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Mapping Myth: an Analysis of the Hero Myth in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* Series

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1. Introduction

For millennia, man has been obsessed with storytelling. Indeed, one of the few constants across human cultures is the tendency to chronicle events, the world around us and man itself. A unique category within that broad spectrum of storytelling is myth.

Throughout the ages, mythic narratives have found representation in all forms of art: paintings, theatre, and literature are only a few examples that validate this claim. Recently, since the inception of video games, myth has found a new medium in which to manifest itself. Considering that the medium largely shapes the exact manner in which stories are presented, and subsequently deciphered, this raises several questions. How are mythic narratives incorporated and interpreted in the video game medium? What connects myth and video games? What is the role of human participants within this complex phenomenon?

In order to answer these questions, I will conduct a case study: I will apply the hero narrative as Joseph Campbell presents it in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) to FromSoftware *Dark Souls* video game trilogy (2011, 2014 and 2016 respectively). This dissertation will therefore focus on narrative analysis.

1.1 Myth

In the following paragraph, I will give an outline of the concept of myth, but, as Eric Csapo observes in *Theories of Mythology* (2005), it is nigh impossible to define myth in absolute terms. What the term ‘myth’ refers to and includes depends on a variety of factors, for example the perspective of observer or participant, formal and structural characteristics of myth or the time and location where myth appears or is studied (Csapo 2005: 1-10). As such, the information provided in this section only constitutes part of what myth is. Defining myth might prove impossible, but encapsulating some of its prime aspects is not. For the purposes of my thesis, I will focus on the perspective that presents myths as narratives.

A first characteristic of myths is that they are, essentially, stories –they are cultural artefacts that manifest themselves in narrative form. These narratives are passed on within the societies that spawn them, primarily by means of oral or written texts, but they are occasionally transmitted by means of other media forms (such as films, paintings or recently video games). Moreover, the vast majority of cultures across the world has its own network of myths, although the content of these myths and the position they hold within those societies varies drastically.

Secondly, myths are more than mere narratives. They are *functional* stories which fulfill key roles within the societies that transmit them. They weave together the threads of social fabric and assist in the process of creating social identity. Myths are tools that create social structure and reinforce social roles. This is the collective aspect of myth. Csapo states that “myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance[...] Myth is a function of social ideology –Bruce Lincoln (1999: xii) would define it as ‘ideology in narrative form’ [...]” (2005: 9). *People* transmit and interpret mythic narratives, which accounts for the importance of sociocultural context. The analysis of mythic narratives thus unavoidably involves an investigation of the people that participate in the creation and consumption of myth.

Additionally, most myths (but again, this varies depending on what one defines as ‘myth’) are regarded as sacred stories. They recount events which are conceived as spiritual or supernatural, events which transcend the profane experiences of the mundane world. That is why certain myths are enacted in sacred rituals, or why they often play a crucial role in the religious systems across cultures. In other words, not only do myths help people understand the social order of their lives, they help in interpreting ‘that which transcends phenomenological experience’—that is, the mysteries of life: where do we come from, why is the world the way it is, what is life, what is death. Not every single myth addresses all of these existential topics simultaneously—each myth is an individual narrative structure which only tackles a small amount (if any at all) of these topics at a time. Therefore it is important to critically examine the themes of a mythic narrative before it is possible to extract the ‘insights’ it contains.

Thirdly, as I have already pointed out, myths are stories: therefore, they possess both form and content. Formally, it is exceedingly hard to pin down ‘the singular structure of myth’, an idea which has been criticized for being overgeneralizing and outright erroneous (e.g. Csapo 2005: 1-9; 79). As I will stress multiple times throughout this dissertation, I too firmly believe in the importance of individual (sociocultural) context. However, a considerable part of my narrative analysis relies on Joseph Campbell’s hero structure in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). In several of his works (e.g. *Theorizing about Myth* (1999); *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2006)), Robert A. Segal criticizes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for its universalistic tendencies, its blind focus on similarities and blatant disregard for the differences between individual myths. It thus

becomes problematic to solely rely on Campbell to explain the mythic narrative of *Dark Souls*. Therefore, I will supplement my analysis by explaining what makes the narrative of *Dark Souls* unique instead of restricting it to Campbell's "monomyth". I will rephrase the issues concerning Campbell's theory in greater detail further on in the dissertation.

Such a manner of analysis entails that I disagree with the idea that there is a single formal structure which underlies myths from all over the world. That does not mean it is impossible for some myths to be structurally similar; in fact, a large part of the analysis I conduct relies on the formal structure of the hero myth in general. However, it needs to be emphasized that, even when similarities occur, analysis and interpretation should not overlook their differences. Instead of solely focussing on similarities, the critic should supplement his/her analysis and interpretation with relevant sociocultural information, for it is that which ultimately renders each myth unique. In short, I argue that to fully comprehend and study mythic structures, two different perspectives should be adopted: one generalizing, for this allows one to categorize or study the subject in a wider spectrum of similar phenomena; and one individual, which provides more insight into the particular and unique characteristics of the subject. Both perspectives complement one another.

Returning to the topic of form and content, the structure of myth varies drastically, although some cultures use intratextual or extratextual markers to indicate the mythic function of the narrative (e.g. "in the beginning...", restricting the telling of myths to relatives or to certain times of the day/month/year (Csapo, 2005)). On the level of content, it is easier to detect characteristics that reoccur across cultures: myths involve supernatural beings such as gods, dragons, fairies, trolls; supernatural events such as creation of worlds, people and animals, metamorphoses, legendary battles; places such as the realm of gods or the dead, far-off kingdoms. The content thus often involves supernatural, mystical or magical elements which in modern Western society are regarded as 'fictional'. This aspect of myth, the affinity for the magical, is used exhaustively in video games (especially roleplaying games) and forms the strongest link between the two. Again, not all video games adopt the magical, wondrous or even childlike elements that are found in myth –certain games make it their objective to remain as true as possible to outer reality. *Dark Souls* does contain those magical elements, which I will frequently use as illustrations during my narrative analysis.

