but there are ways to distinguish between a mimic and a normal chest. The simple way for a player to avoid mimics is to simply attack any chest they come across, before opening. The mimic has a low health total and will go down easily in a few hits if the player delivers the first blow. If the game is connected to the internet the chances are pretty high that another player will have left a warning by the mimic, letting them know of the danger. The most reliable method though, is to learn the visual and auditory clues that reveals a mimics identity. The first is it's breathing, which is revealed if the player stands next to the chest for a few seconds. The second way is an even quicker way to spot the difference. Every chest found in the *Dark Souls* franchise has a chain connected on its lower right side. On a normal chest this chain will be curved, with its end pointing away from the avatar. A mimic's chain however, will always have a straight chain pointing straight towards the avatar. Distinguishing between the two is easy if the player knows what to look for. At that point, all the player must do is to remember to check each time. If the player wishes to avoid a fight entirely, they can use the item "undead hunters charm". Throwing it on a mimic will put it to sleep letting the player retrieve its treasure while avoiding danger. This last option though is almost impossible to figure out on your own. There are no hints in the items description that lets the player about this function.

There will be times when the player feels bitter about getting killed in a *Dark Souls* game. After all, the very first time the player encounters a mimic there will be almost no way to know that

it's not just a normal chest apart from its quiet breathing. The player is mostly reliant on the danger of mimics being communicated to them by other players. The chances then, of the avatar dying, or at least getting badly hurt when first encountering a mimic, is therefore high. Killing the player once unfairly might be a sacrifice worth making. Later, the player is rewarded with the satisfying feeling of revenge, when they get to turn the tables on the mimic when they return after respawning. It should be noted that the differences between the chains has stayed the same since the first *Dark Souls* game. This creates a sense of continuity between the three games. It also rewards the loyalty of veteran players returning to the franchise. They are faced with new grueling challenges, but some old challenges have stayed the same. Experienced players can feel like some of their old mastery of the *Dark Souls* world has remained.

4.3 Tutorials

There are three ways that a player can get better at playing a game. They can experiment with the game mechanics. In other words, they can press different buttons on the controller and see what happens on the screen. This method of learning to play is unavoidable. The game itself can teach the player either through an in-game tutorial or a game manual, the latter becoming less and less common as physical game purchases are increasingly sinking in favor of digital sales. These tutorials are optional in the *Dark Souls* franchise, and we will be discussing the implications of that later. Lastly, they can get outside help from either a guide on the internet, or even people they know personally.

Previously we examined how vulnerability relates to an increased feeling of growth by the player. Let's now discuss how this relates to the design of tutorials in Dark Souls. After all, Tutorials are often a part of how players learn a games mechanics which then leads to the player experiencing growth. Tutorials are represented visually by glowing icons on the ground in starting area of the game. If the player presses the "interact" button while standing on an icon, a short paragraph will show up explaining a gameplay mechanic. The designers also give the players a chance to test out their new knowledge straight away. After being told how to perform a backstab attack, the game provides an enemy with its back turned. To be successful

at this, the player has to walk slowly up to the enemy to not make any noise and then use a light attack while standing directly behind the target. Andersen, O'Rourke, Liu, Snider, Lowdermilk, Truong, Cooper, and Popovic distinguish between tutorials that "...provide contextually relevant suggestions from within the application interface and those that provide documentation outside of the application context." They argue that learning to play is more effective when the player must make use of the knowledge straight away rather than much later when the information might have been forgotten. (2012, s.2) *Dark Souls* provides this opportunity to the player. However, the player can also just engage the enemy in regular combat instead of performing the backstab move as instructed.

The tutorial instructions provided in the *Dark Souls* franchise are optional. This means that a player replaying the game doesn't have to waste any time reading any of them. But a player who would rather experiment and work out the gameplay systems on their own, is also free to pursue that method of learning. The player might even feel an extra sense of pride by figuring the game out on their own. However, some of the tutorial instructions are placed on the map where the player might not ever go. So, there's also a risk that certain elements of the mechanics will remain hidden until much later because the information was obscured from the player simply by accident. In this situation the player didn't make a choice to avoid the tutorial. Rather, it was missed by accident. In this case, learning the game might empower the player or lead to confusion and frustration.

4.4 Dark Souls 3 Storytelling

4.4.1 Plot

The actual narrative that's being uncovered through completing *Dark Souls 3* can be summarized fairly quickly. In a fantasy kingdom called Lothric a bell tolls, signaling that the "age of fire" is ending. It summons the Lords of Cinder to relight the fire, sacrificing themselves in the process. The actual consequences of the fire going out are ambiguous, but at the very least, it seems like the light from the actual sun in the sky is fading and that it's causing undead

to rise from their graves. The Lords of Cinder are unwilling to sacrifice themselves and have abandoned their duty to relight the fire. This causes "The Ashen One", an undead who failed to become a Lord of Cinder (the players avatar) must now embark on a journey to defeat the Lords of Cinder and gather their ashes to perform a the sacrificial ritual to prolong the age of fire once again. Some key features of the story is reminiscent of many other video games stories where the hero must venture forth across the land to gather a certain set of items to eventually save the world. However, the way parts of the story is conveyed, is quite unique to the *Dark Souls* franchise.

4.4.2 Storytelling Through Item Descriptions?

A player who isn't interested in the story and just wants to conquer the challenges of the game, remains ignorant of the larger context of *Dark Souls 3's* world and story. This is equally true for the previous games in the franchise. The few cutscenes that are in the game are short and offer little exposition to explain what is going on. Why has the Lords of Cinder shirked their responsibilities? Who or what is the Ashen One? What is a Dark Soul? The answers to all these questions must be actively sought out by the player by looking at the descriptions of armour, weapons and other items found throughout the game. Because of this, the larger parts of the story is made optional. It utilizes the interactivity of the medium. If the player is intrigued by the initial premise and taken in by the atmosphere of the game world, he can choose to investigate further and possibly enriching the experience. Additionally, as these bits of lore are received through loot found in the game world, either by exploring the environment or defeating enemies, the story can be viewed as a direct reward for being successful at the game. The game has already giving you the traditional reward of equipment and items. On top of that, bits of story are added as a bonus. This also plays into the roleplaying part of the game. Maybe the intention by the designers is for the player discover more about the world through unearthing the story like an archaeologist digging up ancient secrets, and to bolster a sense of accomplishment with the player. In fact, some few people like Michael Samuels, more commonly known as Vaatividya, have made making videos explaining the lore and stories hidden within the game, their career. He, along with other fans of the series, even go so far as

to compare the English item descriptions with the original Japanese ones to better understand the clues left behind by the writers of the game. He jokingly describes himself as a "professional item description reader" and has over a million subscribers on YouTube and gets over 5000 dollars a month from patreon. It is hard to imagine that another game franchise could provide anyone with the same financial opportunities in the same way.

Of course, it's also possible to criticize the storytelling for being obtuse. Many players who were interested in knowing more of the story, could have missed out because they didn't realize where to find it. Few people would even think to look at the item descriptions to learn more about the game world. This is, after all, not the normal way to deliver exposition or in video games. The game also loses a certain degree of realism. How exactly is all this information extracted from the actual in game items? It's not like the item description is written on the surface of the actual armor pieces or weapons. It seems rather, that the player is just handed information along with the weapons. The information just appears through the ether, arriving in the interface next to a visual representation of the item. The thought might not occur to the player when he is busy slaying monsters and avoiding traps. But it might register subconsciously and take away the feeling of realism.

4.4.3 Four Endings

Dark Souls 3 has four different endings to its story, that the player can experience. There are the obvious consequences resulting from this. The player is awarded with extra interactivity through the influence they can impart on the narrative. The story of Dark Souls 3 has gigantic stakes so the players are empowered by the massive changes they can impart on the world. Additionally, it increases the game's replay value. Some people will finish the game several times because they want to to experience all the possible conclusions to the story. There are elements to *Dark Souls 3* multiple endings that set them apart from most other Video games that feature multiple endings. Often the different type of endings will rely on a single choice made towards the very end of the story. This does not provide the same amount of incentives to go back and replay the entire game. The player can go back to a save point just before the

critical choice that determines the games ending, but there's also another method to achieve something very similar. Now that gaming content and the streaming of video game content has become so prevalent on the internet, it's very tempting to just watch the other endings online. This is much less time consuming than to slog through almost the whole story just to get the payoff provided by an alternative conclusion to the story. There are two reasons which makes this option either harder or downright impossible to do when finishing *Dark Souls 3*'s story.

Firstly, the game is saved automatically as you make progress every few seconds. There is therefore no way for the player to load a save right before a critical choice. The player has to create another character and play the game from the start or explore the other endings in a "new game plus" mode with the same character. The different endings are also clearly designed with this in mind. It's very likely that the player will experience a specific ending on the first playthrough. This is the one where the avatar ends up relighting the first fire and restarting the "age of fire" yet again. Quite possibly the player will even be completely unaware that there even are other endings available. Where many games provide the choice affecting the ending through dialogue options, Dark Souls 3 requires that the player perform certain tasks throughout the game for the option of an alternative ending to appear at all. Therefore, going back to an earlier save wouldn't save the player that much time, even if the option was available.

Also, in Dark Souls 3's case, watching the alternative endings online doesn't provide the same amount of satisfaction. This is because the player must earn them by completing extra, and sometimes challenging tasks to experience them and to even understand the context in which the ending is provided. This all adds to the sense of growth a player can feel while playing Dark Souls 3. There's a huge leap of complexity between the simple ending of relighting the fire and the most complicated ending. For the simple ending, the player must defeat the required number of bosses. The most complicated ending involves ten very specific steps that involves selecting specific dialogue options in the correct sequence with different npc's and exploring hidden areas to gather a certain set of items. These steps are so convoluted that the vast

majority of players getting the ending look up a guide online. You could criticize the game for being overly obtuse or you could argue that every completion of the complex ending is a victory for the entire *Dark Souls* community. They banded together in the early stages after the games release to figure the required steps and were able to share that with the rest of the player base. Many other games have "good" and "bad" endings. In *Dark Souls 3,* they can be categorized as bittersweet. This is at the very least true for the two that are relatively easy to achieve. The player has to pick between resetting a potentially corrupt cycle, that turns everything rotten every time the fire is about to go out. Or the player can let the fire die out, not knowing what will happen without it's light to sustain the life they are familiar with.

4.5 Punishment

4.5.1 Four Types of Punishment

Let's look at the how players are punished for failing in *Dark Souls.* Failure in this case means taking damage from enemies or other hazards in the environment. You could define failure as struggling to navigate the game world, solving a puzzle or not comprehending the story, but first we will focus on what happens when the avatar takes damage or dies. Jesper Juul separates punishment of player failure, into four different categories: Energy punishment, life punishment, game termination punishment and setback punishment. (Juul, 2007) The prime and most obvious example of energy punishment is when the avatar gets hurt and loses hit points. This is a punishment used in both *Hellblade* and *Dark Souls 3* as well as almost all games in both their respective genres*.* Life punishment is when the player loses one of a total number of lives when the avatar dies. This brings the player closer to game termination punishment, which forces the player to start over from the beginning.

Life and game termination punishments now seem archaic. In games designed in the 21 century they are rarely used. You could even argue that this type of design used in for example the 2D Mario games, where you can lose all your lives and start over from the beginning, were a needless holdover from the arcade halls where starting the player over from the beginning cost

the player more money. But even though life punishment is rare in games made during the last decades, they still serve a purpose on home consoles. Firstly, having a limited amount of tries to defeat a level will raise the stakes as you get closer and closer to the point where you have to start from the beginning. Secondly, finishing a game with a large amount of extra lives can make a player feel like he has mastered the games mechanics. The player can easily compare his performance to when he was a novice and see the improvement. Thirdly, it extends the game lifetime. Many retro games with this life punishment mechanic had a much more limited scope than what's common in the 21st century. Raising the difficulty by giving the player a limited number of tries will make the game last longer for anyone who is set on finishing all the levels. It's also a direct and simple way for the developers to control a games difficulty setting. They can add or remove "lives" that the player starts with or finds throughout the game.

4.5.2 Bonfire Checkpoint System

Dark Souls 3 uses the setback punishment along with the previously mentioned energy punishment. The setback happens after a certain amount of energy loss. Setbacks vary in severity but consists of the player losing a limited amount of progress. When the avatar is killed in the *Dark Souls* franchise, he is transported back to a previously lit bonfire. These are checkpoints in the world where the player can refill the avatars health and stock up on healing items. Checkpoints are a regular fixture of many games, but there are a few things about *Dark Souls* franchise design that separate the bonfires from the regular checkpoints that we are used to. Normally checkpoints are not woven into the fabric of the game world itself. it's often just a place where the game saves your progress after a challenge or a certain point in the story. Mario dies and he is transported to the beginning of the stage with one less life. He is sent back in both time and space, almost like it never happened. The failure is in a certain sense erased. In *Dark Souls* the death is kept. The clock is not rewound. The avatar is an immortal undead whose ashes are sent back and restored at the nearest bonfire. The death also has certain consequences to the player. If he doesn't use a certain restorative, consumable item, the avatar gets weaker and weaker for every successive death that occurs. This also helps confirm and remind the player that the failure took place.

