2. APPROACHING FROMSOFTWARE'S SOULS GAMES AS MYTH

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ABSTRACT
FromSoftware's *Souls* series comprises five separate fictional worlds, and yet is considered a series with a 'spiritual' connection. Although the games share the same developer, special attention has been paid, both in popular discourse and in research, to the distinctive character of FromSoftware's world-building and storytelling. I argue that a mythological approach allows us to better outline, analyse and put into relation the elements of these games. Mythology is understood as a *model for understanding the world*, following the work of Frog (2021) and Roland Barthes

([1972] 2009). This builds on *mytholudics* (Ford 2022), which adapts this understanding for the study of games. Through this, I examine three aspects of a potential *Souls* mythology: desire and purpose, godhood and divinity, and fire and dark. Additionally, I consider how the *Souls* community negotiates the *Souls* gameworlds, relating it to the role of folkloric storytellers in communities.

INTRODUCTION

Since the release of *Demon's Souls* in 2009, Japanese developer FromSoftware has found global success and acclaim. In particular, the success of *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) spurred a movement in digital games, sparking what is now considered the 'Soulslike' genre.[1] Soulslikes are typically third-person action- adventure roleplaying games with a high level of difficulty, whereby the player is expected to die many times, and in which the currency for levelling up falls to the ground upon death, and is lost if the player dies again before collecting it. They are often set in a dark fantasy world without much of a clear narrative.

It is this last point regarding narrative that I am concerned with in this paper. Here, the *Souls* series refers, in chronological order, to the FromSoftware games *Demon's Souls* (2009), *Dark Souls* (2011), *Dark Souls II* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015a), *Dark Souls III* (2016), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) and *Elden Ring* (2022).[2]

These seven games represent five separate fictional universes

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1. Following the example of previous genres named after highly influential games, such as Metroidvanias, roguelikes and even *Doom*-clones.

2. With *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II*, the series was referred to as the *Souls* series. With the release of *Bloodborne*, it became known as the *Soulsborne* series. With Sekiro it became the Sekisoulsborne series. The Frankenstein title could not bear

(with only the *Dark Souls* titles sharing the same world). And yet, these fictional universes bear striking similarities to each other. Yes, this can largely be explained by them having a shared developer and (with the exception of *Dark Souls II*) creative director, Hidetaka Miyazaki. But what is more interesting to me is precisely *how* these titles occupy distinct fictional worlds in which one can hear echoes of the others. Experienced FromSoftware game players can often predict the trajectory of the quests in a new *Souls* title. New characters feel familiar.

Many have attempted to describe FromSoftware's distinctive style in both popular and academic discourse.

For popular discourse, Erik Kain (2012) outlines *Dark Souls'* "archaeological" storytelling; Jon Richter (2021) describes the "'Soulsian' approach to storytelling" as an "ambiguous" narrative that favours "lore" over "plot"; Mike Worby (2021) discusses the "art of obscure storytelling" in *Dark Souls*; and Cian Maher (2021) argues that "the main thing [the *Souls* games prior to *Elden Ring*] all have in common … is ambiguity" and that the "fragmented narratives" of the games rely on "environmental storytelling".

In research, Felix Schniz (2016) describes *Bloodborne*'s "cryptic ludonarrative"; Franziska Ascher (2014) uses the frame of "environmental storytelling"; Andreas Theodorou (2020) explores the "cryptic and fragmented nested narratives" of FromSoftware games; and Madelon Hoedt describes the *Soulsborne* games (until *Bloodborne*) as "moving away from more traditional, linear models" of narrative, in which "the game's narrative is instead dispersed, found in cutscenes and dialogue, hidden within item descriptions and visual details, scattered around its world" (2019, 3).

I argue that a framework of narrative is ultimately limiting. Often, either crucial aspects of the games and their worlds are ignored (because they are non-narrative), or the concept of narrative or story is stretched so far that it becomes imprecise and unhelpful.

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the addition of Elden Ring, and so here I revert to referring to them all as the Souls series.

Instead, I propose that a framework of myth helps us to best grasp the ways in which FromSoftware games are seen to share a common core. Building on an approach that I outlined, called *mytholudics* (Ford 2022), I instead argue that we can better understand FromSoftware games by conceiving of the connection between them as a common *mythology* in the sense of a *model for understanding the world*. This manifests in narrative structures as well as themes, motifs, architectural styles, spatial configurations, characters, events and so on. This framework helps us more precisely identify what it is that gives FromSoftware games (and perhaps Soulslike games more broadly) a sense of spiritual continuity.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The understanding of mythology used here is derived primarily from Frog's (2021) work on *mythic discourse analysis*. For Frog, mythology is "constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world" (2021, 161). Mythic discourse then "refers to mythology as it is used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society" (2021, 161). Frog's method allows for the production of a *symbolic matrix*, which has the advantage of "providing a consistent framework for addressing narratives of different genres, rituals, taboos, and so on" (2021, 161). Adapted for digital games, rules, systems, gameplay mechanics, quest structures and so on can all fit into this consistent framework.

Crucially, as suggested by the name of the method, Frog distinguishes between myth and mythic *discourse*. This provides some distance from previous structuralist approaches (most notably Lévi-Strauss 1955). Mythic discourse analysis performs the more specific task of analysing the ways in which a mythology is "used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society" (Frog 2021, 161), rather than claiming to reveal some fundamental truth. However, this is complicated in games, as I explain later.