1.2 Video Games

Before it is possible to conduct an academic analysis of video games, a brief introduction is in order that delineates what exactly a video game is. In contemporary Western society, most people are familiar with the term and generally know what it refers to. Upon closer inspection, however, video games are a more complex phenomenon than one would first assume. A video game is, like literature, music, paintings, films or pictures, a product of human activity which one categorizes as cultural artefacts. As a fairly modern format of cultural artefacts, video games are rapidly evolving in content and form, and academic knowledge of the medium expands just as swiftly.

Video games are electronic games that project visual stimuli (i.e. images) by means of television screens, computer monitors or other devices, and nearly all video games include auditory stimuli (i.e. sounds) or even kinetic stimuli (e.g. vibration of controllers). In *Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games* (2014), Brendan Keogh refers to Steve Swink's *Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation* (2009) in order to lucidly explain the process of playing video games:

What the video game outputs as audiovisual representation via the screen, speakers and rumble motors are taken in through the player's bodily senses (sight, sound, touch); these senses send messages to the brain that, in turn, determines output from the player's muscles into the game hardware's input device. The game, again, takes these inputs and alters the audiovisuals of the game accordingly. [...] The player's corporeal schema is caught up in a circuit of organic, technological, and representational actors and materialities, and the body through which the player perceives gameplay is redistributed across the circuit.

As Keogh's statement implies, video games thus necessarily involve a human player that interacts with the electronic interface. The stimuli absorbed and interpreted by the player all piece together to form a mental and virtual world, in which the player conducts actions or engages in a certain type of behaviour.

Furthermore, like music, literature or films, there are multiple genres of video games that represent different core subjects or involve different forms of player interaction. Famous genres include shooters, platformers, puzzle games, dungeon-crawlers, sports games or roleplaying games (abbreviated as 'RPGs'), the latter of which is the genre focused on in this thesis. Additionally, video games are commodities that are manufactured out of economic

interest: developers/publishers create them to make a profit, and people buy them because they provide entertainment.

For the past quarter of a century, scholars have attempted to define what makes video games unique as a cultural medium, which has sparked off a heated debate, to which I will return in the upcoming chapter. This debate has not fully been resolved yet, so consider the following to be my own understanding of the ontological status of video games: they form a patchwork medium which combines elements from a variety of other cultural media such as literature, music and film to create plotlines, characterization, dialogues, sound effects, soundtracks, artstyles, cutscenes (these are sequences in video games during which the player has no control), visual environments and much more. Ludologists (these are scholars that study (video) games and insist that (video) games carry unique structural elements, which they label 'ludological') would likely not agree with the term 'patchwork medium', because they maintain that video games are characterized by elements that are not found in other media, and to a certain extent I believe they are right. I agree with the idea that some aspects of video games are typical of the medium and are nearly, but not entirely, exclusive to the medium. Specifically, two such characteristics are the ergodic and the liminoid. However, I hope to prove that while such concepts are characteristic of the video game medium, they are not limited to it. Throughout my analysis I will attempt to establish links between video games and myth based on concepts such as the liminoid and the ergodic. These concepts therefore play an important role in my analysis of the hero myth.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Necessity of Personal Experience

Subjectivity is a concept that has traditionally been shunned in scientific discourse, throughout a wide variety of academic disciplines. In video game analysis specifically, critics have recently begun to value the advantages of personal experience. In her article *Passion As Method: Subjectivity in Video Games Criticism* (2015), Stephanie Jennings defends the idea that personal experience is valuable in video game analysis, and claims that it is unavoidable altogether. She cites Brendan Keogh's article *Killing is Harmless* (2013) to illustrate that other critics share the idea that subjectivity is inevitable:

Ultimately, this is an act of interpretation. Like any reading of any text, it is necessarily a selective reading. The meanings I get out of it are unlikely to be precisely the same as those that you get out of it, or precisely the same as those that the developers intended to put into it. I'm not trying to claim that I know, objectively, exactly what *The Line* is 'about'. I am simply trying to understand my own experience with this game. (p.9)

Jennings discusses multiple key concepts related to video games studies to validate her claims. She refers to the fact that any single playthrough of a game is highly individual, for the manner in which a game was played and completed is never identical to any other playthrough of the game. Each player spends a little more or a little less time lingering in a certain level than others. Some players will replay the game several times, while others only complete it once. In games that have multiple possible endings such as *Dark Souls*, some players will prefer one ending over the other. Some players enjoy the aesthetics of a game most, while others play to master the combat system. All of these examples show that any given playthrough is different, if ever so slightly, from others, and Jennings uses the terms "potential textualities" and "actualized textualities" to coin this concept. The former refers to "the choices that the critic may or may not make and may or may not reach, but that are available to be made and reached," while the latter refers to "the play sessions in which the critic participates and performs [...] They are the choices that the critic makes, the outcomes they experience, the flow of playthroughs". Combined with the fact that each player, as a human being, has a unique personality and state of mind, and is embedded within a sociocultural framework, it is safe to say that how players interpret and analyze a video game varies drastically. In other words, no matter how objective an academic game critic attempts

to be, his/her analysis of the game will always be limited by the unique and subjective experience he/she had while playing the game.

Jennings continues by pointing at poststructuralist tendencies, more specifically the writings of Roland Barthes, and states that “Barthes detach[es] critical interpretation from authorial intent and underscore[s] a text’s potential for pluralities of meaning”. However, in reference to the unique position of video games, she cites Espen Aarseth (2003) to assert that “unlike studies of film and literature, merely observing the action will not put us in the role of the audience. When others play, what takes place on the screen is only partly representative of what the player experiences” (p.3). Video games analysis is, according to Jennings, whose opinion I share, even more prone to subjectivity than critical analyses of other media forms. Jennings cites Clara Fernández-Vara (2014): “The player is a necessary part of the text... The game is not really a complete text without a player that interprets its rules and interacts with it” (p. 7). In short, what makes subjectivity unavoidable relates to the intrinsic characteristics of the video game medium, namely the ergodic, the liminoid and identity creation, which are all discussed throughout the course of this dissertation. One could even argue that personal experience plays a crucial role in how the individual interprets mythic narratives: this is a connection between myth and video games I will attempt to describe in greater detail as well.