The bonfire allows the game designers to more accurately tailor the challenge of the game. In many games the player is allowed the option to save the progress made at any time. In this scenario (if you remember to save), the consequences for failing are negligible because you only lose a tiny amount of progress when you fail. Arguably when each failure has a lessened impact, that will also diminish the positive emotional impact caused by the players eventual victory.

Let's imagine a possible scenario in *Dark Souls* where the player is killed for the tenth time a by a challenging boss and the bonfire mechanic is changed to save slot mechanic found in many other games. Normally when the player is defeated by a boss, the avatar is sent back to a bonfire a short journey away from the encounter. The player will now have to navigate the space filled with less dangerous enemies that he already defeated, to again earn the right to challenge the boss. This time the player navigates the space completely differently than when he first he arrived. Back then he faced every enemy and searched every corner of the environment looking for valuable items to help him in the fight against the game's bosses. This was a slow process that could take hours. Now the player easily dashes past the respawned enemies he has already defeated. He has learned their predictable attacks and dodges out of the way. This is the tenth time he makes this journey. It has become a ritual that prepares him for the battle against the boss. It's tedious and frustrating because at this point the player has done it many times before. Maybe he blames the boss for being too hard or maybe he blames himself for not being able to read and react quickly enough to avoid damage. Regardless, he is reflecting on how he has been performing against the boss so far and what he has to do to overcome the challenge.

We can contrast this with what happens if the player was sent back to his saved data right in front of the boss encounter. In a certain sense it would be less frustrating. The player wouldn't have to make the dull journey from bonfire to boss fight. He would just repeatedly fight the boss over and over until he was successful. The pacing of the gameplay would be changed very

dramatically and the reflection that took place during the previously described ritual wouldn't happen. We can imagine an even more remote scenario where the player saves his game during the boss fight itself. If the player performed particularly well during the first half of the fight and decides to save that sliver of progress. In this example the achievement of beating the boss is broken up into several pieces and the pacing is changed even more dramatically, and the victory achieved by the player is watered down and broken into pieces. It would be less important to learn effective strategies against the boss. You could illustrate this point by comparing the boss fight to a difficult dance choreography where the player can turn back time a few seconds every time he makes a misstep. The dance would not exist as a single impressive feat. A performance perfectly completed from start to finish, achieved through grueling practice, would clearly be more satisfying to the dancer.

4.6 Huge and Powerful Enemies

In *Dark Souls 3,* as well as in the other games in the franchise you mostly fight enemies that tower over the avatar. This is especially true when it comes to the bosses. The third boss in the game for example, is a giant tree-monster called the *Curse-Rotted Greatwood,* that the player defeats by striking in the feet and ankles. It moves around on its hands and knees but with the front of the body facing outwards. It already seems abnormal and disturbing. But during the second part of the boss fight, a fleshy arm sprouts from its lower belly and tries to grab and squeeze the avatar. However, there isn't a direct correlation between the size of the enemy and how difficult it is to defeat. In fact, many of the harder bosses are rather small compared to the Curse-rotted Greatwood which is one of the easier bosses in the game. As the player progresses towards the last boss the difficulty curve gets progressively steeper. Though there are certain difficulty spikes along the way.

Even when the player fights humanoid bosses, they are oversized knights that dwarf the size of the avatar. There are probably several reasons that the game is designed that way. Firstly, if the antagonistic character model is larger than the avatar, the designers can give him weak points for the player to aim for. *Dark Souls* controls are quite precise, but very few games control so

well as to let the player aim their attacks at individual body parts, if the enemy is the same size as the avatar. This is of course excluding games in the shooter genre where shooting enemies in the head do extra damage. When a game has melee-combat controlled from a third person perspective, It is very hard to give the player that kind of pin point accuracy. In some games this is resolved by giving the player the power to slow down time. In *Metal Gear Solid: Revengeance* (2013) The player can target specific limbs and cut them off with his sword. But that's only possible in a mode of attack where the time is slowed down. In that game, the avatar is a near invincible cyborg ninja. The game is more about feeling incredibly powerful, and the way the game controls, as well as how the story is presented, heavily contrast with the *Dark Souls* franchise. Being able to slow down time for your enemies would seem to mesh terribly with the more vulnerable avatar in *Dark Souls.* Here, one of the keys to succeeding, is to learn the rhythm and attack patterns of the enemies through trial and error, so giving the player the power to confound and change that rhythm would have dire consequences for one of the key features of the series. Additionally, the games multiplayer features would cease to function if each player could slow down time independently of one another.

Intuitively it makes sense that fighting an adversary that dwarfs your avatar gives the player an extra sense of accomplishment when he eventually succeeds. You get to be the underdog in a David versus Goliath story. Size is far from the only factor of making an enemy look dangerous, but it is certainly a key recipe. Other factors could be things like glowing eyes, oversized weapons, imposing armour, threatening voice lines or a "powerful" musical theme. And that's not even considering how the enemy is animated. An enemy's movement can seem threatening in a variety of ways. It can for example, have jerky unnatural movements or have large sweeping attacks that destroy parts of the environment or other creatures along with the avatar. This is the case for the tree monster boss fight in *Dark Souls 3* that was mentioned earlier. First it destroys other smaller enemies when aiming for the player, then it crushes the floor of the arena where the fight is taking place. The player falls down to a underground area along with the boss. Of course, the sizes of characters in a video game is relative. The perceived size of an enemy boss is reliant on the avatar not equaling that size. In some games, rpg's

especially, the player can affect the height of his avatar in the character creation tool. This is not the case for *Dark Souls* where all humans are the same height.

In *Dark Souls 3* the avatar isn't just small in relation to the enemy npc's, but also in relation to his environment. Castles and mountains have also seemingly been modeled to enhance the players sense of vulnerability. The avatar must enter huge looming doorways and redirect the camera upward to even catch a glimpse of the tallest mountains and cathedral spires within the game's world. As well as having to contend with dangerous undead knights and beasts, the player is often in danger of dying from dangers in the environment itself. Traps of all sorts are spread throughout the game's world, and even the treasure chests where you normally expect rewards, sometimes come alive, and turn out to be terrifying monsters that spring on the player with sharp fangs and long gangly arms. An inexperienced player, who rushes through the environment without knowing of the placement of enemies or traps is going to have a hard time surviving for long.

4.7 Roleplaying

4.7.1 Immersive Roleplaying

As we covered in the section on genre, *Dark souls* is an action rpg. As the player defeats enemies, they drop experience points which can be used to increase the avatars strength or stamina. The game becomes increasingly more challenging towards the end. Both getting better at the game and improving your avatar is needed to make it through. But there's another facet to the rpg genre that's also important to experience. The player is not playing just to get through the content. How and why the player experiences the content is also central to why rpg's are so popular. "Role-playing is a specific kind of pretense-play activity, namely pretending to be somebody else in fictional game world confined by rules." (Petri Lankoski, Simo Järvelä, 2012, s.6) *Dark Souls 3* allows the player to inhabit a different body of their own making. If the game is sufficiently immersive, they can experience escapism. Let's discuss some *Dark Souls 3's* specific mechanics that allows this process to happen.

Joris Dormans describes three different reasons to play roleplaying games. "Some play for the narrative pleasures, some play to be with friends, while others enjoy the game for the challenges it offers. "(Dorman, 2006) The players avatar can be equipped to satisfy a style or to fit into a certain role. The action of equipping the avatar can related to "narrative pleasures", but also relates to the challenge of making progress in the game. The type of armour and weapons can also be influenced by playing with other people. Let's examine the potentially complicated reasons a player might have for using different equipment.

In *Dark Souls 3* the player gets to inhabit a character of their own making. They can gain ownership of that character because of the unique sets of decisions that make the character their own. Maybe that ownership causes them to also possess that character's story, whatever that may be.

4.7.2 Fashion Souls

Strategy is not the only reason why players pick certain equipment and armour. Many players care more about inhabiting a character with the right aesthetic. This is demonstrated by the well-known meme about focusing on making your avatar look good, called "fashion souls". Googling fashion souls nets you over 80 000 000 hits, and there's a subreddit with the same name with over 20 000 subscribers. The "about" info on the subreddit reads:

"We all know that Dark Souls is a game about kicking ass and taking names, and getting your ass kicked and having your name taken, but most people also know that it is a game about looking dope as fuck. Some folks will sacrifice stats for a phresh look and that's ok!"

Prioritizing looks over strategy could be a sign that the player is immersed in the game world. Caring what your embodiment in the game looks like is irrational if you're not invested in the game's fiction. But as the subreddit demonstrates, it's not just about making the avatar look good. There's also an incentive to share it online with strangers. There are several factors why

Fashion Souls exists in this game franchise. These factors exist in other games too but rarely all at the same time.

1. The equipment system in *Dark Souls* uses separate types of armor pieces described in the game as: Helms, Chests, Gauntlets and leggings. With a total of 79 armor sets that the player can mix and match to achieve the preferred look.

2. Even though the game is mostly played as a single player game, it does have some online functionality that allows you to run into other characters from time to time. So, when you change your equipment to look a certain way, you don't do it just for your own benefit, you also do it to for other potential players you come across. In real life, we put a lot less effort into how we look if we don't plan on being seen by other people. This is illustrated clearly by how developers set up business-models in multiplayer games where they sell cosmetic items.

3. Dark Souls has a pretty robust character creation system that lets the player change the gender, face, and body type of their avatar. If a player has a certain character in mind when starting the game, these options help to realize that vision. If you for example want to play as a big warrior who uses heavy weapons, you could give your character a bigger and more imposing body or strong jaw and brow.

4. Since *Dark Souls* has such a flexible and loose narrative the player can fit any kind of character into the story without creating a disconnect. The player character is a nameless hero that rises from nothing to change the fate of the game world against all odds. This is a conducive environment for roleplay.

5. In *Dark Souls 3* almost all of the armor and weapons found in the game are given context in the game world. The player sees the items being worn or used by other creatures in the game world and context is additionally provided by the item descriptions that inform much of the game's narrative. This roots the items in the world and can make using or wearing them more meaningful to the player.

6. As we covered in the roleplaying section, there are many different playstyles available based on what type of weapon or magic the player wants to use offensively and what

armor or clothes they equip for defensive purposes. The weight of the armor affects the avatars movement speed. These are all results based on choices made by the player.

It can be argued that as the player gets more and more invested in their character the tension related to if they live or die increases. And all of the points above contribute to the player getting more and more invested in their character. The avatar feels more and more like an original creation. The developers created the tools and materials, but the player uses these to roleplay as a unique character. That's at least what it's supposed to feel like. In reality, there are probably a lot of other characters that look and play similarly with the only difference being the characters unique name.

4.8 Rewarding the Player

Almost all games give players goals to achieve. A goal can actually be part of what helps us define what a game is. We can illustrate the point by imagining two people running around versus two people running as part of a race. (Salen & Zimmerman cha.20. p.9) When the player achieves the goal put forward, we can assume that that has a value in itself. The player decided to finish something and saw it through. Is the objective then for game designers, to make players care about achieving that goal? Maybe if we see the game as some sort of chore that offer some great reward at its end. That seems an ineffective incentive for the player if the game lasts for dozens of hours. The player must be invested in the journey, as well as the destination. *Dark Souls 3* has several ways of achieving this.

4.8.1 Souls as a Reward

When defeating any kind of enemy in *Dark Souls,* the player receives "Souls". The amount is proportional to the threat level of what the player manages to vanquish. This is a currency which is used to both upgrade the avatar's stats and buy items from vendors. Normally experience points and currency for buying items are separated into two different kinds of objects, but in *Dark Souls* games the player has to consider the value of powering up the

avatars stats versus getting more powerful through acquiring or upgrading equipment and items. Beyond providing an extra interactive element to the game and increasing player agency, souls being rewarded instead of experience points, also provide an extra layer to the narrative. Through the language of the reward we know that the avatar is gaining power through the literal absorption of the core belonging to the game's enemies. The player can imagine that the essence of all those giant challenges are now an actual part of his avatar, helping it when facing even greater challenges later in the game.