I apply Frog's approach to games, and combine it with an emphasis on the work of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* ([1972] 2009),

in particular his ideas of *naturalisation* and *tautology*. In a sentence, mythologies are models for knowing the world that have become naturalised and self-justifying within a particular society or context. Centring on a 'model' is important for a few reasons. First, it establishes that stories, rituals, superstitions, customs of behaviour and so on are all expressions *of* a mythology, rather than the mythology itself. Second, models are predictive: once the logic of the model is internalised by an adherent, new information and situations can be quickly parsed and decisions can be made on the basis of what the model suggests the consequences will be.

I argue that games can be analysed *as* mythological models (Ford 2022). The elements that make up the gameworld habituate the player into a particular model for knowing the (game)world. As players, we learn over time what is and is not meaningful within the gameworld. Once we are habituated, we make predictions and inferences about, for example, quest structures, how to defeat a new boss, how to navigate a new area, what the consequences of certain choices will be.

Games are particularly powerful in this regard in that they are also *simulations*. When playing a game, the player cannot choose whether to adhere to the mythological model: it is enforced (particularly in digital games where it is enforced computationally). When I play *SimCity* (Maxis Emeryville 2013), I am forced to accept that there is an optimal income tax rate, and it is approximately 12%.

This approach to mythic discourse can be applied to games: rather than considering the mythic discourse of a particular community, it can be used to describe how a gameworld is structured and upon what premises it is built (Ford 2022). However, this is complicated by the dual simulational/representational function of digital games – and, indeed, of computers themselves, being both a simulation *and* a representation of (a part of) reality (Agre [1997] 2014, 131).

A gameworld can be seen as a representation of the world or of ideas about the world. Work on the simulatory qualities of games also suggests that we cannot *only* consider games as representational in the same way as other media forms (Aarseth 2007; Köstlbauer 2013;

König and Rusch 2007). We are not only presented a world, we are given a world to inhabit, to act within. I argue that it is our similarly dual status as both inhabitants of the gameworld but also as people who exist outside of it that allows us to see games as mythic discourse, even though, when analysed from this perspective, treating the game as discourse also describes how it functions as a simulation, as an emulated reality. This is why I suggest we view games both *as* and *through* myth, with the former being about taking the gameworld on its own terms, and the latter about looking past the gameworld to trace the broader influences that led to that gameworld. This extends into the complex interplay between gameworlds as emulated realities, but also as discourse of a kind, and the discourse that then surrounds the gameworlds themselves: discourse on discourse.

At this point I must caveat my approach – particularly my later points regarding folkloric storytelling. FromSoftware is a Japanese developer with a global following. I cannot hope to cover such reach adequately and representatively, and so this article should be understood as my perspective from my viewpoint, playing the English-language versions of the games and viewing the online, Anglophone discourse surrounding the games (and not, for instance, Japanese-language discourse). I also stop short of a deeper look at how a potential mythology of FromSoftware games emerges from FromSoftware's history and position within contemporary Japanese society and culture.

This also represents one of the drawbacks of this approach. In part because it focuses on the connections between elements, and in part because of the global distribution and reception of these games, my approach here cannot get into the nuances and specificities of FromSoftware games' cultural situatedness. There is an interesting and long discussion to be had about the 'Japaneseness' of FromSoftware games, combined with their open use of Western signs, symbols and traditions (made explicit in interviews, see, e.g., Sliva 2015), but that would represent a later step than is covered in this work. My analysis here forms a basis on which to understand FromSoftware games as having a shared mythology, and *then* we could move

forward to understand more thoroughly the origins of such a mythology.

Frog's mythic discourse analysis works by identifying *integers*, and putting them into relation with one another in *equations*, represented by the use of small capitals. An integer is "a distinguishable unit (of whatever sort) ... An indicator that something is an integer is precisely the ability to talk about it as a unit" (2021, 169). This definition is intentionally ambiguous, because what constitutes an integer is identified from an emic perspective.

Frog categorises integers as the following:

Image: Comparable to a noun; an image can refer to a specific entity, like the eponymous playable figure Sekiro (a *centralised* image), or a general type of entity, like dragon (a *decentralised* image) (Frog 2021, 172).

Motif: A dynamic relation between two or more images. These can also be centralised or decentralised (Frog 2021, 175): Sekiro slays Genichiro compared with playable.figure slays boss.

Partial: Elements that are closely associated with another integer, to the extent that either the integer can be recognised by reference to the partial, or the partial need not be stated and is simply presumed of the integer already. In Scandinavia, one-eyed is a partial because it is an integer that is particularly emblematic of the integer Odin (Frog 2021, 173–74).

Theme: A more complex construction consisting of "regular constellations of images and motifs" (Frog 2021, 182). This can be a narrative theme, but it can also be a branching 'if, then' pattern, a ritual, and so on.

Frog lays out other types of integers, but they are not referenced in this article.

In this paper, I apply this mythological approach to FromSoftware games. The goal is to examine whether there is any common mythology that runs through the *Souls* series, and if so, how it is structured. With this, we can more precisely describe why the *Souls* series have such congruent gameworlds despite being from (mostly) different fictional universes.

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THE *SOULS* SERIES

The *Souls* series comprises eight core games (plus downloadable content, remasters, etc.). The *Dark Souls* games share a fictional universe, while *Demon's Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring* each have their own separate world. I will begin with a brief overview of each game world.