The reason why I defend personal experience is twofold. First, not every single one, but a fair amount of the examples, allusions and references I derive from *Dark Souls* are the result of my own playthroughs of the series. I hope to have demonstrated in the previous paragraph that playthroughs vary from player to player, and as a result, the examples I utilize to uphold my arguments are precisely that: highly individual accounts of my own personal experiences while playing the games. On the other hand, an equally fair amount of *Dark Souls* source material I use is of a more objective type (e.g. the functions that characters fulfill from a formalist point of view). Secondly, in the final chapters of this dissertation, I will mainly focus on interpreting the main narrative themes of *Dark Souls*. This narrative interpretation should be seen in light of my own contemporary sociocultural context. After all, as Hidetaka Miyazaki, the lead developer of *Dark Souls I* and *III*, stated in an interview conducted by Alex Donaldson (2016):

Only those storyline elements that actually make it into the game are something that I need to force players to accept as a base for building up their own interpretation of the world. There are things in my head that aren’t in the games, after all – so after that, it’s all up to the players. I have no intention in forcing any of the storyline upon any of the

players out there, and there will be no official statements made about the ‘true’ story of the game.

In summary, both the examples I will be using to illustrate my claims, as well as the very results and conclusions drawn from my research will be somewhat ingrained in personal experience, which cannot be avoided. Or, as Jennings puts it (by partially referring to Aarseth: “How we analyze a game text ‘all depends on who we are and why we do it’ (Aarseth, 2003, p.6). The consideration of who we are should not be limited to whether we are scholars, academic, critics, casual game players, what have you. It is also a matter of our identities, the subjectivities and perceptions and positions that we carry with us into the games we play and study”.

2.2 Models of Behaviour

A particularly useful tool that I will be employing throughout my study is narrative analysis. The reason why I will be using it that often is because narrative structures are not only a part of (most) video games, they form an inherent part of myths as well. Seeing as the case study of this thesis involves the hero myth in video games, it is unavoidable to dedicate a considerable chunk of my attention to the analysis of *Dark Souls*’ narrative. Moreover, I will primarily validate my arguments by referring to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell’s renowned comparatist work that discusses the hero myth. Linking *Dark Souls* to Campbell’s theory of the hero myth requires me to resort to narrative analysis, for the main criteria Campbell himself invokes are of a narrative/functional nature. However, the hero myth discourse does not end with Campbell: critics (e.g. Robert A. Segal) have pointed out the flaws and limitations of Campbell’s perspective on the hero myth. In any case, when I employ Campbell’s framework to discuss the *Dark Souls* series in light of the hero paradigm, I will turn to the series’ narrative structure as one of several tools with which to construct my arguments.

Before I continue, I will provide additional information concerning narratives and video games, for the relationship between the two has been the cause of much academic friction during the last quarter of a century. To that end, I have to thank Jan Simons, who explores this subject in great detail in his article *Narrative, Games, and Theory* (2007). Particularly, Simons refers to “ [...]scholars of games studies [who] argue that narrative theory is no longer appropriate to cope with the forms and formats of new media. These scholars call for a new paradigm that provisionally has been baptized ‘ludology’ (Juul, 2001; Frasca, 1999;

Eskelinen, 2001)”. The following chapter examines this subject attentively, because, as I already stated, narrative analysis is of detrimental value to the discussion of the hero myth in this dissertation.

According to Simons, “narratives provide excellent platforms for thought experiments and simulations of ‘models of behaviour’. Narratives allow the exploration of (or speculation about) what would or could have happened under even slightly different conditions.” Related to *Dark Souls*, Simons’ claim suggests that the narrative structure of the games could serve as a ‘model of behaviour’, as a form of experimentation. As I hope to prove, that experimental aspect of video games can be extended to the hero myth structure (and myth in general). In other words, I hope to establish a link between video game narratives and myth based on their mutual potential as models of behaviour. In doing so, this connection proves the value of narrative analysis in video games. Furthermore, the experimental freedom players receive to construct their own unique narrative structure is distinctly opposite to Campbell’s static hero monomyth. If one succeeds at proving both myth and video games are linked by experimental, dynamic freedom of narrative construction, then it proves that the disregard for individual (sociocultural) context in Campbell’s theory is a crucial flaw. In fact, these individual, experimental deviations from the static hero myth structure are extremely valuable –Simons refers to Nial Ferguson (1997) on this matter, who claims “counterfactual scenarios of virtual history are not mere fantasy: they are simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world (hence ‘virtual history’)”. Ferguson and Simons thus both support the speculative, hypothetical value of such ‘models of behaviour’, and by extension, their arguments can be used to positively assess the ways in which *Dark Souls* deviates from the hero myth paradigm. Though the series does not strictly adhere to the hero structure, especially in terms of how it alludes to contemporary relevant themes such as death or the value of human existence, it is precisely that deviation from the pattern that reveals *Dark Souls*’ worth.

Simons continues by stating that “narratives often serve as a means to explore the future”. He connects that statement to the behaviour of video game players, more specifically, to the way these players make decisions during their playthroughs: “Game players probably weigh the outcomes of the alternative choices they are confronted with ‘narratively’, too.” Simons uses this specific characteristic of narratives that allows players/readers/spectators to reflect about future events as a means to connect the more general field of narrative studies and games studies. With that effort, Simons includes himself among the next generation of

academic video game critics that smoothen the unstable relationship between narrative and video games studies, seeing as a few decades earlier, games studies attempted to forcefully carve out their own space within the humanities primarily by severing ties with narrative studies. It is theories such as Simons' that, after a few decades of academic skirmishes, reconcile games studies with neighbouring cultural studies, and that try to define video games based on what they are rather than what they are not.