Because the game is quite difficult to get through, just finishing it gets you a certain amount of bragging rights, both to yourself and to any friend that also has a passing interest in the hobby. Salen and Zimmerman describe this type of reward as "rewards of glory" (Salen & Zimmerman cha.24. p.18). These rewards don't impact the game directly like the types of rewards we will look at going forward.

"Rewards of sustenance" is the next category on the list presented by Salen and Zimmerman. These are items that let the player keep the rewards they have accumulated this far in the game. These are defensive items like armor and shields or restorative items like medpacks or health potions. The *Dark Souls* Franchise utilizes a rather unique way of sharing out these rewards to the player. The player starts of with the max amount of the healing items called estus flasks after a rest at one of the bonfire checkpoints scattered across the game world. Then, as the avatar takes damage, the reserve of estus flasks dwindles as they are used to heal. The player feels increasingly more vulnerable the longer it has been since he last visited a bonfire. This way of giving the player healing items, helps reinforce the bonfire's function as a safe oasis to the player. Of course, regular healing items are also scattered around the world, encouraging the player to explore the environment to stay alive. Before moving on to another type reward, one could make the argument that weapons and other rewards that are used offensively are also used to keep the avatar alive, just like healing items or armour. After all a monster killed by a powerful weapon can no longer rob the player of any of the things previously earned.

"Rewards of Access" are rewards that lets players access a new area. Examples include keys, password and similar items. These are normally only used once and can be discarded after. (ibid) Sometimes however, the player is given an ability or item that can be used to both access another area and as a movement option in combat. Double jumping or using a jetpack can be used both to access new areas and in other more action-oriented scenarios. When the avatar are rewarded with abilities like this Salen and Zimmerman lists it as "Rewards of Facility". In other words, a reward can be a combination of types (cha.24. p.19). In *Dark Souls* most new areas are revealed to the player after a boss fight. Certain places though can be found only if the player makes an effort to look for them. Illusory walls hide treasure denied those who are too impatient to fully explore the environment.

4.8.2 Ambiguous Rewards

So far, all the examples of rewards have been clear cut and obvious. An item that upgrades your character found in a treasure chest is a proverbial carrot on a stick for the player to keep playing. But these kinds of rewards have their limits. Games get more sophisticated in terms of graphical fidelity, animation, artificial intelligence, storytelling and a myriad of different things. This allows for game designers to reward the players in additional more indirect ways. A relevant example is described by Alison Gazzard, the environmental exploration in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2002)*: "However, the reward of exploration is available with and without the reward of environment. It is possible for player's to explore a wide area of the game without completing set missions within the game."(2011) So just roaming the environment alone can be rewarding based on how well the game world looks or feels to navigate. In GTA games the player can drive around in a multitude of vehicles while listening to fictional radio stations. Doing this will rarely provide them with any actual rewards like weapons or other upgrades. The design of *Dark Souls 3* encourages this type of exploration by letting the player uncover hidden story content and rare items. Exploring the game world can be rewarding by itself, but providing extra encouragement to do so, should make a larger portion of the player

base in this kind of exploration. Though if we are to dive even further into a comparison between the two games, we realize that a *Dark Souls 3* player actually has no other choice put to explore. In GTA games there's almost always a specific point marked on the players map that show where to go to progress the story. The *Dark Souls* franchise provides nothing similar to guide the player forward. There is no map, and the player are in most cases dropped into the environment with multiple paths going forward. Sometimes npc's will offer some guidance or hints through dialogue, but most often, the help provided will be rather general. Below is an example to illustrate this point. This is how an npc-ally introduces herself at the *firelink shrine* when she first meets the avatar.

"Welcome to the bonfire, Unkindled One. I am a Fire Keeper. I tend to the flame, and tend to thee. The Lords have left their thrones, and must be deliverd to them. To this end, I am at thy side. Produce the coiled sword at the bonfire. The mark of ash will guide thee to the land of the Lords. To Lothric, where the homes of the Lords converge" (2016)

She gives a cryptic idea of what the overall goal of the game is, but doesn't provide a lot of information on where to go next. Navigating the game world might be more rewarding when the game isn't telling you exactly where to go or what to expect. Additionally, The Fire Keeper and other characters way of speaking is archaic and often hard to interpret. It adds to the feeling of being in an unfamiliar fantasy land. Figuring out different characters intentions sometimes becomes an additional challenge. This might entice certain players and annoy other depending on their tastes.

The graphical fidelity of games gets increasingly more impressive as technology evolves. Game developers utilize this, along with a bigger pool of passionate artists than ever before. Exploring the game world of *Dark Souls 3* allows the player to gaze upon amazing vistas and environments. After a boss is defeated the player is allowed to access a new area. Exploring some of these areas are like wandering through a gothic painting. Navigating the world becomes a reward unto itself.

4.8.3 Patience

Earlier we discussed difficulty in *Dark Souls 3.* From Software made it clear in the game-manual that it's possible to make progress in the game even as the player is just repeatedly dying to the same boss, over and over again. "Most importantly, the knowledge you gain exploring and fighting improves your gameplay even as your character gains strength" The player often has to try different strategies while they familiarize themselves with the bosses' attack and movement patterns. This can be a slow process. That's why you could claim that patience, and not giving up, is the most important skills to have for a player trying to beat a Dark Souls game. Unless the player is unusually skilled, there will be times when they are stuck on a boss. I mentioned in the introduction that it was a moment like this that inspired me to further investigate and analyze the game. I had fought a big wolf boss dozens of times making incremental progress each time. As I learned to predict its different attacks and its various weak points, I was gaining confidence. When the boss's health total was nearing zero the pressure would build. After hours of practice I would finally have the chance to complete my goal. This is where many players get overly aggressive to try to finish the fight early while discarding the previously acquired strategic knowledge. *The Dark Souls* community often calls this "getting greedy". The game rewards players who patiently keep calm and wait for the right moment to strike. It can be potentially very rewarding when a player manages to control their emotional state in these kinds of situations to overcome challenges. It can feel as though you overcame obstacles in your own psyche just as much as overcoming the challenge within the game. These attributes are clearly transferable to other games with tough challenges. You could even argue that these lessons of perseverance and patience are transferable to high pressure situations in real life where staying calm will help achieve success.

4.9 Music in the Dark Souls franchise

Video game music used to be instantly recognizable back when limitations in the technology hampered what music could be put on gaming platforms. These were restrictions in mainly caused by limited file space on old gaming cartridges or platforms. (Rod Munday, 2007, s.51)

This is of course no longer the case and video game music is therefore much like all other music used to score visual media. We can therefore focus on what the function of the music is rather than what medium it's from (ibid) So what is the music's function in *Dark Souls 3*? Rod Munday divides video game music into three different categories.

One of the franchise´s trademark is that there is almost never music playing in the background´, except during a boss fight. The rest of the time the audio landscape is defined by the ambient noises like the whooshing wind, or clattering window shutters, all depending on where the avatar is situated. Let's look at the possible reasons of why the game was designed this way, and how that relates to the feeling of vulnerability for the player through the avatar. Plainly, it's one of the things that sets the boss fight section of the game apart from the "regular" part of the game. It lends extra importance to the moment. Songs are often somber orchestral pieces with intense chanting in the minor key. When the music suddenly arrives, it's quite loud and bombastic. But despite this, the music never resembles the triumphant hero-themes so often found in other fantasy games. The only other time there's music during the game, is when the player is navigating the title screen and initial menu screen. A discordant choir chants a wordless building melody as strings and chimes gradually join in. A wailing violin joins in as the music grows ever more climactic. A bell rings repeatedly, echoing the bell that raises the dead from their sleep within the game's narrative. The occasional hopelessness you will feel as you repeatedly butt your head against the games challenges is conveyed before you even start playing the game.

4.10 Dark Souls 3 Aesthetic

How the game world looks also affects how the player perceives the avatars degree of power versus vulnerability. "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces. It is no accident, for example, that game design documents have historically been more interested in issues of level design than plotting or character motivation."(Jenkins, 2011) An environment can be just as influential on a narrative as a plot point.

We briefly covered how the game world of *Dark Souls 3* is filled with traps and other dangerous obstacles in addition to its enemies. But along with the gameplay mechanics threatening nurturing the feeling of vulnerability, the visual design also has an impact on the players state of mind. In *Dark Souls 3* the age of fire is fading, and the sun seems to be going out. This explains why the game world is covered by a washed-out light. The world is denied any bright colors and any vegetation is wizened and grey. Civilization has fallen into ruin and there are only a select few characters in the games world that haven't become mindless undead. Many buildings in the game world are now crumbling remains of what they once were. The different areas throughout the game are still quite varied, despite my description so far. Each area is bathed in its own particular shade, of washed out light. Lothric Castle is covered in a dusk like yellow light. Many enemies and bosses, like the environment, display signs of rot and decay. Hidetaka Miyazaki, the game lead designer, once tried to describe his visual design philosophy related to this aesthetic choice in an interview. This interview is translated by fans from the original Japanese script.

"Most people don't believe me when I say this, but a certain kind of refinement, elegance, and dignity are very important to me. I'll usually tell the designers that flat-out grotesque or splatter type designs will not get past me." Waranagi, another designer, expands on this point talking to Miyasaki: "I remember you said that to me when I was working on the zombie dragon. Originally it was covered with maggots, but you told me that I needed instead, to try and capture the sadness of this great creature as it marches towards extinction." (2012)

This conversation between two of the creators of the game illustrates the themes presented in the game. The world staggers and sputters towards the ending phase of it's cycle where a magical flame that gives everything life has gone out. The world and all the creatures in it, have turned from noble high fantasy archetypes into decaying versions of themselves desperately attempting to cling to their glorious past. You could argue then, that some of the adversaries that the player is faced with, also contain traces of vulnerability. There's something pitiful and weak about being in the process of worsening. This creates a contrast between the player, who

throughout the game, is getting steadily more powerful and skilled, while faced with giant enemy bosses who mindlessly cling to their former glory. The player travels and explores a vast game world while the enemies are stuck waiting passively in their crumbling dungeons and throne rooms.

4.10.1   Praising the Sun

So far, we've been focusing primarily on the avatar and the player's enemies. Let's now examine a relationship between the players and a friendly npc, and what the relationships represents. The player encounters several npc's throughout the *Dark Souls* game worlds. Possibly the most famous of them is Solaire of Astora. His popularity has made him an unofficial mascot for the franchise. I want to discuss why he resonated so powerfully with players and what he represents symbolically. While the character itself isn't present in the third installment, you can still assemble his armour set, so he is present in some form. In fact, his helmet and armour cover all distinguishing features so if a player were to wear the outfit, the avatar would look just like the character, barring any differences in body type.

Upon first meeting the character the player is awarded with an item from Solaire. "Use this, to summon one another as spirits, cross the gaps between worlds, and engage in jolly cooperation". This "white Sign Soapstone" lets the player put down a mark on the ground that is visible to other players with an online connection roaming the same area. They can then summon the player and help each other progress. Bosses do get a 50% bonus to health for each player summoned to help, but having help is still considered a much easier way of getting through the game. This is yet another example of how Dark Souls provides extra context for features that most often don't make much sense within the game's narrative. It's not uncommon for games to have a coop option, but often, the multiplayer is accessed through a menu separated from the game's fiction. Solaire also provides context for the existence of other players in the first place. "We are amidst strange beings, in a strange land. The flow of

time itself is convoluted; with heroes centuries old phasing in and out. The very fabric wavers, and relations shift and obscure." The statement lets the player consolidate the idea of being responsible for the story with other players performing similar narratives in the past. It also fits in with the games cyclical theme where the worlds fire is endlessly sputters out and is rekindled.

Solair is associated with the "warrior of sunlight covenant". This is a group that the player can join to gain rewards when helping other players. If the player is a member, then the avatar will be wreathed in a shining golden light. Solaire can be similarly summoned against certain bosses and will shine the same way. Additionally, the summoning text that was used to summon them will stand out in a similar manner. Solaire expresses a longing admiration for the sun: "Oh, hello there. I will stay behind, to gaze at the sun. The sun is a wondrous body. Like a magnificent father! If only I could be so grossly incandescent!" When joining the group, the player is given the "praise the sun" emote. This is a cosmetic animation that the player can trigger where the avatar stands up on its toes and reaches upward with the palms facing inward. The phrase: "praise the sun" has become sort of a slogan for *Dark Souls* players on the internet. Of course, *Dark Souls 3* environment is rather dark and somber, so when the sunlight is able to penetrate that in a few of its more welcoming areas, it's even more impactful. Light is generally seen as a mark of safety for the players. Whether it's just the increased visibility or the safety of a bonfire, light is purposefully used to give the players a sense of relief from the oppressive danger that permeates most of the game world.