Demon's Souls

KING ALLANT'S pursuit of Soul Arts has awakened The Old One once again, and now Boletaria is consumed by the Deep Fog and demons destroy the souls of the living. The player controls an adventurer who enters the fog to defeat King Allant and lull the Old One back to sleep. The player may finally choose to help the Maiden in Black lull the Old One back to sleep, or they succumb to the temptation of power and kill the Maiden in Black.

Dark Souls

THE PLAYER CONTROLS a Cursed Undead who escapes the Undead Asylum to Lordran. There, they must find the city of the gods where they are instructed to succeed Lord Gwyn. Gathering the four Lord Souls, the player must defeat Gwyn and then decide whether to succeed him by linking the flame, or let it die out and usher in the Age of Dark.

In *Dark Souls II*, the player is also an Undead. They travel to the fallen kingdom of Dranglaic to try to break the Undead Curse. Guided by the Emerald Herald, the player finds Queen Nashandra, who instructs them to kill the king. However, it becomes clear that Nashandra is the cause for the kingdom's destruction due to a war with the Giants. The player must access the memories of the Giants,

defeat the Giant Lord, absorb its power, and defeat Nashandra. In the *Scholar of the First Sin* version (FromSoftware 2015b), the player may choose to ascend the throne, continuing the cycle of the Age of Fire and Dark, or abscond it, with unclear consequences.

Dark Souls III is set in Lothric. With the Age of Fire dying, Prince Lothric has abandoned his duty to link the flame. The player controls an Undead who failed to become a Lord of Cinder. They must defeat each of the Lords of Cinder, travel to the Kiln of the First Flame and defeat the Soul of Cinder, an amalgamation of all those who have linked the flame in the past. They may then choose to link the fire, extinguish the flame and usher in the Age of Dark, or take the flame for themselves and become the Lord of Hollows.

Bloodborne

SET IN THE GOTHIC, Lovecraftian Yharnam, the player controls a Hunter. The Hunter travels to Yharnam seeking a cure for the Paleblood, an unspecified illness. The city, however, has been overrun by a plague that transforms Yharnam's citizens into beasts. The Hunter seeks a cure for the plague, and in doing so discovers that the residents of Yharnam worship eldritch gods known as the Great Ones. The player finds the source of the nightmare in the form of Mergo. Once Mergo is dead, the player may awaken from the Hunter's Dream, refuse to and become bound to it, or (with additional steps) become an infant Great One themselves.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

THE ONLY FROMSOFTWARE game that explicitly references real-world locations, *Sekiro* is set in Japan after the Sengoku period (from 1476 CE to somewhere between 1568 and 1638 CE). In Ashina, the player controls Wolf, a *shinobi*. Isshin Ashina is elderly and infirm, while the Interior Ministry invades. Isshin's grandson, Genichiro, seeks to

preserve Ashina by using the blood of the immortal Divine Heir, Kuro. Kuro asks Wolf to perform the Immortal Severance ritual, which would kill Kuro but also prevent people from fighting over his blood. The player must collect the ritual ingredients and perform the ritual.

There are three other endings. In the Shura ending, Wolf sides with his adoptive father, Owl, who also seeks Kuro's blood, and kills Emma, Kuro's doctor, and Isshin, with the bloodlust turning Wolf into a demon. In the Purification ending, Wolf works with Emma to instead discover a way to sacrifice himself instead of Kuro. In the Dragon's Homecoming ending, a complex series of steps leads to Kuro's corporeal form dying, but his spirit form living on.

Elden Ring

ELDEN RING IS SET in the Lands Between. After the shattering of the Elden Ring, the demigod children of Queen Marika fight over the shards, which hold power in themselves as Great Runes. The player controls a maidenless Tarnished of no renown who must follow the Guidance of Grace to the Erdtree in order to become the Elden Lord and repair the Elden Ring.

Six endings are possible. Four involve the player becoming Elden Lord, but with different Mending Runes, colouring the world they will rule over. In the Lord of the Frenzied Flame ending, the player becomes the Lord of Chaos and burns the world to a primeval state. In the Age of the Stars ending, the player instead helps Ranni the Witch to end the Golden Order and usher in a new order.

MYTHOLOGY OF THE *SOULS* SERIES

Here I outline four aspects of a potential *Souls* mythology and explore how each game relates to these and to each other. These four aspects are not exhaustive.

Desire and Purpose

THE NECESSITY for *purpose* and yet also its dangers seem key to the *Souls* series. The games are replete with cautionary tales of those who were fuelled by an excess of desire.

In *Dark Souls*, Seath the Scaleless is a dragon born deformed and blind. As his name suggests, he was born without scales, unlike the rest of his brethren, and it is dragon's scales that grant them immortality. This lack prompted an obsession for Seath with gaining immortality by other means, leading to him betraying his kind. For his betrayal, Seath was awarded a dukedom, and with that power he amassed an extensive library. He became obsessed with increasingly dangerous research into immortality, and the pursuit drove him mad.

In *Sekiro*, Genichiro's obsession with the heretical arts in pursuit of Kuro's immortality drives him to become a furious husk. "I will shed humanity itself", he remarks in a cutscene.

In *Elden Ring*, Rykard, once leader of a company of inquisitors for the Golden Order, "fell from lofty ambition into gluttonous depravity" according to an item description ('Gelmir Knight Armor' 2023), offering himself up to the God-Devouring Serpent so that he too could devour the gods (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy appears from the belly of the God-Devouring Serpent, offering the player to join them in gluttony.