Video game narratives carry the potential to speculate about future events (as Simons contends). It needs to be kept in mind that this speculation is also restricted by the pre-existing set of affordances and constraints built into the virtual world by the game designers. That is to say, the claim that players can use video game worlds to experiment with future situations is only sustainable within the boundaries of that game world: there are technical, narratological or mechanical laws that confine the players' actions. In *Dark Souls*, for example, the programming of the game's physics engine does not allow players to jump a hundred feet into the air. The multiple possible endings of the games cannot be experienced before progressing through a certain number of mandatory areas (except when consulting outside sources, such as YouTube videos of other people playing the game or walkthroughs, for example). *Dark Souls I* does not allow players to fight the final boss, "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder", before defeating multiple other bosses, for which players are required to develop the appropriate mechanical skills in order to beat them. Simons argues that an external observer will notice how the player has no true agency, that the interaction he/she has with the gameworld is limited to the restrictions of the system (as a video game is ultimately a limited, rule-bound world). Nonetheless, the player feels as if he/she is in control and experiences agency, even though it is an illusion. Simons concludes that as long as the player experiences "a true sense of interactive freedom, transformation as variety is not an important design consideration (Mateas, 2004)". In other words, game designers have met their goal if players feel as if their actions mean something within the gameworld, when in reality their actions are confined to pre-set digital rules, and are not truly their "own decisions".

2.3 Narrative Construction in a Patchwork Medium

In any case, as Simons points out, it is illogical to "dismiss narratology wholesale" in light of video game analysis. For example, narrative structures lie at the core of many, if not all, roleplaying games, for the central feature of the genre is the creation of identity and the allocation of roles to characters, places, enemies and players themselves. The tools that create that identity or that realize those roles are stories, in other words, narratives. Identities and

roles are woven into a coherent whole, a text, as it were, by combining singular meaning-bearing elements.

As an example I would like to bring up the message system of *Dark Souls*. One of the features of the online multiplayer component of the series is that players are able to leave text messages on the ground. This is, aside from the emote system, the only way in which players are able to communicate with one another. Players create a text message in their own game world, and if the online component is enabled, the message appears within the game world of other players. If these players then interact with the message (which visually appears as cryptic, runic symbols surrounded by an orange hue), a text box pops up containing the written message in English. However, the content of the message is limited to a predetermined set of words and phrases. For example, a message can consist of the parts “Be wary of” and “Fire”, which may indicate a fire trap is nearby. A second example is “Try” followed by that same “Fire”, which may indicate a monster or boss is weak against fire-based attacks. Alternatively, some messages are not functional but express emotions or feelings: the phrase “Gorgeous view” is an example of this. In short, the message system encourages players to, in a creative way, help fellow players. Players can rate the messages positively or negatively, which is to some extent an indication of the veracity of the content of the message, or players may rate a message based on humor or a shared opinion. As the previous sentence implies, it is possible for players to leave messages that are not helpful or outright false. For example, the game contains many secret areas and hidden treasures, and it is not uncommon to encounter messages which hint at the presence of such secrets. However, sometimes players leave messages such as “Jumping off Amazing item” near cliffs to trick players into killing themselves, believing there is a treasure nearby.

With the previous examples in mind, the message system is a gameplay mechanic that has a particular social function. It allows players to interact in a helpful manner, or it can be used to impede other players’ progress. The very content of these message ties in with the general tendency of the game to keep textual information as ambiguous, vague and concise as possible, which stimulates individual player interpretation. The messages are visually represented as magical, mystical runes that emanate a strange glow –this relates to the overarching artstyle of the game which depicts numerous kinds of magical creatures, locations and events. Functionally, the messages may assist players in their quest, or potentially make the journey even more dangerous. Thematically, their existence is made possible because of the convolution of time and space in the *Dark Souls* universe and thus it makes sense for

messages left in ‘different dimensions’ (i.e. the game world of other players) to magically pop up in one’s own game world. In short, the message system is just one individual element in a complex network of meaning that comprises visual, mechanical, functional and social aspects of the game. It is linked to and even consolidates the larger narrative structure of the game. The message system helps create a story, a narrative, which, as Simons suggest, can be uncovered by analyzing the games’ narrative. I hope to have demonstrated that claim with my (brief) analysis of *Dark Souls*’ message system. In light of the larger scope of this thesis, proving that some video games (especially RPGs) contain narrative structures is important, because Campbell’s hero myth is realized by means of a narrative.

2.4 Reconciliation of Narrative Analysis with Video Game Studies

Aside from the difficulties between narratology and games studies (which are in the slow process of being reconciled in recent years), the latter also sharply opposes itself to “game theory”. Game theory concerns itself with a much larger domain of academic disciplines: political campaigns, military strategies, arms races, biological evolution and video games, to give a few examples (Simons, 2007). The difference between game theory and games studies is that the former takes as its field of study every form of game, with game being defined as “any situation in which two or more decision makers interact (Osborne, 2004)” in Simons’ article. He continues to state that “one could say that game theory reduces all sorts of situations to a single form: the payoff matrix”. Games studies, on the other hand, can be considered the humanities niche that resides within that much larger field of game theory, and which focuses on “enjoyable” games (boardgames, especially video games).