5 Analysis Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Developed by *Ninja Theory,* and released summer 2017, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* received much attention for both its content and how that content was published. The game has very impressive graphics and animation, it looks and feels like a high budget game. However, players can finish the game in about seven hours, which is short for a game of this type. This information is retrieved from the website: Howlongtobeat.com, where players submit the time they spent getting to a games credits. Ninja Theory adjusted the price point down to 40 dollars from the regular 60 dollars to account for its length. The length of the experience allows for the more limited and simple system of mechanics to not grow stale. A seven-hour story makes it easier to accept that there are no rpg mechanics. The avatar does not level up, instead, growth happens exclusively when the player gains experience with the combat systems and the way in which puzzles are solved within the game world. If the player had to spend more than seven hours to finish the story, the mechanics would risk losing their novelty to the player.

In addition to the game's length and price, the game's narrative and unique storytelling has received a lot of attention. When the player boots up the game the text: "this game is best played with headphones" pops up. The game utilizes binaural audio to give the player an accurate as possible impression of what it feels like to experience illusory voices felt by people who struggle with the symptoms of psychosis. Later we will go further into what this entails from both a practical and storytelling perspective.

5.1 The story of Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

The story follows the quest of 8th century warrior Senua who has travelled to Hell to save the soul of her dead lover, Dillion, from the clutches of Hela, the goddess of death. Senua suffers from severe psychosis and her symptoms consists of hallucinating and hearing non-existing voices. She believes she's cursed by something called "the darkness". Along her quest to reach Hela, she faces many demonic enemies, but it is never quite made clear if these enemies are real or hallucinations resulting from her condition, or a mix of both.

Throughout the game, visions and the voices in Senua's head reveal her backstory to the player. Her mother suffered from the same "curse" and was burned alive by Senua's zealot father, who feared her visions. After her mother's death, her father locked Senua away from the world and abused her both physically and emotionally. Midway through the game Senua is confronted by Hela who easily defeats her and destroys her sword. She survives and after solving four puzzles she is rewarded with a new weapon. This is the titular Hellblade, that has the potential to defeat Hela. The story climaxes as Senua confronts Hela and her warriors. Rather than defeating Hela though, Senua lets go of her hopeless desire to save her lover. She accepts her "curse", and leaves Helheim trying to coexist with the voices in her head.

5.2 Female Protagonists in Gaming

Depictions of female characters have a reputation of often being designed to appeal to a male adolescent audience. They are often idealized and two dimensional. "Women, though possessing physical strength, and some level of empowerment, are relegated to second class status as sexualized objects." (Peck, Ketchum, Embrick, 2011, s.219) The reason why the genders sometimes have been given equal physical strength, might be because developers want the game mechanics to be balanced and fair. The wish to empower women might never have factored into it at all.

Hellblade's protagonist represent a minority of games with a rounded three-dimensional female protagonist. Senua's animation is a created primarily by performance capture. This was performed by Melina Juergens who was originally only meant to work as a video editor on the project. She won several awards, including the 2018 game awards category for "best performance". Developing technologies like performance capture might help bring game characters closer to reality and contributes to making characters more three dimensional. Relatively speaking, it's harder to write a character as a sexual object when you later have to direct an actual woman to perform the storyline. This is in comparison to when the characters

being written were represented by actual 2D models. Turning these models into realistic characters, that seem to have flesh and blood, might inspire game writers to infuse their bodies with actual personalities. Additionally, in performance capture the actor is empowered with a certain amount of influence over how the character is conveyed. Her stance, attitude and ways of moving are her tools to affect the audience's perception.

What makes Senua more fully realized than most other female video game characters? She's certainly not a damsel in distress found in the common "save the princess" narratives common in video games. Even though she is a victim of traumatic events, she is also the one responsible for saving herself by overcoming those events. The developers got to develop her character because they give the player time to explore and figure out her backstory slowly as they progress. Rather than fighting a single antagonist responsible for her hardship, the story is about figuring out how to overcome her own overwhelming loss and mental illness.

The characters outward design plays a considerable role in conveying a character's personality. Video game writers would have a really hard time changing a first impression of a character where she was wearing a skimpy, oversexualized outfit for seemingly no reason. That would always cloud the players impression. Senua looks the part of a celtic warrior. She wears dirty leather armour covering everything except her arms. Her forehead is covered in blue warpaint leading up to her hair, which is tied back in a practical ponytail keeping it out of her eyes during battle. Her proportions are realistic. Ninja Theory sent the actor to train for six weeks before they scanned her body for the character model.

5.3 Hellblade's Death Mechanic

When the player first encounters *the failure state in Hellblade*, meaning they die and have to start over from the last checkpoint, they are given the following message in: "the dark rot will grow each time you fail. If the rot reaches Senua's head, her quest is over. And all progress will be lost." This of course, heavily implies that if the players fail enough times he will have to start again from the very beginning. This "dark rot" is a black blotch that infects Senua's skin. It

covers an increasingly larger part of her arm and shoulder as the game goes on. So, the threat of being sent back to the beginning of the game after a certain number of deaths is conveyed both through text and the graphics. This is a traditional game mechanic that has roots in retro gaming. Juul called it" game termination punishment". (2007)

Hellblade's design is unusual in many other ways in both its mechanics and presentation, so it might seem more plausible to the player that the developers could reintroduce that mechanic to a modern game. However, If the player tests this game mechanic and dies on purpose an unrealistic amount of times, it's revealed that this is only a bluff to heighten the tension related to failure. The player is never sent back further than the last checkpoint. The wording of the warning about the rot spread never literally said the player would be sent back to the beginning. Tameem Antoniades, chief creative director at Ninja Theory, revealed in an interview that this was very much a deliberate choice. "The wording for the permadeath message was chosen quite carefully because we didn't want to lie to the player, it's actually your interpretation of the message that is what threw people off" (Purslow, 2018). The message only says Senua's quest will be over if the dark rot reaches her head. The game just convey that that can never happen, no matter how many times the avatar is defeated.

Normally when we are provided with false information about how a game works within the game, which happens pretty rarely, we have cause to be annoyed or even upset with the game. In Hellblade's case though, much of the game's narrative is about being confronted with false information. As we have previously covered, Senua is delusional. She experiences psychosis and is throughout the game unsure about what's real and what's in her head. So, conveying false information to the player is therefore thematically appropriate. Obfuscating the game's mechanics is helping the player relate to Senua. The players are now also unsure of what to believe. Furthermore, believing that the repeated death will send you back to the beginning of the game, won't really have a dramatic impact on how the game is played. The player is possibly nudged to face the game's challenges with more focus. The tension is heightened because of how the stakes are raised. But nothing else is really affected by the game's

subterfuge. The information does not change any of the strategic choices made by the player. With or without the information they would be trying to keep their avatar alive.

5.4 The Voices

We can tell that the developers thought that the audio was critical to the experience because of the previously mentioned message when you boot up the game. They urge the player to wear headphones. Mark Nicholas Grimshaw illustrates the great difference headphones make to immersion compared to regular speakers. "This is particularly the case where the player is using headphones as these serve as an extension to the player's proprioceptive auditory system greatly attenuating, and in some cases entirely blocking out, sounds external to the game world such that, for example, the sounds of the character breathing become the sounds of the player breathing" (2007, s.237) Blocking out sound seems like one of the most important parts of maintaining the players immersion. This is demonstrated when somebody plays with the sound of or lowered to lessen the impact of the scary parts of horror games.

The audio is recorded by microphones that accurately simulate hearing in 3D space. Some of these voices are important characters in Senua's past and some are the "furies", female voices whose identity is more unclear. They might be pure figments of Senua's imagination with no basis in her backstory. Ninja Theory hired actors to move around a highly sensitive mice, sometimes whispering up close, and sometimes moving further away. These different voices incessantly talking inside Senua's head, is one thing that sets it apart from any other game.

Many other games have voiceovers, and some have the character hearing voices as well, but no other game so far have implemented that feature in a way that resembles how Hellblade did it. Of course, that's probably because no other game has ever tried to realistically convey what hearing voices caused by psychosis feels like. What really sets this apart from most game design choices is that it feels like a feature made partly to deliberately annoy the player. It serves many other functions outside of that, including organically delivering information about the avatars mental state, and giving the player information about Senua's past. But the constant

whispering, which is often mocking or disparaging towards the player, is clearly not designed to be pleasant. If Ninja Theory were to even attempt to convey what having psychosis feels like, that could never be the goal. It makes the player constantly uncomfortable. Most of the time the voices whisper softly but sometimes they will abruptly increase in intensity, causing players to be wary of a sudden loud noise. This is one of the aspects of the game that can keep the player feeling vulnerable.

After a while the player might get used to the constant interjections, and the sense of dread and vulnerability could turn to annoyance. When considering this, it was important for the developers to not make the game last too long. Any game that requires the player to wallow in misery and pain rather than to make the experience "fun", must be designed so that the player can finish the story in a relatively short time.

The voices also have a mechanical function. They warn the player about enemies attacking from outside their field of vision and give hints when they spend to much time completing a puzzle. This is not an uncommon way to help players who are struggling, though sometimes the implementation leaves a lot to be desired. A rather infamous example can be found In the action-roleplaying-game *Fable* (2004). The guild master, a character who teaches the player many of the game mechanics during the tutorial will give advice through the entire game in an attempt to help the player. The avatar has an item that lets him communicate over any distance at any time. The guild master though, has a very few sets of tips that he repeats hundreds of times throughout the game. If the players hit-point total drops low he says: "your health is low, do you have any potions, or food?". There's almost no way that a player won't already be aware of this game mechanic after a few hours with the game, in fact most players would be very aware of both the mechanical function of food, and especially health potions in the context of video games even before they began playing *Fable*.

The experience of sound in Hellblade is a huge contrast to this example. The audio from the voices in Senua's head are dynamic and if a line is repeated, the player hardly notices because

there are so many varying sound bites used in so many different situations. A voice might say "look out!" just as an enemy is approaching to attack from behind and slightly to the right, and the audio will come from that specific direction to help the player dodge to safety. Jesper Juul makes the case that sound is deprioritized compared to graphics. "In game development, fewer resources are usually spent on sound than on graphics , and there is a tendency for sound in games to be mostly mood-enhancing and not quite as informative as graphics" (2011, s.134) In *Hellblade* it seems like more resources have been spent on sound than in most other games. Utilizing audio in unique ways in their storytelling sets them apart from other narratives in the same medium.

5.5 Senua's Ending

There are limits to how much of the story you can discuss in detail. Analyzing the end of the story might impart the most meaning because an ending to any story represents what last impression the writers intended to leave the players with. So far, we've discussed the role of character growth in storytelling. Hellblade's ending is well suited as an example to showcase how character growth can be conveyed in unique ways by leveraging its video game mechanics, rather than just using audiovisual also found in more traditional media.

5.5.1 Approaching the Domain of the Final Boss

The prelude to the last scene is Senua approaching the archetypical boss room through a grand hallway. Pillars and decorations decorate the path on both sides, and the ceiling stretches so far up its out of view. Senua believes she must sacrifice herself to save herself to bring back her lover. His decapitated head, wrapped in a cloth pouch, swings from her belt, the container she has brought to refill with her lovers stolen soul. She has finally arrived at Hellas domain.

What is less typical in this scene is that the usual large door that leads into most final boss rooms has been replaced with a mirror placed in the middle of the hallway. The voices in

Senua's head begs her to stop, saying they don't want to die. Senua's inner monologue answers them:" I'm sorry. I didn't ask you to be a part of me. If you don't want to die with me, then leave me alone." A pale version of herself exits the mirror and circles around her and tries to convince her to turn back. As Senua enters the mirror, the mirrored version of Senua screams and incinerates, echoing the fate of Senua's mother who was burned at the stake. Also, when entering through the mirror, the voices disappear along with the combustion of her mirrored self. Only one voice remains, and that voice speaks, as Senua approaches the final door leading into the Hela's domain. "It's not like the old stories, is it? The noble warrior facing evil in search of victory and honour. Clear dividing lines."

If we interpreted the plot of *Hellblade* by taking everything at face value, the story would seem straight forward. It can be summed up as: Hero travels into the underworld to defeat evil and save the soul of loved one. The "dividing lines" seem "clear" enough. It resembles the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from Greek mythology. Additionally, in language the expression goes to "hell and back" demonstrate that the explicit story of *Hellblade* seems like well-trodden ground. The story suddenly becomes more muddled when taking Senua's debilitating condition into account. This will be clearly demonstrated as we further examine the ending to the story.

5.5.2 The Reveal

When Senua enters the room to Hela, she is first greeted by another vision of her past. She recalls her mother burning on the stake, screaming at her to look away. Senua's father, the one responsible, hovers behind her and attempts to justify himself. "This is what happens when you listen to the voices of the underworld. They crawl into your soul and rot you from the inside. Defy the gods like your mother, and they will come for you too." Senua's father seem to represent an extreme, willful failure to understand or help individuals struggling with mental illness.