FROM THESE EXAMPLES, we can consider the broad decentralised motif agent desires power as followed by agent consumed by:desire. Examples of this in the *Souls* games include:

Game	Agent	Desire	Outcome
Demon's Souls	King Allant	Power (via forgotten soul arts) and ultimate peace	Old One is awoken, beginning the end of the world
Dark Souls	Solaire of Astora	His "very own sun"	Either madness, controlled by Sunlight Maggot parasite, or depression, despair
Dark Souls	Big Hat Logan	Power (via Seath's magical advancements)	Madness
Dark Souls	Seath the Scaleless	Immortality	Madness
Dark Souls II	Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin	Break the Undead Curse	Horrifying experiments on others; became a monster
Dark Souls II	Queen Mytha	Beauty, immortality	Becomes a monster
Bloodborne	Master Willem	Insight	Great Ones destroy Byrgenwerth
Dark Souls III	Slave Knight Gael	The Dark Soul	Madness, becomes a monster
Dark Souls III	Oceiros, the Consumed King	Immortality	Madness, becomes a monster, hallucinates a child
Sekiro	Genichiro Ashina	Immortality	Becomes a monster, sheds his humanity
Sekiro	Doujun	Immortality	Madness, increasingly heretical and vile experiments
Sekiro	Wolf/ Sekiro	Wrath, immortality	Becomes a *shura* (a demon or demigod obsessed with killing)
Elden Ring	Rykard	Devour the world	Madness, consumed by serpent
Elden Ring	Preceptor Seluvis	Collect 'puppets' (magically frozen people)	Becomes a puppet himself

Table 1. Examples of characters in each Souls *game whose desire has been their downfall.*

These examples show that a monomanic pursuit of a desire – particularly a desire seen as *excessive*, such as devouring the gods or obtaining immortality – leads to one's downfall, most typically becoming monstrous and/or mad. In its decentralized form, we could see it as the following:

- A1. agent desires unobtainable
- A2. agent fails to:obtain unobtainable
- A3. → agent goes:mad~becomes:monster
- B1. player slays mad~monster.agent

Of course, not all of these examples follow this structure exactly. Some of the consequences of their desires change, for example. But the consequence is always self-destructive. Two other aspects of this also come to the fore.

First is that the agent can be anyone: a nonplayer character (NPC) with whom all interaction is optional like Solaire; a central boss like Rykard or Genichiro; a dragon like Seath; or a god like Gwyn. Even the playable figure – in *Sekiro* – can fall prey to an excess of desire.

Second is that the fate of these agents is almost always to be killed by the player. Some of them are non-optional bosses – such as Seath, Rykard, Genichiro – others are optional – like Oceiros or Gael. Others are NPCs like Solaire or Doujun whose side quests involve the player assisting them in obtaining their prize, but ultimately end either in tragedy or with the NPC becoming hostile towards the player.

Figure 2: Solaire finds his "sun": a parasitic Sunlight Maggot, which turns
Solaire hostile and he attacks the player.

Together, these establish *excessive desire* as a crucial part of *Souls* mythology. Within this model for knowing the world, striving for the unobtainable leads to doom. Myth works tautologically, and so at the same time, we can infer from those consequences of doom that that agent's desire was *unobtainable* and their drive for it *excessive*. When we see Seluvis turned into a puppet himself, we infer that his desire for an ever-increasing puppet collection was excessive and unobtainable.

Madness and monstrosity are the most common consequences of this excess, perhaps because these are, in a sense, constructions *of* excess. For example, Bridget Escolme notes that in early modern medicine (in the British context, at least), "excessive passion *was* madness and was caused by the same humoral imbalances as the passions. Mad figures in the early modern drama are excessive subjectivities" (2013, xxxv). Similarly, monstrosity is often thought of as a manifestation of excess (Oswald 2010, 6; Arumugam 2020, 47). Notably also, many of the examples I have listed are monstrous gods. Indira Arumugam argues that the sacred may be fundamentally monstrous: "first, as an insatiable appetite that exceeds ritual satiation and a profuse fury when defied and, second, as a sovereignty that

exceeds attempts to conceive of let alone neatly categorize them" (2020, 57). The *Souls* series seems to play with this idea of excessive desire, monstrosity and divinity. I consider divinity more closely in the next section.

However, a *lack of desire* is shown to be equally ruinous in the *Souls* games. For example, a character called the Crestfallen Warrior tellingly appears at the beginning of both *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. As the name suggests, he is deeply cynical and pessimistic about the situation of the world:

In *Demon's Souls*:

You came for Demon Souls? Or to save this land, and be remembered as a Hero? Bah, it's all the same. You're just another prisoner of the Nexus. We're welcome here as long as we keep slashing up Demons. Hahahahah... (FromSoftware 2009)

In *Dark Souls*:

Well, what do we have here? You must be a new arrival. Let me guess. Fate of the Undead, right? Well, you're not the first. But there's no salvation here. You'd have done better to rot in the Undead Asylum... But, too late now. (FromSoftware 2011)

In both games, the Crestfallen Warrior eventually goes mad or becomes a Hollow, indicating that this pessimism and lack of motivation the player is introduced to at the very beginning is also ruinous. Further examples abound. Vendrick (*Dark Souls II*) fails to stop Nashandra, and becomes doomed to wander the crypts as a Hollow. Hawkwood the Deserter (*Dark Souls III*), having abandoned his goal of finding the Lords of Cinder, welcomes the player by saying "ahhh, another one, roused from the sleep of death? Well, you're not alone. We Unkindled are worthless. Can't even die right" (FromSoftware 2016). It is worth noting, however, that this appears markedly more pronounced in *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* series than in *Blood-*

borne, *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring*. These worlds still ooze a certain cynicism and pessimism, but it is less overt, less central.