Considering that this thesis analyzes the hero myth in *Dark Souls* (as cultural artifacts studied by the humanities), I will mostly employ theories derived from games studies, for the scope of game theory reaches far beyond what I require. However, it is interesting to mention game theory’s take on the whole narratology versus games studies debate: from the perspective of game theory, there are few reasons why they should oppose each other. Game theorists “love stories too because stories are often about characters who face difficult decisions, impossible moral choices and conflicts with rivals” (Simons, 2007). In other words, from the more distanced perspective of game theorists, games studies should not downplay the role of narrative structures within video game analysis, for narratives and games have more in common than ludologists would admit. Simons refers to Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul, two academics that fiercely defend the ludological movement, who both suggest that “the plot of a story cannot be extracted from a game based on that story, while in the inverse

translation from game to story the rules of the game get lost” (Juul, 2001; Aarseth, 2004). Juul and Aarseth thus both seem to defend the notion that video games have some intrinsic, ephemeral quality that makes them unique in comparison to all other forms of cultural media. Specifically, they point at the rules of a game as that unique factor, which they then oppose diagonally to the narrative. Aarseth (2004) states that “although non narrative and non-ludic elements can be translated [setting, atmosphere and characters], the key elements, the narration and the gameplay, like oil and water, are not easily mixed”, a citation also referred to by Simons.

As I already suggested during my discussion of *Dark Souls*' message system, I do not think Aarseth's claim is correct. As I hope to further prove, for example during the upcoming discussion of the relevance of the death mechanic in *Dark Souls*, the “ludic” characteristics of video games do add to the narrative. Conversely, the players' understanding of the narrative adds more depth and could even change the way they play the game: for example, which ending scenario players pick in the *Dark Souls* series depends entirely on how they interpret the narrative.

Simons argues that games studies should, like game theorists, embrace the insights narratology offers when it comes to analyzing video games. Moreover, Simons states that “the logic of narrative is increasingly moving towards a conception of narrative as a contingent assemble of characters, settings and actions that can be constantly reformatted, reconfigured and repackaged for release and re-use in different media for different purposes”. The key idea behind this evolving notion of ‘narrative’ is that it is essentially comprised of bits and pieces, fragments that each bear meaning and combine to form a story. Narratives thus not only occur by means of certain formats that are set in stone; instead, the occurrence of a singular narrative throughout various media formats (such as film, literature, music, video games) all add to that narrative, which is reminiscent of Laurence Coupe's “radical typology” in mythic structures (1997), to which I will return. This is what Simons means when he refers to Jenkins (2004), who asserts that “movies and games are contributing to a larger narrative economy”. The unique characteristics of each media format all add to that larger narrative economy. Therefore, when one uses narrative structures to analyze video games, one should pay attention to how the characteristics of the format add to the understanding of the video game itself. In the case of this thesis, examining how the hero myth is implemented within *Dark Souls* (or how the games deviate from that pattern) unavoidably entails bringing up elements

that are typical of the video game format, specifically the ergodic, the liminoid and identity creation.

2.5 Illusion and Investment: the Self

A discussion of the narrative unavoidably involves reviewing the role, function and meaning of characters. Again, he refers to Aarseth (2004) to open up the debate: Aarseth claims that, when playing Lara Croft, he does not even see her body, but rather sees through it and past it. He continues by asserting literature is about “the other”, while games are about “the self”. Simons adds that “characters in games are functional and not emotionally and psychologically characterized entities as their counterparts in narratives”. While I do not wholly agree with Aarseth nor with Simons, their statements are interesting to delve into deeper, particularly the concepts of the self and the functional.

As I hope to clarify in the upcoming section on the ergodic, video games differ from most other media formats (with the exception of a few borderline cases such as ergodic literature, which Aarseth (1997) also discussed) because of the non-trivial effort expected from the player to advance the game. The necessity of player agency to progress in the narrative structure resonates with the importance Aarseth attaches to “the self”: players feel as if they are in control, as if they are the driving forces behind the progression of the plot. To a certain degree, this is true, because after all progression in the narrative depends on the players’ non-trivial effort. However, it needs to be kept in mind that, as I have already pointed out, player agency is an illusion. In *Dark Souls*, each individual player’s decisions determine which particular ending occurs out of several possibilities. Notwithstanding those decisions, the games still only have a predetermined and finite number of endings. Thus, the player is never fully in control of the fate of his/her character: the laws and boundaries of the game world determine what can and what cannot happen within that virtual universe. Regardless of whether the player is or is not fully aware of the illusion of player control, what matters is that he/she feels his/her actions matter. If this is the case, the player will become invested in the story and will feel the need to progress.

When I play *Dark Souls*, one of the major reasons I keep playing is because I want to find the first flame. I play because I feel that my effort can help NPCs (non-player characters) resolve their issues, make them feel less alone, and maybe even release them from their curse. I realize, like most players, that my efforts bear no real significance; they do not affect anything outside of this fictional world. I realize that I am not fully in control and have no true

freedom to do whatever I want. But I am willing to suspend that belief, to push it to the background, so that I can experience how the story unfolds, so that I can feel what the character I play as feels. The temporary discharge of emotions and experiences is the reason why people play video games: ultimately, video games are primarily a medium of entertainment. They should be enjoyable. In roleplaying games, that feeling of joy occurs when players are able to identify in one way or another with the characters and the events they encounter, and when they feel as if their actions matter within the story and universe of the game. People's favorite games are those that have had a lasting emotional impact, that has taught them something about themselves or the world around them. Games cannot have that effect when players are unable to identify with the narrative or the characters.

In that regard, Aarseth's comment that games are about the self becomes a matter of identification and personal experience. I do not think this interpretation is how Aarseth intended his idea to be understood, but if Aarseth refers to the self as the lens with which players evaluate characters and experience games, then such a highly individual outlook requires the critic to pay attention to each player's individual context, or at least, to keep in mind that different analyses may vary accordingly.