Of course, people living hundreds of years ago would be very ill equipped to help people with psychosis. They wouldn't even have the necessary vocabulary to begin to describe the symptoms. The setting then helps convey an ignorant viewpoint that seems believable to the

player. Now, as Senua clearly remembers the burning of her mother, she understands and condemns her father's actions. "She didn't defy the gods, she defied you, and so you killed her!" The world subsequently fades into a different environment and the remains of her mother turns into a giant undead husk crouching in the distance. In front of Senua stretches a giant causeway connecting to circular platforms where she battles dozens of enemies to make her way to the giant humanoid awaiting her on the other side. This is the second time Senua is faced with this creature. Halfway through the game the giant attacks, and easily defeats Senua when she's about to cross a bridge leading into the underworld. Earlier there was no obvious reason for neither player nor Senua to assume that the giant was anyone else but Hela, the goddess of death. She seemed very different than other depictions of Hela. A Norse god is normally articulate and confident. The giant figure that defeated Senua on that bridge was imposing, but mostly because of its size. The giant crouched down and approached Senua like a scared animal.   Now at the end, we see that she resembles Senua's mother and things that seemed simple becomes more complicated. Is this truly Hela or something else entirely? Senua expresses this uncertainty herself. "...if you really are Hela, then I have a sword that can kill a god!"

This last gameplay encounter consists of fighting through dozens demonic enemies, including one that transforms between three different mini bosses that the player has already defeated earlier in the game. Senua's father mocks several times throughout, letting her know the whole thing is pointless. "Look at you. Running forwards but moving backwards to wallow in your miserable past". His voice is twisted and unnaturally dark, further painting the character in an antagonistic light.

Without the subtitles it would be quite hard to make out exactly what this voice is saying. Earlier we discussed the "death mechanic" where a physical manifestation of Senua's curse, or "darkness", is corrupting her body itself. Her body is now covered in black welts and wounds, regardless of how many times the player has reached the fail state. Her mental faculties seem close to the breaking point, and this is represented visually on the avatars body. Senua is now

starting to recognize that the voices and hallucinations are an unreal creation of her own making. In interacting with the voice of her father, she blames him and the trauma resulting from his abuse. Her father's voice then counters: "Tell me Senua, where is Dillion soul if the darkness is a lie? How will you save him?" After all, she was led to the underworld by her visions. How does she reconcile this with her realization that her visions aren't real? Still she refuses to give up and continuous fighting the seemingly never-ending waves of demons. These enemies are identical to the ones faced earlier in the game, but this time they seem to be moving in slow motion compared to Senua. The challenge is ramped up by giving the player more adversaries to dodge and kill than any previous time in the game. This is yet another factor that clues the player into the fact that the enemies might be Senua's hallucinations. This, along with the fact that the environment has objects floating through the space as if unaffected by gravity.

5.5.3 Letting Go

After fighting for close to 15 minutes the Senua reaches the giant on the last circular platform. That's assuming they weren't defeated earlier and forced to start over. When you arrive, the giant shrinks down to less than a tenth of her previous size. Endless enemies now spawn, and no matter how many the player manages to kill, they are unable make progress. The giant still cowers in the same crouching stance, looking on, out of reach by Senua's sword, protected by a circle of green flames. This is another big departure from normal video game tropes. The only way to progress the story to its conclusion, is to be defeated by the demonic onslaught.

This can feel incredibly frustrating to a skilled player who is able to survive for a long time. They might wait for something to trigger after killing a certain amount of demons. So far, the gameplay objective has always been to kill or be killed, why flip this on its head at the very climax of the story? After being knocked down, Senua hears the last remaining voice telling her to: "Let go of her battle." This signals to the player that the objective has changed. But this is not a reliable hint. After all, the voices in Senua's head are sometimes well intentioned, and

sometimes not. Whether the player stops fighting on purpose or gets defeated fighting to the end, the traditional feeling in most games, of overcoming a last obstacle is changed to something more uncertain.

Being unsure of what to do, is a vulnerable position for a player. It's quite common when solving puzzles, but to intentionally get hit and lose is something far less common. It's not that unusual to have the player lose to a boss, but it's almost always done slightly differently than in Hellblade's final encounter. Three core differences set it apart:

The first one is demonstrated in the action rpg, *Jade Empire* (2005) where the player defeats what seems to be the final boss of the game. The evil emperor's hit points are lowered to zero, but after the story takes a turn and the avatar is defeated by the real villain in a following cut scene. In this instance the player is successful, but the avatar is still beaten (temporarily) in the game's narrative. This is an example of ludonarrative dissonance where the game mechanics convey the fiction in a manner opposed to what is conveyed in the non-interactive fiction. There is nothing the player could have done differently to make the avatar succeed. You could argue that that the player, if nothing else, was successful in propelling the story forward. Additionally, the writers of Jade Empire seemed to make a sacrifice by having the avatar fail to create a more compelling narrative, despite the feeling of ludonarrative dissonance.

We can further use the previous example to demonstrate the second reason why Hellblade's last encounter is unique. In Jade empire, the avatar is forced into defeat two thirds into the story, setting the protagonist up for a more climactic final battle at the story's end. Senua's is forced to: "let go of her battle" at the very end, leaving the player with a defeat at the very end of the story. Though in *Hellblade,* it's the very opposite happens. The Player loses, but the avatar is victorious. How this victory is conveyed will be further explored later.

Thirdly, the gameplay of the last confrontation takes a very atypical shape. Normally when the player is forced into a defeat, it will either happen by the player winning through mechanics,

but still losing in the narrative like in Jade Empire, or the designers will make a challenge impossible to overcome. They can make it so that the players attacks do no harm, or that the enemies attacks are impossible to avoid. Making the player lose through the game's mechanics will create less dissonance between gameplay and narrative. In Hellblade's climax however, the player can end up losing by either being overwhelmed by enemies or realizing that the only way to progress is to give up and then following through with that course of action. Either way, the interactive part of the story ends with Senua taking one last attack from a demon and the screen quickly fading to black.

5.5.4 Final Cutscene

As the screen fades back in again, Senua is laying on her side coughing and gasping for breath. The point of view sweeps in over her body and rests above her as she clutches her wounds, writhing on ground. She staggers to her hands and knees; the point of view shifts and the giant is revealed to be approaching her slowly. The giant is nowhere near as large as before, but still around three times the size of the avatar. She picks up Senua's discarded sword. Her defeat seems absolute, as the sword represents one of the few objects that's infused Senua with power. Through the game's narrative it's the only thing Senua has used to dispatch enemies. Stripping that away along with the characters posture, heightens the perception of Senua as a vulnerable character at this juncture. Between the giant and Senua, lies Dillion's severed head, still covered by the cloth pouch and apparently dropped during Senua's defeat. The platform is separated between an area wreathed in light, the giant now standing tall and the other half, where Senua sprawls, covered in shadow. As the giant picks up the sword, Senua crawls to recover the head, which lies just outside of reach, on the part of the platform covered in light. Now she sits on the border between light and darkness, framing her two choices. Succumb to hopelessness and despair or accept her past and mental condition and attempt to move on.

The first "option" is also conveyed through Senua's desperate remarks to the giant. "If you are a lie. And there is no darkness. Then you never took him from me did you? And I can't save Dillion" She clutches the Dillion's head tightly and sobs. Soon the tears turn to hysterical

laughter and defiance. The point of view is now shifted to the giant as it looms over Senua looking down her. She looks straight into the screen as she accuses the giant of lying and that she must be hiding Dillon's soul away. The player no longer hears the voices inside her head, and with the perspective shifted to Senua directly addressing the screen we are separated with her perspective more than ever before. Most importantly, because this is a cutscene, the player no longer has any control over the avatar. She has become like a character in any other medium. This is not the first cutscene in the game. but it's duration (it goes on for over eleven minutes) along with Senua addressing the point of view of the player, amalgamates into a stronger separation between player and avatar than earlier in the story.

Senua seem to realize her own powerlessness though, and her earlier defiance turns to bargaining. She offers the giant her soul and says that she will be Hela's slave warrior forever, if she agrees to release Dillion. The giant never responds. Her only utterance is a low throaty grumble. After a long moment of silence, Senua seems to deflate. She looks up one last time and whispers: "But if you won't, then you will have to kill me because I have nothing left. No fear. No hate. No quest. Nothing". But then she also realizes that she has nothing left to lose. Senua finally stands up and says:" And you have no power over me". With the giant's perspective the players must watch as the giant grabs Senua by the throat and lifts her up unto the air with her left hand. With her right she rams the sword through Senua's stomach and lets her drop to the ground.

As Senua wheezes what seems to be her final breath, Dillion appears next to her as a reflection on the ground beside her. The fact that he appears as a sort of reflection could convey that he is just another hallucination conjured by her memory of him. He asks her to accept his death but also crucially, to stop hiding from the darkness. The only way to deal with her condition is to face it with her eyes open. His image fades, and Senua seems to lose consciousness. The environment comes back into focus, but has now changed from a huge otherworldly space into a dilapidated ruin. All fantastical elements have not disappeared though, because now the giant reappears in the frame, approaches and picks up Dillion's head. She walks past Senua's

unconscious body and kneels down while holding the head at the edge of the platform. At long last the giant speaks, and her voice is that of Senua's mother. "Never forget what it is like to see the world as a child, where every autumn leaf is like a work of art, every rolling cloud a moving picture, every day a new story. We too emerge from this magic, like a wave from the ocean, only to emerge from the sea." As she speaks the last words, she drops the head down over the edge and out of sight of the game's perspective, which follows its fall down. As the games point of view pans back up, the giants form has transformed into Senua. This is "Senua's Sacrifice" from the title. She has given up her righteous quest for revenge, accepting her own inability to change the past.

She stands up, and finally all the voices return from their hiatus. They playfully laugh and speak over one another. Their return seems almost overwhelming when compared to the relative silence in their absence. Senua's starts walking away, but turns her head toward the screen and locks eyes with the player and says: "Follow us. We have another story to tell". The intro to the song over the end credits starts playing and the game ends with one last statement delivered by Senua's inner voice. "My friend. Go with her. This now will be your story to witness." The player is unable to "follow" Senua and participate in her new story. Despite the game's financial success, there seems to be no plans for a sequel with Senua reprising her role as protagonist. Therefore, we can possibly assume that the player isn't meant to follow her in a literal sense, but instead that they should follow their example of growth and self-acceptance.

Earlier we framed Senua's last action as a choice between despair and self-acceptance, but there are certain things in the ending that makes the ending seem out of Senua's hands entirely. Other than her giving up the fight, it's the vision of Dillion and her zombified giant mother that "forces" her into accepting herself at the very end. These are of course actors controlled by Senua's unconscious mind and not really separate characters from Senua at all. But you can still argue that Senua is no less in control of these characters, than the demons she has been fighting the entire game. This could diminish her accomplishment of acceptance in the eyes of some players. The end seemed to almost happen to her, rather than driven to fruition

from her making an active choice. On the other hand, you could argue that Senua's decision to stop fighting enacted the positive changes in her subconscious generating her Mother's and Dillion's encouraging words of wisdom at the end of the narrative. So, she was at least partially responsible for her own redemption.

5.5.5 Illusory Characters

Even though many players might have had the suspicion earlier, it is now revealed without much room for doubt that Senua's struggle was wholly an internal one. Hela was never the antagonist she was built up to be. She turned out to be a sort of personification of her departed mother who represented her traumatic past. Senua's true objective to end up victorious was never to restore her dead lover to life. Rather, her struggle was internal, and victory consisted of accepting her traumatic past, mental illness and moving forward instead of trying to change the past. What though, does it mean to accept your mental illness, and how is that displayed through the last few moments of the game. Much of Senua's internal struggle consist of whether "the darkness" is real or a lie. And even if the darkness is all a lie, how is she to treat the darkness if she can't distinguish between it, and reality? The game provides no clear answer, but part of Senua's victory consists of letting go of the fight. When she identified that the darkness was a lie, she also realized that it could actually hurt her. Even though she was stabbed through the stomach with a giant sword, she rises at the end seemingly unhurt. In other words, treating the hallucinations as real and trying to fight, only seemed to make them stronger.

 Accepting that the visions and voices were her own creation and to stop interacting with them, seemed like the critical puzzle piece in regaining control. On the other hand, the game also acknowledges that there is no "cure" to get rid of the symptoms of psychosis entirely. The objective in the end is not to get rid of them, but to learn to cope and function despite them. When the voices return at the very end, they themselves realize the positive change in Senua's state of mind. They mention that the darkness seems "different" and "okay". To sum up, the

game conveys how it's impossible to successfully wage battle against your trauma or your past, if you are to move forward.