Figure 3: If the player kills the Sunlight Maggots before Solaire arrives, he is saved from insanity, but instead falls into despair.

This sense of a need for purpose can then be linked to the games' core gameplay loop and notorious difficulty. Each *Souls* game has broadly the same loop organized around a number of key aspects.

First is the combat, which is unforgiving. Chiefly, this is because animations cannot be cancelled, as in many other action-adventure games. Once the player has begun swinging their weapon, they are committed to it. Combined with the stamina system whereby attacking, dodging and blocking all consume the same resource, a total lack of which leaves one mostly helpless, and hard-hitting enemies, this makes the combat system feel punishing.

Second is the consequences of death. The player collects a resource (souls in *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* games, blood echoes in *Bloodborne*, experience in *Sekiro*, and runes in *Elden Ring*) which is lost upon death. The player may retrieve their lost resources if they can return to the spot at which they died. However, dying again before retrieving their corpse renders the resource perma-

nently lost. And, of course, the spot at which the player died is usually quite a dangerous one.

Third, each game features intermittent checkpoints at which the player may rest, heal, restore resources such as healing flasks, and spend their resources to level up. These are Archstones in *Demon's Souls* (which work slightly differently), bonfires in *Dark Souls*, lamps in *Bloodborne*, Sculptor's Idols in *Sekiro*, and Sites of Lost Grace in *Elden Ring*. However, resting at these checkpoints also resurrects all slain enemies.

Together, these elements form the core of the gameplay: the player battles from restpoint to restpoint, trying to avoid death but (often) failing. There is risk and reward: do you battle on, exploring an area more thoroughly, but risk dying even further from safety? When do you call it quits and return to the restpoint, giving up on reaching the next? An excess of desire will lead to the loss of vital resources, while a lack of purpose will mean no progress is made at all.

This may seem like stretching the metaphor a little, but it's a common sentiment amongst *Souls* players to relate the experience of playing the game to the concept of hollowing in *Dark Souls*. For example, writer and YouTuber Hamish Black has talked about *Dark Souls* as resonating strongly with his severe depression for this reason:

Black felt he'd found a game that understand [*sic*] what he was going through. He was like the Chosen Undead, surviving and thriving in a world indifferent to his presence. "Having a game reflect that idea to me was one of the biggest reasons I feel I've avoided a relapse," he said. (Black quoted in Gault 2016; see also Writing on Games 2016)

Giving up on the game due to its difficulty is thus equated with the player themselves 'going hollow' because they lack the drive of purpose in a world which *requires* it.

Godhood and Divinity

Being fantastical games, it is unsurprising that each *Souls* gameworld contains a set of higher powers. What is interesting is whether and in what way each gameworld's structure of godhood is similar.

Demon's Souls	God, The Old One, Archdemons, Monumentals
Dark Souls	Gods and Lords
Bloodborne	Great Ones, Kin(?)
Sekiro	Buddhist and Shinto deities, Divine Dragon
Elden Ring	The One Great, Outer Gods, Gods, Empyreans, Demigods

Table 2: The structures of gods and higher powers in each Souls *game.*

Three similarities stand out. The first is that each world is polytheistic; the second is that the gods are always fallible; the third, relatedly, is that the category of 'god' is usually not well- defined and can be the subject of debate even within the diegetic gameworlds.

It is not unusual for gameworlds to be polytheistic (Bainbridge 2013, 66). William Sims Bainbridge (2013, 82) argues that this is, in part, a way to represent competing factions and to justify the many different quests. This is clear in *Elden Ring*, for example, in which players do not have to excavate much lore to find competing factions whose quests are embarked upon in the name of different higher powers, such as the Greater Will or the Frenzied Flame. But the *Souls* games also tend to show polytheism not as a unified pantheon, but as a fracturing.

Again, this is explicit in *Elden Ring* in the event called the Shattering, which began after Ranni the Witch forged godslaying knives and plotted the assassination of Godwyn the Golden on the Night of Black Knives. As a result, the Elden Ring, which seems to define the

fabric of the world, was shattered, leaving the gods to fight over the shards.

In the *Dark Souls* games, there are many gods who play greater or lesser roles in the games. In the first game, for example, the player is told that the gods lived in Anor Londo, but fled after Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, entered the Kiln of the First Flame. Only the Dark Sun Gwyndolin remains, alongside an illusion of Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight. Other beings claimed Lord Souls, such as Gravelord Nito and the Witch of Izalith, granting them great power. The Anor Londo dynasty scattered, the player, seeking the Lord Souls, must defeat a number of these higher powers in battle, including a Hollowed Gwyn as the final boss. In *Dark Souls III*, few of these gods remain, and instead the player finds Aldrich, Devourer of Gods in Anor Londo. Clearly, this is not a united pantheon.