2.6 The Value of Colour

Surprisingly, despite Simons' previous calls to analyze video games in light of a wider context that includes not only the exclusively ludological, he seems to forget in the final section of his article that characters, both in video games as well as in narratives, are more than junctures. Characters serve a purpose that exceeds the filling of functional slots. Claiming that the personal traits of game characters is reducible to "colour" in the eyes of game designers (Simons, 2007) effectively negates all other roles characterization has. For one, individual readers/players/spectators identify with characters; not with the functions they exert. Interpretation of those characters, or even the narrative as a whole, can change depending on personal experience and context. As an example, the final boss of the first game "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder" functions as an obstacle, a danger that needs to be confronted and overcome by the player character. However, a friend of mine and myself had entirely different opinions about Gwyn, for reasons of what Simons calls "colour": I disliked him and thought he was tyrannical for the exact same reasons why my friend liked him and found him heroic and brave. Gwyn is zealously trying to keep the first flame from fading in order to extend the Age of Fire and to assure the preservation of his kingdom. To achieve this, he (unconsciously?) dooms mankind to live in agony. While the function of Gwyn remains the

same no matter who plays the game (he remains an obstacle), the interpretation of the character and his actions, the “colour”, changes dramatically depending on who is playing. That interpretation is motivated by personal experience, as well as unique factors such as the player’s personality and state of mind at the time of playing. How players evaluate the characters, and by extension, the narrative structure as a whole, thus varies from player to player. The “colour” which shapes these characters and influences how they are interpreted is therefore far from meaningless.

That is not to say a functional analysis of the characters is redundant –on the contrary, it can reveal information about characters that was previously backgrounded, because of players’ feelings towards said characters, for example. In *Dark Souls II*, the NPC “Merchant Hag Melentia”, as the term ‘hag’ implies, appears to players as an old, brittle woman. Her voice is shrill, her clothes are tattered and rather than politely conducting business (she sells items to the player character), she informs players that “everyone's so stingy around here. Everyone's so stingy everywhere! You're my only customer. Don't make me beg, now, buy something!” (*Dark Souls II*, 2014). The impression I had when encountering this NPC was that she acted rather hostile, as if she was hiding something. She was not at all interested in establishing a relationship with my character, but saw me almost exclusively as a walking moneybag that she could exploit to safeguard her existence in the harsh world of *Dark Souls* for a little while longer. When one identifies Melentia functionally however, she fulfills the function of benefactor, or at least, of a character that actually helps the player. As I already pointed out, she sells a variety of goods to players to aid them in their playthrough. When players buy enough goods from her, she even gives them a ring that increases the accumulation of souls (which, in *Dark Souls*, are used as a form of currency) for free. Despite what players might think of her as a result of the “colour” of her character, a functional analysis proves that she is in fact a welcome aid (or even a benefactor and friend) in the player character’s quest.

In short, the functional slots filled by characters cannot be overlooked, but nevertheless the analysis of characters in video games (and other media, for that matter) should not be reduced to the merely functional. This claim holds especially true in light of Campbell’s hero myth. While the ingenuity of Campbell’s work cannot be denied, there are several crucial factors that Campbell pushes to the background or outright negates when it comes to the analysis of the hero character. A recurring criticism is that he attaches no value to individual sociocultural contexts of the myths he analyzes in light of the hero paradigm

(Segal, 1999: 140). Such factors do play a crucial role because ultimately Campbell is dealing with highly variable narrative structures. In any case, a functional analysis forms only part of that larger structure, but its importance should not be disregarded either. As Simons remarks, after all, “it is no coincidence that game designers had recourse to the ‘functions’ defined by Vladimir Propp (1968) in his study of Russian folktales which would become one of the fundamentals of structuralist and semiotic narratology (Newman, 2004) or to Joseph Campbell’s more popular book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949) [...]”. Functional analysis of video game narratives has the distinct advantage of uncovering rudimentary structures, functions and relationships between characters, but video games are more than functional blueprints that are insignificantly decorated.

3. The Hero Myth

Discussing the different mythic structures within *Dark Souls* from all possible mythological perspectives is a titanic labour which far exceeds the limits of this dissertation. Therefore, only one mythic structure will be examined, but to great detail: the hero myth. As the nomenclature implies, the hero myth encompasses a particular subset of myths, that which is characterized by the hero figure. Furthermore, the singular form is used rather than the plural, indicating that there is a common thread which connects multiple hero myths into a larger, overarching “Hero Myth”. By now, it should be clear that there are advantages and disadvantages when one channels multiple mythic structures into a more abstract, general category –this, too, applies to the hero myth. A scholar who has written extensively on the subject of the hero myth, particularly related to its formal aspects, is Joseph Campbell. His renowned work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) forms the main source of academic information that I will use to relate myth to the *Dark Souls* series.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell closely examines hero myths from a plethora of different cultures around the globe in an attempt to establish the formal pattern that courses throughout all of them. He presents his readers with numerous myths, of which he claims they all, in one way or another, fit into that larger paradigm of the hero myth, which he calls the “monomyth”. He then deconstructs the examples he provides into smaller structural units. Afterwards, he comments on how each of these individual units fit within the formal categories he regards as characteristic of the hero myth, and provides an explanation for those formal categories: what they represent, what their functions are (mainly from a psychological perspective, as Campbell was strongly influenced by Carl Jung (Segal, 1999: 117-134)). The main structure of Campbell’s monomyth consists of three narrative segments: departure, initiation and return. While Campbell’s work allows numerous myths to be classified and analyzed by means of a common denominator, there are multiple elements within his theory that have been criticized. It is necessary to reveal these flaws and explain them prior to the application of Campbell’s structure to *Dark Souls*.