5.6 Conflicting Story Conveyed in the Mechanics?

As we have discovered, the intended message of the game is revealed in its ending moments. But a much larger portion of the game is spent interacting with Senua's delusions, either through combat or by solving puzzles. Puzzles, where the solutions are found by recognizing patterns in the world only available to Senua, because of her mental illness. One game journalist, Dia Lacina, who herself struggles with mental illness, illustrated a potential problem with this mechanic. "I stopped and wondered about how many times in my own life my mental illness has aided me. No intrusive though has ever saved me from harm or given me direction. Visual hallucinations have only been horrifying or mundane" (Lacina, 2017) This seems to be the message throughout most of the game. That those with mental illness possess special observational powers that allow them to perceive patterns that reveal secrets. Even if the story's ending has the very opposite message, the previous impression might still remain. It might be so ingrained, that the message conveyed by the ending fails to overturn it. What is conveyed throughout the game by the puzzle solving mechanics, might be more impactful to the games lasting impressions than the message conveyed in the last eleven-minute cutscene.

This highlights a challenge for the developers of *Hellblade* Despite of how the message is perceived by people who struggles with mental illness themselves, the usage of hallucinations in the puzzles are one of the things that set the game apart. This unique twist was a big part of what earned the game great review scores and positive attention from players. These reviews in turn, is what attracts players who get to experience a game that attempts to convey the experience of some of the symptoms of psychosis. Even if it's not accurate to all the different ways people struggle with mental illness, the attempt itself is creating awareness, of what some of these people go through. The aforementioned game journalist acknowledges that others with mental illness praise the game for doing this. "Even friends with mental illness said the game resonated with them- that this was the "AAA Depression Quest" the games industry has

been waiting for" (ibid). This, in contrast to *Depression Quest* (2013), an entirely text-based game, developed without a fraction of the budget of *Hellblade*, and therefore also with no chance to reach and affect the same number of players.

When talking about representing mental illness accurately, you could also discuss to what degree the developers are even responsible for that at all. We are never asked to use Senua's character as an archetype to represent every single person with mental illness problems. This rather, seems projected upon the character from the outside. An attempt to depict one kind of experience, shouldn't invalidate other people's differing experiences.

Hellblade is one group of developer's interpretation of psychosis, filtered through a story about a celtic warriors' quest. They consulted with both healthcare professionals and with people with the diagnosis and tried to implement some of what they learned into the end product. Even if they failed at an adequately accurate depiction, they succeeded at conveying a thoroughly unique narrative that was subversive to many of the video game tropes that gamers are used to. Hellblade attempts to teach the player to empathize with a fictional vulnerable character, and this empathy might end up translating to people who share some of the main characters symptoms in real life.

5.7 "Games for impact" award and recognition

At the Game Awards held December 2017, Hellblade won the "games for impact" award. The parameters of this awards category were described in this way: "For a thought-provoking game with a profound pro-social meaning or message."

Let's first establish the reasons why the category exists. It's quite unique to the medium. Awards ceremonies that celebrate other mediums does not explicitly reward products for their positive impact on society. If people think a movie is profound, it is of course more likely to win an Oscar, but that's taken completely for granted. The game awards have established it as an actual category. The most obvious reason for this is of course that most games to an extent is

there simply to relax and entertain you. When a game differs from the norm and has a real message it stands out from the crowd of other games. The games media want to highlight these games to not only validate games as a serious and mature art-form, but also to validate themselves as legitimate journalists. The games media take the content of games seriously and want to be taken seriously as well. As a result, they might also want to see more games that aspire to something more than "pure entertainment". Maybe if other game companies see games like Hellblade get rewarded, they will be inspired to create something equally ambitious. We have already heavily touched on the reasons why Hellblade could be perceived as worthy for an award like this. It mostly comes down to representation of psychosis in a highly credible way compared to most other attempts in any medium. This was clearly the objective from the very early stages of development. Ninja Theory received a grant of 398.000 dollars to do research on mental illness and subsequent development. Additionally, they created a website for people seeking help. On the frontpage of the website it reads: " If you've been affected by any of the issues you've seen in Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice and want to talk to someone or find out more, select your country from the drop down to find your local support" The website demonstrates a commitment to exploring mental illness that reaches far beyond representation. Of course, cynical minds could boil this down to a marketing strategy, but the end result is still a stark contrast to other representation of mental illness in video games regardless of the motivation behind it.

Kelli N. Dunlap created a model that categorizes different portrayals of Mental Illness in video games. It separates types of representation into three types escalating in comprehensiveness and realism. One-dimensional are the simplest type of representation. "These consist of broad references to mental illness wherein the representation is a nonessential element to a character, story, or environment. These references are background noise, something that is alluded to but not established and which carry minimal significance"(2018, s.81) Characters represented in this way never develop, and their mental illness is not explored in any meaningful way. Dunlap references the "Psychos" from *Borderlands* (Gearbox software 2009)*,* a

generic enemy type. Their name and surface behavior is the limit to how their mental state is explored. (ibid)

Two dimensional are representations where the mental illness is a defining trait of a unique character. These are characters that are "crazy", but "any attempt to dig deeper reveals a hollow shell of a character" (Dunlap, 2018, s.82).
Three dimensional representations have more depth, and Hellblade is Dunlap's first example fitting this category.

"Hellblade features character, narrative, and environmental representations of mental illness and delivers a thoughtful and emotionally engaging story that explores the complexities of mental illness without stereotype or sugarcoating. Hellblade was developed in cooperation with mental health professionals as well as individuals who experienced voice-hearing or other psychosis-related symptoms." (ibid)

Hellblade features realistic graphics and motion captured animations. As we've discussed, these can help enhance the players sense of immersion. Dunlap makes the case that these are not required to authentically tackle themes relating to mental illness. Many of her other examples uses simple or cartoony graphics to convey these issues in an in-depth way. (ibid) When considerable resources are spent to explore these types of issues, it has a greater likelihood of reaching a wider audience and having an even greater impact. This sums up the major reasons why it was awarded with a "games for impact award". It might have paved way for *Celeste* (Matt Makes Games 2018), the winner of the following years award which tackles themes of related to mental illness and anxiety.

6 Comparative section

6.1 Sequel versus new IP

Dark Souls 3 and *Hellblade: Senua's* sacrifice are set apart by one being a sequel and the other being the first of a new original IP (intelligent property). In the case of *Dark Souls 3*, it's not only a sequel of the first two games. The original *Dark Souls* released in 2011 was also a spiritual successor of *Demon's Souls* released in 2009 released for the PS3. The original was a critical success with a niche audience. The original *Dark Souls* expanded its audience by also releasing on the Xbox 360. The franchise has been gaining players with every iteration with good word of mouth coupled with critical success. Financially backed by Sony, From Software released *Bloodborne* in 2015 on the PlayStation 4.

Bloodborne keeps much of the same gameplay mechanics found in *Dark Souls* games but is set in a different fictional world. In summation, *Dark Souls 3* is built on a proven foundation people were happy with. From Software introduced several gameplay elements and improved the graphical fidelity, but much of the core experience remains the same. This Sets it apart from *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* which must shoulder new things like a new art style, characters and gameplay mechanics just to name a few. Most importantly they must attract a new audience. The *Dark Souls* franchise already have ravenous fans that would buy the new game even if it just offered more of what made them fans in the first place. Of course, one shouldn't underestimate the difficulty of developing a game that lives up to previous critical success either. Generally, the sequel to a game will have improved graphics because of the more powerful hardware and software used to run games. In spite of this, many sequels fail to achieve or exceed the amount of acclaim gained by previous entries in the a franchise. In the case of *Dark Souls* though, every installation of the franchise has been both a critical and financial success following the first entry in the series. *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice* built more of its fan base from scratch. Sometimes a developer can rely on previous success to market a new

ip, but Ninja Theory, the creators of *Hellblade* have an uneven track record, when it comes to both popular and critical success.

6.2 Third Person Perspective.

Both the *Dark Souls* games and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* display the avatar from a third person perspective, meaning that the main playable character is shown and controlled with the character looking on from behind rather than a first person perspective where the game world is displayed directly through the "eyes" of the avatar. Kristine Jørgensen describes the main emotional difference from a players perspective when comparing *Crysis (2008)* with *Diablo 2* (2000) "Due to the first-person perspective of Crysis, the players describe that they merge with the figure in the sense of sharing and taking over its perceptual properties. Also, having a visible controllable figure on screen does not seem to create a sense of identification with it." (2009, s.7) Jørgensen admits that the how the avatar is controlled could be influencing how her interview subjects feel. In *Diablo 2,* the avatar's movements is controlled through clicking on the ground with the mouse cursor. The character then moves toward the spot that was clicked before stopping on arrival. This creates a certain disconnect between the player and the character. The relationship is described like someone controlling a puppet rather than inhabiting an avatar. (2009, s. 4) *Diablo 2* represents a different kind of third person game in another way as well. The perspective is looking down on the player from above and the camera moves on a 2D plane like in most strategy games. Additionally, unlike *Hellblade*, the player chooses a generic nameless class to control rather than a named character. You also have a very limited control over what the character looks like compared to the *Dark Souls* games. There are certain advantages to the third person perspective in games. Seeing the character, that you've outfitted with your hard-earned loot, is satisfying. In most first person games, you can see the avatars hands and in some you can see the knees and feet if you look down, but it doesn't quite compare to being able to rotate the camera around the avatar to admire the character in full detail.

The most obvious advantage to having a third person perspective is that the player can perceive more accurately, where the avatar is in relation to the environment. That's why most platforming games that require precise jumping is played in this perspective. The details are often slightly adjusted based on a few key differences between third person games, and these differences are exemplified in *Dark Souls* and *Hellblade*. In *Hellblade* the player perspective is zoomed in quite close to the avatars character model, obstructing the players view of the environment and potential threats. The player would have an easier time fighting enemies, solving puzzles and navigating the game world in general if the camera was zoomed out further.

So why does Ninja Theory make it harder for the player? By limiting the players perspective it's easier to direct the players attention towards something specific. If the player is in complete control over the camera and have a wide field of view, they might get distracted from something the developers want to convey at a specific point in the story. In *Hellblade's* case specifically, the limiting and zoomed in view of the character model fits in with the games central themes. Senua is tortured by illusions and has problems distinguishing fantasy from reality. Her perspective is in other words deeply limiting. When the designers limit the players perspective it can possibly help players relate to the character under their control. Often the player will hear unknown sounds behind them, or the voices will warn them to "be careful" or "look out. Turning the characters view around is cumbersome and the player might feel like whatever threat was lurking had the time to scurry away. This enhances the feeling of vulnerability and helps the player inhabit the character who has those same feelings.

Players of *Dark Souls* are reliant on being able to scout out upcoming traps and to accurately perceive their avatars location in relation to enemies. The level design also has a much higher degree of verticality and its navigation requires a great deal of camera control. It's dense systems and gameplay mechanics sets it apart from Hellblade and it's apparent in the games third person controls.

6.3 Headcanon

We've discussed how Senua's story is a more directed and tightly conveyed narrative than the one found in *Dark Souls 3.* This becomes especially apparent when comparing the avatars from the two ip's. *Dark Souls* gives the player a plank canvas and a set of paints and brushes to design what kind of avatar they want to control. This can have a profound effect on how the narrative is perceived, and crucially it lets the player take a more active role in his own experience of the story. For example, when the avatar's backstory is left blank, the player can craft it themselves. The players are then at the very least, indirectly encouraged to create their own headcanon, making up their own personal interpretation of the story with little basis in the actual game.

This can be done either actively, by writing it out themselves as fanfiction, or consciously thinking about it when designing and controlling their character. Even subconsciously, designing your own character will have a certain impact on how the story is perceived. Killing a Boss with a giant axe versus doing it with a magic spell has a slightly different emotional impact. These types of combat strategies have archetypal characteristics and personalities attached to them. Spellcasting wizards with long beards are generally wise, compared to heavily muscled men, wearing loincloths and wielding giant weaponry. Controlling one character compared to the other will give the narrative a different kind of flavor. With this "flavor" in mind, the player will either consciously or unconsciously interpret the events of the narrative. In the "*Dark Souls 3* storytelling" section we discussed how much of the games story has to be unearthed by the player actively exploring and reading item descriptions. Most players though, won't find every single item and read them. Much less, piece all of the lore together into a cohesive story when the first task is through. Much of the games story is left up to the players imagination.