In *Bloodborne*, the Great Ones are multidimensional Lovecraftian deities whose thoughts and motives are unfathomable to humans (and those who do begin to fathom them become monstrous Kin). There is not as much focus on their combat between one another (though a note found in the Lecture Hall suggests the Moon Presence wants to kill the others), but the Great Ones are nonetheless fractured. For example, a Great One, Kos, is killed, leaving behind a frenzied Orphan of Kos. Their reproductive difficulties are also highlighted. For example, the item description of the 'Third Umbilical Cord' states that "every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate" ('Third Umbilical Cord' 2020).

Sekiro is markedly different. The only *Souls* game that explicitly references real-world religions (except God in *Demon's Souls*), *Sekiro* is set in Japan, rather than an invented fantasy world. It is replete with Buddhist references in particular (Genovesi 2021, 37), as well as Shinto. 'Gods' are far more distant than in other *Souls* titles, but that does not mean divinity is not present. Kuro, Sekiro's ward and the focal point of the game, is the Divine Heir, whose bloodline bestows immortality. This is related to a boss in the game, the Divine Dragon. While not as factional or combative as other *Souls* games, it is notable that divinity in the game is not depicted as altogether *good*. The

game's central goal is to *sever* Kuro's immortality, for example. And the same ability that grants Kuro immortality, and Sekiro the ability to resurrect, spreads a sickness known as Dragonrot, which nonplayer characters become gradually more inflicted by each time the player dies (Figure 2).

Figure 4: Emma tells Sekiro that the power of the Dragon's Heritage also spreads the Dragonrot.

What is also notable about *Souls* games is that divinity and godhood are always questioned and challenged. In *Demon's Souls*, while Saint Urbain impresses the presence of the Christian God in the world (for example saying, "God has chosen you"), other characters such as Sage Freke imply that Urbain's "God" is, in fact, the Old One. It is unclear in the *Dark Souls* games whether 'god' is just a label Gwyn gives himself, or the status the bearers of the Lord Souls have. In *Bloodborne*, powerful Kin who have attained godlike powers are often mistaken (both within the gameworld and by players) for Great Ones. In *Elden Ring*, assisting Lightseeker Hyetta reveals the suggestion that the Greater Will is in fact only a fractured part of the One Great.

If fictional religions in gameworlds function as "world-building infrastructure" by drawing on our already-existing conceptions of

real-world religions (Gregory 2014, 134), or as "allomythic" metaphors for religion (Anthony 2014, 40), then this would appear to be a deeply cynical view of religion. Gods in the *Souls* games are fallible, killable (often by the player) and untrustworthy, if not either indifferent or wholly evil. The gods are flailing against seemingly inevitable apocalypses like everybody else – they just have more weight to throw around. The world with diminished gods is not necessarily shown to be *better*, but nor do the gods seem to bring about peace and prosperity.

This is supported by the fact that a number of these gods are also bosses: player/boss=protagonist/god is a common diagrammatic relation which puts the player in an antagonistic relationship with the games' higher powers. Lars de Wildt argues that religion in games often entails that "players from different (non-)religious beliefs take on different worldviews while role-playing the (non-

)religious Other" (2023, 118), and this seems true of the *Souls* games, but in a qualified way. When replaying *Elden Ring*, for example, we may 'try on' being a fully-fledged adherent of the Flame of Frenzy, or a devotee of Ranni. These tryings on lead us to different parts of the gameworld and to different endings and cosmic outcomes.

Crucially, however, moral truth is never afforded us. Higher powers, from whom we may in other religious gameworlds (or real life, of course) derive meaning, are still fallible and untrustworthy, even if we choose to side with them. This is reinforced by the games' endings being almost always ambiguous and Pyrrhic. In *Demon's Souls*, the Old One is put to sleep again, but with the ever- present threat of its reawakening, as well as the fact that so many have already lost their souls. In *Dark Souls*, prolonging the Age of Fire is depicted as futile, but it is not clear that the Age of Dark will be better. In *Bloodborne*, each ending is ambiguous. *Sekiro* ends with death, demonisation, or mystery. *Elden Ring*'s many endings each have dark implications too.

This diversity of ending options (common to all games of the series) in itself underscores this point, as well as their specific

contours. The player is never 'told' whether the higher power they chose to trust has made the world ultimately a better place, just that it has made it a *different* world. And yet each ending *is* coloured and defined by those higher powers in some way. A plurality of fallible, competing gods seems to be a defining feature of *Souls* games, even as their legitimacy, authority and power is perpetually undermined and questioned. This leaves an ambiguous, tense relationship between the player and divine powers.

Fire and Darkness

> In the Age of Ancients the world was unformed, shrouded by fog. A land of gray crags, Archtrees and Everlasting Dragons. But then there was Fire and with fire came disparity. Heat and cold, life and death, and of course, light and dark. (FromSoftware 2011)

THE OPENING CINEMATIC of *Dark Souls* impresses the importance of fire and dark in its gameworld. Typically, light and dark are strongly associated with good and evil (Le Guin 1975, 145; Thompson 1955–1958): light/dark=good/evil. But in the *Souls* games this dichotomy is more ambivalent.

It features most prominently in the *Dark Souls* games in which the Age of Fire is not taken as an unalloyed good. It is Gwyn's unnatural extending of the First Flame that causes the decay we see. Darkness – and the Age of Dark – is more associated with humanity. Darkstalker Kaathe tells the player that the ancestor of humans, the Furtive Pygmy, possessed the Dark Soul, and that their destiny is to end the Age of Fire. But what the Age of Dark, and Humanity, entail remains ambiguous.