3.1 The Flaws in Campbell’s Monomyth

The problem with Campbell’s method is that his design of the monomyth and the results he hopes to find influence his process of analysis. In hopes of finding a universal structure, he breaks down individual myths into structural units with the intent of forcing them to fit his structural categories. Moreover, he even acknowledges throughout the course of his work that

the order in which those structural units present themselves may vary, and even that it is entirely possible some structural units are left out completely in some myths. The following citation is a lucid illustration of Campbell's shortcomings:

The changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description. Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the *Odyssey*). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes. The outlines of myths and tales are subject to damage and obscuration. Archaic traits are generally eliminated or subdued. Imported materials are revised to fit local landscape, custom or belief, and always suffer in the process. Furthermore, in the innumerable retellings of a traditional story, accidental or intentional dislocations are inevitable. To account for elements that have become, for one reason or another, meaningless, secondary interpretations are invented, often with considerable skill. (p. 246-247)

The previous citation sums up the loopholes, deficits or gaps within Campbell's theory, of which he himself was aware. Rather than adjusting his theory or elaborating upon it, he avoids counterarguments by simply stating that all variations upon the hero myth, in whatever shape or form, are secondary, archaic or flawed variations of the 'pure' version. In enumerating a great number of individual myths, Campbell gives the impression that the hero myth structure is universal, and that all myths can be reduced to that monomyth. What really happens, however, is that Campbell supplies his theory with ample space for manoeuvrability and elasticity. The elements of the myths he chooses are picked precisely because they fit his theory, and he consciously leaves out those which do not, or dismisses them as 'flawed'.

The theory of the hero monomyth is reminiscent of what Vladimir Propp hoped to accomplish in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), where he set out to reveal the unifying deep structure of all Russian folktales. The criticism on Proppian theory is therefore to a large extent similar to that which Campbell's theory of the monomyth has received (Csapo 2005: 201-209). Moreover, the flaw which Propp and Campbell share is arguably that which characterizes all comparatist perspectives on mythology: the disregard for context. On a sidenote, it could even be argued that ludologists had to endure analogous criticism: their search for the formal and 'pure structures' that are unique to the video game format encompassed a similar rejection of context. Ludologists reduce video games to the absolute

formal, a situation that occurs in Propp and Campbell as well. Returning to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and the citation mentioned a few instances ago, it is strange to note that Campbell was aware of the contextual differences between disparate myths. Instead of using those sociocultural differences, that “colour”, as it were, to accentuate and complement his already insightful theory, he dismisses them entirely. Additionally, all of the examples elected by Campbell involve the hero figure, while one familiar with mythology can easily think of myths that have nothing to do with the heroic (e.g. etiological myths which explain the origin of objects, place names, customs, animals etc.).

It is precisely that flaw which I hope to resolve in this dissertation. Aside from merely analyzing *Dark Souls* in terms of formal structure (which does have its merits), I will supplement the narrative analysis with my own personal interpretation of the series’ dominant themes. First, however, I will explore the formal structure of Campbell’s hero myth related to *Dark Souls*, because it establishes interesting connections between myth and video games of the roleplaying genre.

Before I initiate the formal analysis of these games, a few observations are required. First, the case selected for study is the *Dark Souls* series: this refers to all three individual installments of a single video game trilogy. All three connect, overlap and allude to one another, most distinctly on the level of gameplay mechanics, visual elements and above all narrative structure. Therefore, it is not surprising to detect that the formal hero structure of Campbell is similar within all three, as I will illustrate, for Campbell’s analysis is in essence an analysis of the narrative. Nonetheless, all three installments of the series will receive equal attention. A second remark, which can be deduced from the previous chapter, is that Campbell’s formal structure does not seamlessly apply to all three games. As Campbell himself pointed out, some mythic narratives enlarge certain elements of the hero cycle, other elements are left out, repeated or fused together in a single unit. Therefore, the actual narrative analysis deviates from Campbell’s scheme: it does not stick to the ‘ideal’ hero structure. Whenever segments are fused or left out altogether, I will attempt to explain why this is the case.

With that in mind, consider the following base structure of the hero myth as Campbell (1949) himself summarized it:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero

comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (p. 30)

The three main sequences in the hero's journey are thus departure, initiation and return, all three of which are comprised of further subcategories. I will begin with the departure sequence in the *Dark Souls* games and continue accordingly.

4. The Hero Myth in *Dark Souls* – Departure

4.1 The Herald and the Call

The hero quest begins with the “call to adventure”; this can occur either by chance, by accident, or intentionally of the hero’s own volition. In *Dark Souls*, the call to adventure is motivated by misfortune. *Dark Souls I* starts when the hero is deported to the “Undead Asylum”, separated from the rest of the world, because of a curse, physically marked by “the Darksign”. This brands him/her as undead, a fate which befalls many human beings within the universe of the game. The curse dooms its bearer to live for eternity, rendering him/her unable to die, but also causes the loss of his/her sanity and humanity in the process. These undead are hunted down and locked up in the Undead Asylum.

Dark Souls II starts similarly: the game introduces the player character as such a cursed human during the introductory cinematic. The player watches a man/woman (the player character) stretch out his/her hand in horror to whom are presumably his/her wife and child. Their faces melt away, as well as the room itself in which the scene occurs. This indicates that the man/woman is slowly losing his/her mind and sanity as a result of the curse. Subsequently, a smoky vapour escapes out of a wound on the assumed player character’s back. The smoky wound, black in colour, is a physical manifestation of the Darksign from the first game, which indicates the character is undead. Aside from these visual elements, the narrative voice which speaks to the player throughout the cutscene quite literally mentions the player is cursed. She states: “You will lose everything once branded. The symbol of the curse, an augur of darkness. Your past, your future, your very light. None will have meaning and you won’t even care. By then, you’ll be something other than human. A thing that feeds on souls, a hollow. [...] Your wings will burn in anguish, time after time. For that is your fate. The fate of the cursed.” As the cutscene progresses, the man, seemingly conscious of the terrible fate which has befallen him, ventures to a lake of which the narrative voice implies it is the “decrepit gate to a walled off land, far to the north, where a great king built a great kingdom”. A magical maelstrom opens itself within the lake, and the player character jumps in out of his/her own volition, realizing the curse gives him/her no other option. This is where the cutscene ends, and where the player gains control over the player character.

Dark Souls III is different from the previous two installments, for the player character is not simply a hollow/undead, but an “unkindled”. What exactly the difference is, is still subject to speculation, but my own interpretation is that unkindled are hollows/undead which

consciously chose not to light the first flame (or were not strong enough to do so) in previous fire-linking cycles. In any case, the player character awakens in a graveyard after being forcibly resurrected by an unknown force. He/she is resurrected because both the “Lords of Cinder” and other undead have abandoned their duty of linking the first flame. This is the call to adventure.