6.4 Bosses

Most of *Dark Souls 3's* narrative framework is constructed around the different bosses. This is necessary when the player character is mostly a blank slate that the player projects themselves unto. Other characters, like bosses, must then carry the load of the story. The most important ones, the Lords of Cinder are introduced through an intro cinematic, that plays right after the player has created their avatar. An old female voice introduces each by name as they are shown rising from their graves one after the other. When the story focuses on the enemies rather than the player, it helps enhance the players feeling of being less important. In many other games the player is put in the shoes off a "great hero" or a "chosen one" from the beginning. In *Dark souls 3* the player is one among many "unkindled", who rise to in an attempt to defeat the Lords of Cinder and return their ashes to the firelink shrine. The player meets several other npc's along the way who share their objective. The player is only the prophesized hero if they eventually succeed. Until that happens there is no way to know. Therefore, none of the npc's treat the player as anyone out of the ordinary. Again, *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade* are complete opposites. The story in Hellblade, is centered around exploring a single character's psyche. It puts the narrative focus on the avatar, while Dark Souls 3 is all about exploring and overcoming a game world. It's even possible to interpret Senua as the only character even actually existing in the game at all, the other ones being either remembered people from her past, or hallucinations of demon Vikings.

So far, we've discussed how both franchises feature three dimensional characters. This is true as well for some of the bosses in *Dark Souls 3.* As with much of the other story content, the player must conduct a considerable amount of research to discover the backstories and motivations of these bosses. Many have tragic pasts twisting them into the monsters they have become. No matter their pasts though, all these characters serve a more important function as challenging obstacles, rather than actual contributors to the plot. We never gain enough empathy with them to not try our hardest to kill them. The player is never made to doubt his moral superiority over any of the bosses. This is important if the player is to feel good about defeating them, and also seem to be the norm in most video games "In summary, these

findings suggest that moral disengagement factors are embedded in the narratives, scenarios, and gameplay of many violent video games, which effectively free users from feeling guilty if committing violent acts against seemingly alive video game characters." (Hartman, 2017) The player does not feel remorse for the enemies slain by controlling Senua either. After all, they are either evil demons, or imagined demons conjured as a result of her psychosis and traumatic past. Bosses are a much less important part of *Hellblade's* narrative. Apart from the last confrontation with the giant, who the player never actually fights, they all feel like a modified version of the regular demon enemy Senua is faced with throughout the game.

6.5 Naming Your Avatar

In the *Dark Souls* franchise, you create and name a character that fits into the mysterious role of an unkindled. Naming a character at the outset of a game represent the difference between assuming a role and creating a role and has several implications for how the rest of the game will unravel. It's an early telltale sign that the game will feature other rpg elements and systems and a less of directed narrative and that the gameplay will be more action oriented. Furthermore, it also impacts how the player feels about the character. Naming a character is a type of creative expression. It also allows for a player to name their character after themselves. Regardless of what name they choose, the player gains some additional ownership of the character. There is also a difference between expressing yourself through a character, and projecting your own self into the character. The player might not be thinking of the avatar as themselves but rather as an extension of their will. "The data seems to suggest that it is much more common for individuals to use avatars as facilitators for experimentation than for vehicles for direct projection. " (Hart, 2017) In *Hellblade* the avatar is a set character with a set gender, style, personality and goals.

6.6 Lessen interface to Increase Immersion

Dark Souls convey much more information through its interface to the player than Hellblade. There's an ever-present health, mana and stamina bar at the top left corner. The interface

shows what weapon your currently equipped with and what items the player has assigned to the quick use function. Additionally, there's a number on the bottom right hand of the screen that shows how many collected souls the player currently has in his possession. Hitting an enemy of a facing boss, their health bar is displayed as well.

This is in stark contrast to Hellblade, where there's no visual interface whatsoever. When the player takes damage in this game the whole screen turns darker and everything looks out of focus. This is common for more action heavy games that rely on a regenerating health system. The visuals try to imitate a person passing out and eliminates some of the gameplay elements more common in games made in the twentieth century. Then, most action games had a health bar that the player had to refill by either completing the level or finding healing items.

In Hellblade, they eliminated that feature to streamline and focus the game. Looking for health packs is probably not totally compatible with conveying the experience of psychosis. Additionally, using health packs to suddenly restore your health is not a real-life experience, but almost passing out or seeing spots and coming back to your senses is something most people can relate to. Ninja Theory prioritizes getting immersed over conveying useful information to the player in comparison with *Dark Souls*. There are a few reasons why not displaying a health-bar isn't a big problem for the player in Hellblade, but would greatly hinder the player when playing *Dark Souls.* Firstly, most enemies in Hellblade inflict the same amount of damage. If they hit you five times without the player regaining any health, you die and get sent back to the last checkpoint. The player gets used to this fairly soon, so the need for a health bar constantly informing about the avatars status is less needed. Secondly the avatars health total stays the same throughout the whole game. *Dark Souls 3's* complex mechanics are manifested it's equally complex interface. Giving the player an option to increase their health total contributes to the complexity. In *Hellblade* there's no way for the player to heal at all, except by avoiding damage while waiting for the health to recover on its own. If the player were to use a restorative item like in *Dark Souls 3* they would want to see the exact impact of that action reflected in a health bar.

The reasons why the player doesn't need a health bar in *Hellblade but* is reliant on it in *Dark Souls,* can in many instances be extrapolated to cover any other element in *Dark Souls* interface. In general, when a game has a more complex system of mechanics, there will also be a greater need to convey that system to the player. *Dark Souls* without a health bar, stamina bar, mana bar, item quick select indicator and weapon equipment indicator would be confusing and a lot harder to play. Sometimes games will increase the number of elements in the interface over time as the player gets introduced to new mechanics. The mana bar can be revealed when the player first gets introduced to spellcasting. Many designers seem to operate with the philosophy that an overly interface will scare away players, especially newcomers to the genre.

When a player first opens the *Dark Souls 3* menu to level up, their stats they are confronted with 9 different options to choose from. These all have different effects on a dozen of other stats. Some of these are quite innocuous like the "poise" stat, which determines how quickly the avatar loses its balance. This stat is also affected by the avatars armour. It can all be quite overwhelming. Having a cluttered interface can both lessen a player's sense of immersion and scare away players seeking a more relaxing experience. On the other hand, some players will feel glee at the sight of complicated menus and stats knowing that they represent a complex and rewarding set of gameplay mechanics.

6.6.1 More Systems = More Immersion?

I've conveyed how a stripped-down interface gives the player a greater sense of immersion because it closer resembles real life. At face value this seems true. However, the only reason a stripped-down interface is possible is because the simulation is simplistic. The real world is of course extremely complex. So, you could argue that even if a game has a cluttered interface it's still more like real life and that its and intricate systems makes it more like a real place. In fact, you could argue that the simulations and systems make the game world "real" in a certain sense of the world.

Let's examine the benefits of increasing the complexity of a game's mechanics, using limited stamina as an example. First and foremost, it gives the player and extra strategic dimension to consider. Stamina is consumed when attacking, sprinting, rolling and when blocking incoming attacks. Any of these actions performed to frequently will leave the avatar vulnerable. An empty stamina bar will cause blocks to fail, and none of the other actions listed will trigger when the corresponding button is pressed on the controller. The maximum stamina available can be increased by leveling up a certain selection of the avatar's attributes. Obviously, this system isn't exactly realistic. If the player stops moving for a few seconds the stamina will refill back up to its maximum amount again. A person performing extraneous tasks can feel the fatiguing after-effects for days and even weeks later. Even still, the *Dark Souls* stamina system is more realistic than having an infinite amount of stamina that many games operate with, including *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*.

Creating realistic mechanics, in addition to graphics, has been a constant goal for the video game industry. For example, great lengths have been gone to recreate real world physics in video games. In *Half Life 2* (Valve, 2004) the player has to solve several puzzles by using the games physics engine. These types of puzzles have become increasingly realistic as the technology progresses, incorporating liquids, gasses and different strengths of gravity. But even discounting the notions of realism, there's a certain sense of tangibility and immersion that results from increasing the complexity of a game's mechanics. After all, a games rules are real in the context of the video game simulation. A certain magic spell will light up an environment or set fire to an object. The consequences are measurable and impact the game world, and then in turn the players perception of the game's fiction. In games with deep systems there's another layer to the exploration. In addition to navigating the levels and finding secrets, you can unearth secrets within the mechanics. Examples could include a Dark Souls boss being weak to a certain elemental property like fire. This discovery helps convey an authenticity to the game. We know that certain objects are more flammable than others in the real world, so when this holds true in a simulation, we are immersed. Additionally, our curiosity is sparked. If this is true, then what else is also true? Are other enemies weak to fire or other elemental effects? Can I set

fire to objects in addition to enemies? It seems that the more complex a game's gameplay mechanics are, the more potential for growth on the part of the player.

6.6.2 More systems = More Problems?

After the previous paragraph it might seem like a game always gets better as its gameplay systems increase in complexity. There are several good reasons to keep it simpler as well. There's clearly a correlation between complex systems and an increase in the amounts of bugs encountered in a game. Especially when these systems are paired with an open world environment that allows the player to utilize these systems in as many possible scenarios as possible. Getting rid of these bugs through QA (quality assurance) testing in the final stages of development is a considerable portion of a game's development cycle. *Dark Souls 3* is relatively bug-free, but players are way more likely to find them there than when playing *Hellblade* because of its relatively simple gameplay systems.

Sometimes complexity adds very little to a game´s quality. Games seem to work best when all the systems are designed to function in conjunction with the players goals. Let's reuse our flammable objects example. Does setting fire to grass help the flush an enemy out of hiding? Does burning a rope release a mechanism that opens a door? If objects are flammable in a game, the game should also provide reasons to burn things beyond gratifying the occasional pyromaniac. You could argue that *Dark Souls 3* sometimes fail to follow this philosophy. When leveling up the player can increase their "luck" stat. This increases the chances of certain loot dropping from enemies and makes "poison" and "bleed" attacks more effective. Luck could not be increased by leveling up in any of the previous games in the series. You could also argue that it seems out of place in a game all about improving yourself.

it's also impossible to evaluate if investing in the stat is a viable strategy, before performing hours testing. To find out exactly how useful the stat is, the player must first evaluate the drop rate of an item in an area by killing monsters there. This action should be performed for a pretty long time to make it statistically significant. Then they must return to that same area

after leveling up, go back to killing monsters at approximately the same speed and check the difference in the drop rate. And even now, after all this work, it would be very hard to gauge whether to invest in the luck stat or not, because the player still must evaluate how valuable the increased drop rate is worth in the context of the rest of the game. There are some rare weapons that get an increased damage output based on the luck stat, but there's no way for the player to know at the beginning of the game. In summation, the luck stat seems antithetical to the games themes and adds needless complexity. In contrast, when the player increases the "strength" stat, there's an immediate visible increase in the potential damage from the weapon currently equipped. This is comparatively much easier to evaluate. If the player until now has been dealing 50 damage every time an attack lands, it will be fairly easy to imagine how 60 damage per attack will perform in comparison. Earlier we established how complicated menus and interfaces can be overwhelming and cause players to feel out of their depth and possibly even give up on a game. Menus are there to help players understand or to utilize gameplay systems. The mechanics then, is what's indirectly intimidating the player.

But not all gameplay systems require additions to the interface. Some are intuitive because they resemble real life. The earlier fire example is emblematic of this. System that resembles real life physics, like the avatar taking damage when falling off a cliff, or boxes breaking open when struck, are unlikely to scare away players. Most of the core mechanics in the *Dark Souls* franchise are intuitive. Physics based mechanics work together in a simulation. When the player utilizes these mechanics, the consequences seem proportional to what we know from observing real life. For example, a giant axe will be slower and deal more damage per hit compared to a small knife, that hits faster and deals less damage.

6.7 Multiplayer: Adding to Immersion?

Dark Souls 3's multiplayer features also contribute to setting it apart from *Hellblade.* There are elements to *Dark Souls 3's* multiplayer that both subtracts and strengthens a games potential for immersion. It depends on the behavior of the other players that you encounter. Designers try to program npc's, so they don't break immersion. When visiting your game world, Players

can act erratic, moving their character in odd ways and spinning them around unnaturally. Additionally, they can hack the game, gaining an unfair advantage in duels. On the other hand, there are also ways for multiplayer features to enhance the "realness" of the game world. The norms and practices that have evolved in the game's pvp (player versus player) helps illustrate this. The two most common forms of pvp in the *Dark Souls* franchise is either invasions, or dueling. Invasions happen when one player uses an item to suddenly appear in another players game. If player who invaded succeeds in killing the other player, they receive an item that can be used as currency in an in-game store. In this situation, the invader is expected to use any means at their disposal to win the fight.