In *Demon's Souls*, Saint Urbain refers frequently to fulfilling God's will by cleansing the world of dark souls, yet we are led to mistrust God.

Bloodborne is divided into three phases: evening, night and blood moon, linking the nightmarish dream in which the game takes place

with the darkness. The 'standard' ending has the playable figure killed, awakening from the dream to finally see a sunrise over Yharnam. What the day entails, however, and whether the day is not itself the dream and the nightmare reality, is unclear.

In *Elden Ring*, one of the very first NPCs the player encounters is White Mask Varré, who asks the player if they are familiar with "grace … the golden light that gives life to you Tarnished. You may behold its golden rays pointing in a particular direction at times. That is the guidance of grace. That path that a Tarnished must travel" (FromSoftware 2022). However, the same Varré later in the game doubts the guidance of grace and attempts to convince the player instead to ally themselves with Mohg, Lord of Blood. As the player explores the gameworld, the bright, towering Erdtree is rarely out of sight, the source of grace, and a clear reference to mythological worldtrees like Yggdrasil. But this too is debated and challenged. The Golden Order, with whom the Erdtree is most closely associated, is regularly questioned, and an optional area of the game features the Haligtree, a rival worldtree.

Sekiro would appear to be an exception. While themes of light, dark and fire are present – for example, the game progresses from morning to noon to evening to night after certain major events – they do not seem to be a significant *cosmological* force.

As with the gods, then, in the *Souls* games (perhaps excepting *Sekiro*), fire and dark are meaningful images, but ambiguously so. So, typically:

light/dark = sun/moon = fire/shadow = good/evil

But in the *Souls* games we are left without the final moralistic association; the dichotomy simply *exists*:

light/dark = sun/moon = fire/shadow

This aligns with the conception of divinity, which likewise poses countervailing forces but denies any clear guidance. Indeed, guid-

ance provided is undermined, such as *Elden Ring*'s Grace, or Kingseeker Frampt's guidance in *Dark Souls* being later challenged by Darkstalker Kaathe.

Folkloric Storytelling

THE NOTION of *discourse* in mythic discourse analysis is crucial. Mythology is not static, but always in flux, and so Frog stresses that "mythic discourse refers to mythology as it is used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society", and that this method "provides a platform for exploring what happens when mythologies are manipulated, when they interact in contact situations, and when they develop in historical change" (2021, 161). As such, it is important to examine *how* the themes, motifs and structures I have discussed so far have been transmitted and discussed throughout the community.

Many have observed the "archaeological" quality to narrative in the *Souls* games (Dodd 2021; Kain 2012; Caracciolo 2022; Smith Nicholls and Cook 2022), because, as journalist Erik Kain writes, each game "asks you to dig its story from the ruins and learn it on your own" (2012). But, in practice, we don't learn it on our own. We learn it from others. Alexander Jenkins argues that "the complexity lends itself to a narrative experience that invites, maybe even necessitates, participation in paratextual discussion by players" (2020, 134). Kevin D. Ball describes this process in *Bloodborne* as "lore hunts" among fans, in which players "collate in-game and intertextual resources to theorize *Bloodborne*'s story" (2017, para. 1.2).

Interestingly, Ball also notes that "these conversations often take the shape of speculative fiction" (2017, para. 1.2). This is demonstrated clearly by some of the most popular 'lore hunters' of the *Souls* community, such as VaatiVidya, Zullie the Witch, The Lore Hunter and Redgrave. These lore hunters not only collate and configure the games' lore from disparate item descriptions, dialogue and so on, but they typically describe it in a story format. For example, Redgrave's *The Paleblood Hunt* (2015) tells *Bloodborne* as a novel, and VaatiVidya

makes short films out of *Souls* lore and footage in his 'Prepare to Cry' series.

This is made possible by the internet, where the elements of *Souls* mythology can be collected, dissected and organized on forums, wikis, chatrooms and video platforms. This aligns the practice of discovering and discussing *Souls* lore with what Eric Newsom calls *Participatory Storytelling and the New Folklore of the Digital Age* (2013). Newsom argues that applying a folklore perspective to online phenomena such as Slender Man shows that such participatory storytelling has far more in common with traditional folkloric story-tellers than with modern mass media. This has also been called the "open-sourcing" of fiction (Chess and Newsom 2015, 63), whereby there is no clear, distinct authorship and little in the way of authority over the text (complicating discussions of 'canonicity').

Rather than chaos, however, this more folkloric mode of story-telling leads to a balance between stability and flux. Chess and Newsom write that "while the myth is certainly not ossified and still has the capacity to shift and mutate, consistent functions have been established through the telling and repetition of several important iterations" (2015, 36). Elsewhere I have applied metaphors of ossifica-tion and fossilization to the percolation of mythology (Ford 2022): while a mythology is always in flux, over time certain aspects may solidify through repetition such that it becomes definitional or metonymical to the myth.

Applied to the *Souls* games, there is a tension. The *Souls* games have a distinct author – FromSoftware and, often singled out specifi-cally, Hidetaka Miyazaki, creative director for all *Souls* games except *Dark Souls II*. This means that it is assumed there is a 'true' lore: "the lore is Miyazaki's 'puzzle'" (Ball 2017, para. 3.4). And yet, as Ball analy-ses, conflicts between lore hunters demonstrate that "individual lore hunts hold their own authorial charge" (2017, para. 3.4).

In this way, the example of VaatiVidya and other community lore hunters shows that *Souls* games are treated *as* mythology, but quali-fied. While Chess and Newsom's (2015) example of Slender Man represents a much 'purer' form of modern digital folklore, *Souls*-as-

folklore has the problem of authorial authority, while still demonstrating a similar *mode* of storytelling, one which is more akin to traditional folklore than to modern, author-centric mass media.

CONCLUSION

Can we see the *Souls* games as sharing a mythology, even if they do not share a fictional universe? To an extent, yes. There is no doubt variation, as with any mythology, but some core features can be identified. In this article, I have described three of these core features: desire and purpose, gods and divinity, and fire and darkness.

Desire and purpose perhaps form the most consistent set of motifs across the series, though it is more pronounced in the *Dark Souls* series and *Demon's Souls*. Again and again, both an excess and a lack of purpose is shown to be ruinous. Specifically, an excess tends to lead to madness, monstrosity or both, while a lack ushers a kind of zombification.

The games are all suffused with godhood and divinity in various forms. Indeed, divinity is closely linked to the previous theme of purpose, showing the gods themselves to be prone to both maddening excess and zombifying lack. This underscores the central tenet of divinity in the *Souls* games: powerful but not all-powerful (the non-divine playable figure slays many gods), fallible and largely self-interested. There is often an indifference towards humanity and other non-divines. Gods are not ultimate moral arbiters or sources of truth, but powerful competing interests. *Sekiro* incorporates in particular a scepticism of divinity, but stands out notably as drawing explicitly on real-world religions, in particular Buddhism and Shinto.

Finally, light and darkness, fire and shadow, sun and moon are all central images in the *Souls* series. Crucially, however, the typical association of these dichotomies with good and evil is assumed but subverted and undermined. The player typically begins following the path of light, but is given cause to mistrust the light and seek the dark. Fire has the dual purpose of casting light but also burning things down. The Erdtree being burned down in *Elden Ring* seems

like the light's betrayal of itself. The dichotomy exists, but is never granted a moral or cosmological finality, leaving it ambiguous.

I have also considered the mode in which the *Souls* games communities construct, configure, debate, determine and negotiate the games' mythologies. I argue that the often-narrative output of 'lore hunters' echoes the traditional role of storytellers in folklore, who use narrative as a tool for conveying the principles of a mythology to the folk.

While the *Souls* games are often considered and discussed separately according to their five separate fictional worlds, the links between them are also discussed, extending even to attempts to theorise a shared fictional world (e.g., Fox 2022; McCollum 2021; Siegle 2022; Chapman 2022; Duckworth 2022), and also to the FromSoftware series that are not examined here, like *King's Field* (Ellis 2022). Writers and videomakers often observe commonalities in FromSoftware's worldbuilding. My goal here is to suggest a method by which we can conceive of these similarities, identify differences and divergence, and analyse what the implications are of examining game series as mythology.

This is not intended to be exhaustive – I also considered, for example, the notion of the *chosen one*, which seems both commonly found in *Souls* games but also ambivalently deployed. Rather, in this article I aimed to outline an approach and demonstrate how it might work with the *Souls* games. Future work could extend the analyses here, and consider further categories, other FromSoftware series, and/or the Soulslike genre, for example.

Likewise, it is important to stress again that such a mytholudic analysis is always an analysis *from* a particular perspective, and which can only consider a certain amount and certain kind of discourse. I am a Western player playing a Western-fantasy- inspired Japanese game; my exposure to the discourse surrounding *Souls* games incorporates only Anglophone content on the internet and not, for example, Japanophone discourse. Mythic discourse analysis would be well-suited for examining potential differences between Anglophone and Japanophone discourse on YouTube. Do certain integers take on

different significance? Are particular motifs interpreted differently? Are there significant differences in what becomes canonised through folkloric storytelling?

With mythology as an analytical framework, and borrowing from folklore studies as a discipline, we can better compare these disparate elements of space, world, history, gameplay, dialogue and art, without assuming or requiring narrative continuity or linearity. With a mytholudic approach, we can identify whether there is a shared mythological model that binds each *Souls* game and, if so, what constitutes it.

My analysis demonstrates some of that connective tissue, but also highlights exceptions. *Sekiro* appears to be the most divergent title of the series. While it does incorporate many of those same elements, it often does so in a qualified way. *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* seem to be closest to the 'orbital centre' of the mythology, which perhaps reflects their position at the beginning of the series, thus establishing many of the core features. However, it may also be because of my own bias: myth is always perceived from one's own particular vantage point. If my understanding of a *Souls* mythology begins with *Dark Souls*, then of course it will also be central in my analyses.

Regardless of centrality, we can conceive of some form of shared mythology across *Souls* games, in the sense that each fictional world operates on many of the same principles, although they may manifest differently. Crucially, even if some parts of this mythology are more or less emphasised or present in particular games, those games do not *replace* or *contradict* those principles. There is no *Souls* game in which light and dark *do* map onto good and evil straightforwardly, for example, but there are *Souls* games in which the light–dark dichotomy is less important.

We may also think of *Souls* games not as products of the *same* mythology, but as variations of mythology. Mythology is never static or fixed but alters over time and space. Contemporaneous communities in different locations diverge mythologically, just as one community's mythic discourse changes over time. This may be a useful way of thinking of the mythology of the *Souls* games: not the *same*

mythology but *variants* which show divergence anchored by a strong core, where some features ossify, but others come and go and change.

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