Dueling has an entirely different set of expectations and norms attached to it. When players want to duel, they can use an item to invite other players into their world. So, the process is reversed from how invasions are started. Before initiating a duel, the players normally either bow or wave to each other, signaling that they are ready to begin fighting. it's seen as bad manners to use healing items after the fight has begun. That's because healing will extend the fight and disrupt the pacing of the contest. It also wouldn't be fair competition seeing as the "host" player has double the amount of healing items available. There are no in-game consequences to breaking these rules made by the community. People still choose in large part to follow them. There are many other norms or activities performed in the game's multiplayer space. The collection of these shared norms and practices add up to something resembling an in-game culture. It can be argued that this culture adds a layer of reality to the experience of playing the game, possibly adding to the game's overall immersion. When the culture is shattered by hacking, or seemingly random behavior acted out by other players, the sense of immersion might get negatively affected.

6.7.1 Seeking an Even Greater Challenge

There's a subsection of the *Dark Souls* community online that want to challenge themselves beyond the regular difficulty provided by the game. The most common way to do this, is to try to get from beginning to end of the game as fast as possible. This practice of "speedrunning"

transcends *Dark Souls,* and a community can be found in the fandom of many other games. In addition to speedrunning, some players give themselves extra challenges like not using shields or magic. Some have finished the game with unruly controllers like the guitar hero controller or the dance dance revolution dance pad. In 2016 people started trying to complete *Dark Souls* games without their avatar getting hit a single time. In March 21, 2019, a player with the gamertag "HappyHob" finished all 5 "soulsborne" games in succession without getting hit a single time throughout an almost 18-hour long playthrough. This was quite a stunning achievement considering how hard it is to complete even one of these games with no extra challenge added at all. The clip where he delivers the final blow to the last boss of *Dark Souls 3* has over 700.000 views, indicating that there's a big interest in these kinds of accomplishments. Even if the streamer were to fail at five, ten or fifteen hours into the attempt, that would also showcase something dramatic on top of heightening the payoff when the person streaming finally manages to reach the goal. There's clearly a massive interest in video game streaming "People are not satisfied with just the game; they are interested in the people surrounding it: the players at the helm and the viewers who appreciate the performance." (Anderson, 2017) The interest has been recognized by powerful financial forces. Amazon acquired Twich.com for 940 million dollars and companies like Redbull and T-Mobile are sponsoring esports events and teams.

Why does a community and interest like this gather around the *Dark Souls* games and not in games like *Hellblade*? As we've discussed previously *Dark Souls* has a complex set of mechanics that let the player be creative and express themselves. The different weapons have different move sets with several pros and cons to them. This also encourages the player to replay the game several times, which arguably in turn makes it more likely for the player to get even more attached to what the game has to offer. *Hellblade* seems designed for one playthrough. Playing it a second time would feel similar, as there is only one way to solve its puzzles and only one combat style to defeat enemies. Speedrunning *Hellblade* then makes less sense because the player is unable to explore a wide variety of strategies to achieve their goals in a shorter amount of time. That's not to say that speedrunning *Hellblade* hasn't been attempted. The

record time of completing the game stands at 1 hour, 42 minutes and 50 seconds(speedrunning.com). By utilizing glitches to skip parts of the game and by becoming an expert at the combat system such a time is possible. It seems impressive, considering that the average completion time for the game is 7 hours and 21 minutes (howlongtobeat.com). Keep in mind that people who submit their completion-time, or even be aware of the website, are more likely to be experienced gamers. Regardless, comparing the times to *Dark Souls 3*, reveals the flexibility allowed by a complex system of mechanics. The average completion time is 32 hours and 38 minutes. The website also provides a different time for "completionists". Players who say they took the time to defeat extra bosses and collect extra items, report that they spent an average of 92 hours and 12 minutes. The game is potentially a huge time sink for dedicated players. Despite this, the record for the fastest speedrun of *Dark souls 3* is only 32 minutes and 46 seconds. The game provides substantially more opportunities for the player to use creative strategies to lower their completion-time.

7 Conclusion

Both *Dark Souls 3* and *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice* represent two wildly different approaches to conveying a sense of vulnerability and growth. Both also use different tools to create an immersive world, drawing the player in. Immersion is crucial for the player to experience meaningful emotions. But these two games demonstrate that there are many ways to make this happen. *Dark Souls 3* has complex mechanics that work together, creating a web of interacting systems, that making the game world more real. Hellblade on the other hand rely more on sophisticated graphics and motion captured animation, to immerse the player. What really sets it apart though, is how it incorporates a believable soundscape of imagined voices, created with the help of both experts and people struggling with psychosis.

In *Dark Souls 3* the player is made to either rise to the games challenge or stop playing out of frustration. By improving at controlling their character and developing strategies for different situations, the player can go from feeling vulnerable, to experiencing sense of growth. Where many roleplaying games convey this transition through acquiring stats and better gear, *Dark Souls 3* puts a larger emphasis on the player mastering the game's mechanics. These mechanics, including multiplayer features, lays the groundwork for creating an online community where players can express themselves, discuss the narrative, compete or help each other.

Hellblade uses a completely different methods to craft the players experience. It has a solitary single player experience, that's designed to convey a far more specific narrative. The player is placed in a vulnerable state and is made to stay there throughout the whole story, discounting the cathartic part at the very end. The narrative is subversive in a video game context. It's not about the hero triumphing over and antagonist. Like in real life where people have to learn just to function in spite of a debilitating disability, Senua's growth is limited to not giving up, not breaking down in the face of the voices in her head, or the terrifying hallucinations, but to keep going. She will never be free. *Hellblade* is subversive in that most other games that look and play similarly to it, end on a triumphant note. In *Hellblade,* the player must lose the fight in order to finish the story. Neither games narrative has a "good ending" where things go

unequivocally well for the protagonist. *Hellblade* ends with Senua accepting her curse, not ridding herself of it. *Dark Souls 3* has multiple endings, where the player faces a "lesser-of-two-evils" situation. No matter what ending players choose, they experience triumph, because of how they overcame the challenging journey through the story.

Both games establish how video games can convey a more dynamic narrative starting the player out at a lower emotional point, before raising them up either through rewarding gameplay challenges or compelling audiovisual storytelling. Their popularity can potentially inspire other games to venture out beyond the narrative tropes commonly found in video games.

8 Sources:

Aarseth, E. (2007) Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games, Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques, retrieved from

http://www.luisfilipeteixeira.com/fileManager/file/fiction_Aarseth_jan2006.pdf

Andersen, E. O'Rourke, E. Liu, Y. Snider, R. Loudermilk, J. Truong, D. Cooper, S. Popovic, Z. (2012) *The Impact of Tutorials on Games of Varying Complexity,* Proceedings of the 2012 ACM annual conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - *CHI 12* retrieved from

http://grail.cs.washington.edu/projects/game-abtesting/chi2012/chi2012.pdf

Anderson, S.L (2017) Watching People Is Not a Game: Interactive Online Corporeality, Twitch.tv and Videogame Streams. volume 17 issue 1 July 2017. retrieved from
http://gamestudies.org/1701/articles/anderson

Bloomberg, J.(2018) The Semiotics of the Game Controller. gamestudies *Volume 18, issue 2, September 2018.* retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/blomberg

 B. Mitchell Peck, Paul R. Ketchum and David G. (2011) Racism and sexism in the gaming world: Reinforcing or changing stereotypes in computer games? Embrick Journal of Media and Communication Studies Vol. 3(6), pp. 212-220, June 2011

Dor, S. (2018) Strategy in Games or Strategy Games: Dictionary and Encyclopaedic Definitions for Game Studies. volume 18 issue 1 April 2018. retrieved from

http://gamestudies.org/1801/articles/simon_dor

Dorman, J. (2006) On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules. volume 6 issue 1 December 2006. retrieved from

http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S. Smith, J, H. & Tosca, S, P. (2012), *Understanding Video Games: The essential introduction,* New York: Routledge

Emri, L & Mäyrä, F. (2005). Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion. Worlds in Play: Int. Perspectives on Digital Games Research. Retrieved from http://people.uta.fi/~frans.mayra/gameplay_experience.pdf

Gazzard, G. (2011) Unlocking the Gameworld: The Rewards of Space and Time in Video Games *Game studies volume 11 issue 1 February 2011.* retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/gazzard_alison

Gregersen, A. Philos. (2014) Generic Structures, Generic Experiences: A Cognitive Experientialist Approach to Video Game Analysis. retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-013-0125-8

Hart, C. (2017) Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in Video Game Avatars. volume 17 issue 2 December 2017. retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart

Hartman, T. (2017) The "Moral Disengagement in Violent Videogames" Model. retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hartmann

Jose, P & Brewer, F, W. (1984) Development of Story Liking: Character Identification, Suspense, and Outcome Resolution. Developmental Psychology. 20. 10.1037//0012-1649.20.5.911. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49176232_Development_of_Story_Liking_Character_Identification_Suspense_and_Outcome_Resolution

Juul, J.(2007) Without a goal: On Open and expressive games. retrieved from http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/withoutagoal/

Juul, J. (2009) Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty In Video Games. retrieved from http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/fearoffailing/

Juul, J.(2011) *Half real Half-real: video games between real rules and fictional worlds.* Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press.

Jørgensen, K. (2016) The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line. volume 16 issue 2 December 2016. Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/jorgensenkristine

Koech, B (2018) A play of bodies: how we perceive videogames. Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Klevjer, R. (2006) *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer games (Doctorate, University of Bergen).* Hentet fra http://folk.uib.no/smkrk/docs/RuneKlevjer_What%20is%20the%20Avatar_finalprint.pdf

Munday, R. (2007) '*Music In Video Games*,' in J. Sexton (ed.) Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual . Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 51-67 https://www.academia.edu/764173/3._MUSIC_IN_VIDEO_GAMES

Tanenbaum, K., & Tanenbaum, J. (2009). Commitment to Meaning: A Reframing of Agency in Games. *UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture 2009*. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6f49r74n

Wesp, E. (2014) A Too-Coherent World: Game Studies and the Myth of "Narrative" Media Game studies volume 14 issue 2 December 2014. Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/wesp

Salen, K & Zimmerman, E (2004) *Rules of play : game design fundamentals* Cambridge, Mass: MIT press

Jenkins, H. (2011) Game Design as Narrative Architecture. retrieved from
http://homes.lmc.gatech.edu/~bogost/courses/spring07/lcc3710/readings/jenkins_game-design.pdf

Lankoski, P & Järvelä, S. (2012) An Embodied Cognition Approach for Understanding Role-playing. *International Journal of Role-playing. 3. 18-32.* retrieved from
http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue3/IJRPissue3lankoskijarvella.pdf

Lacina, D. (2017) What Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice gets wrong about mental illness. Retrieved from https://www.polygon.com/2017/9/15/16316014/hellblade-senuas-sacrifice-mental-illness

Purslow, M. (2018) Hellblade's permadeath bluff is "not as simple as people think". retrieved from https://www.pcgamesn.com/hellblade-senuas-sacrifice/hellblade-permadeath-fake

Sicart, M (2008) Defining Game Mechanics. volume 8 issue 2 December 2008. Retrieved from
http://www.gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart

Aditinoal Resources:

https://www.howlongtobeat.com

https://www.speedrun.com

Ludography:

Aleksej Leonidovitsj Pazjitnov (1985) *Tetris* [various platforms] Russia: various publishers

From Software. (2016) *Dark Souls 3* [PC] Japan: Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Ninja Theory: (2017) *Hellblade: Senua's sacrifice* [PC] UK: Ninja Theory

Capcom: (1996-2017) Resident Evil [various platforms] Japan: Capcom

Frictional Games (2010) Amnesia: Dark Descent [PC] Sweden: Frictional Games

Epic Games. (2006) *Gears of War* [xbox 360] USA: Microsoft Game Studios

Yeager Development (2012) *Spec Ops: The Line [PC] USA: 2K games*

Lionhead Studios (2004) *Fable* [xbox] UK: Microsoft Game Studios

Valve (2004) Half-life 2[PC] USA: Sierra Entertainment

Kyle Seeley (2015) Emily is away [PC] USA: Kyle Seeley

Spike (2010) *Danganronpa* [various platforms] Japan: Spike Chunsoft

Blizzard Entertainment (1997) *Diablo* 2 [PC] USA: Blizzard Entertainment

The Quinnspiracy (2013) *Depression Quest* [PC] USA: The Quinnspiracy

Verant Interactive (2000) *Everquest* [PC] USA: Sony Online Entertainment

Harmonix Music Systems (2010*) Dance Central* [xbox360] USA: Microsoft studios

PlatinumGames (2013) Metal Gear Rising: Revengance [various platforms] Japan: Konami