Interesting to note is that, in relation to the call to adventure, Campbell mentions there is often a “herald” figure; a character or entity who assumes the role of the announcer of adventure. Campbell claims these heralds are often deemed ugly, evil, dark, loathly or terrifying by the world (p. 53). The reason why they are evaluated as such is due to their relationship with the powers, insights, energies and forces that are at the beginning of the hero’s quest still perceived as mysterious, unknown, unstable and therefore terrifying. The herald embodies those qualities. In *Dark Souls*, the opening cinematics of all three installments are narrated by a similar voice. In the first and third installments, that voice is provided by the same voice actress (Pik-Sen Lim) while in the second the narrator’s voice sounds identical to the untrained ear. In the opening cinematic of *Dark Souls II*, the voice is accompanied by a visual representation of the narrator: she is revealed to be an old, frail woman, grey-haired, wrinkled, with pale skin tone; her irises are grey and cloudy which suggests blindness; and maybe most importantly, she is wearing red robes. This last element bears particular relevance to the narrative, for the first NPCs the player encounters after the opening cutscene are three old women who look exactly alike, all three of them wearing those red robes. They are known as the “old ladies”, a group of women that once served as “fire keepers”. Fire keepers are women that devote themselves to the tending of the flame, and fulfill a function that is comparable to priestesses in mythological systems around the world. Of all people, they are the ones who have the most profound knowledge of the cosmological order of the *Dark Souls* universe. They understand the secrets and the power of fire in a way that is similar to how the herald in Campbell’s theory understands the mysterious and cryptic source of power and energy.

In short, it is plausible to claim that what Campbell calls the herald is, within *Dark Souls*, the narrator herself, who in turn plays an important functional role in the narrative. The herald signals the shift from the mundane, everyday life of the hero to the start of his/her journey. In *Dark Souls*, this is the narrator/fire keeper who speaks to the players in the opening cinematics and marks the transition of ‘outside life’ into the virtual world of the game.

4.2 The Threshold and its Guardian

The second link in the chain of formal elements is already different in *Dark Souls I* and *Dark Souls III* from how Campbell describes it. Usually, Campbell claims, the second step is either the “refusal of the call”, in which case the hero refuses to continue his journey, or he accepts the call and receives the aid of a supernatural figure. Instead *Dark Souls* first presents players with what Campbell labels “the crossing of the first threshold”. This formal category consists of the “confrontation between the hero and the threshold guardian at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. [...] Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger [...]” (p.77). In the first game, players explore the prison where they are locked up, the undead asylum. At the end of this area, they encounter the “Asylum Demon”, a monster that functions as the first boss of the game. It immediately introduces players to the dark, gloomy atmosphere as well as the overwhelmingly difficult combat mechanics of the game. This first boss is therefore the threshold guardian in terms of both the hero narrative and the gameplay mechanics. *Dark Souls III* assigns the role of threshold guardian to “Iudex Gundyr” –a different character, but he serves a function identical to that of the asylum demon. In the case of the asylum demon, it is also possible to slip past and only defeat the boss in combat much later in the game. Regardless of whether players defeat it during the first encounter or slip past, the encounter retains the same function: players are henceforth aware that they are entering a world of dangers, and have been introduced to the unforgiving combat system of the game. After the asylum demon and Iudex Gundyr, the player character (the hero) irreversibly passes into a new, unknown world.

Dark Souls II deviates from that pattern. The refusal of the call-segment is absent, but so is the threshold guardian. It could be argued that the aforementioned introductory cinematic of *Dark Souls II* functions as the crossing of the first threshold. This cinematic did show the player character diving into the maelstrom in the lake to subsequently awaken on the other side of the threshold. However, there is no threshold guardian: it takes most players several hours to get to their first boss encounter of the game. Thus, the threshold guardian is absent, both from the perspective of the narrative and the perspective where a boss-type monster familiarizes players with the harsh combat mechanics. Alternatively, the first area of the game, a zone called “Things Betwixt”, could also be regarded as the threshold itself. It is the area where the player character awakens after the opening cinematic, a place where very few enemies are encountered. There are two reasons why this area is important, and why it could be considered to be the threshold itself. The first meaningful encounter in the zone

occurs when players meet the aforementioned old ladies/fire keepers. By now, the player character has forgotten all about himself/herself as a result of the curse. One of the fire keepers (a woman called Strowen) starts a conversation with the player character during which players are able to choose the name, physical appearance and starting playstyle of their character. Behind the hut where the fire keepers live, there are a few caverns which contain trivial enemies and milestones which inform the player of the mechanical controls of the game (how to perform certain attacks or actions). However, the entire zone can be skipped (with the exception of the conversation with Strowen), and players can journey directly to the central “hub” of the game, a settlement called “Majula”. In short, *Dark Souls II* does not confront players with a threshold guardian that defends the doorway to a new world. The transitory zone itself, the threshold, functions as what Campbell calls “supernatural aid” rather than as a first challenge which needs to be overcome.

This pronounced difference between the first and third installments of the franchise as opposed to the second could be attributed to the development team: the lead producer of the first and third installments is Hidetaka Miyazaki (who is regarded as the spiritual father of the *Dark Souls* series by the community) while the second game was produced by Masanori Takeuchi. Miyazaki might have found it preferable to confront players with riveting threats before they fully realize what is going on. Upon encountering the asylum demon and iudex Gundy, players are still fairly unfamiliar with the combat system of the game (unless they know from sources outside of the game what to expect). Forcing players to contend with such overwhelmingly powerful opponents has the rhetorical effect of enlarging the sense of awe, shock and danger, especially when players do not fully understand the combat system of the game yet. While Miyazaki might have preferred this, it is possible Takeuchi did not. Such encounters are potentially very frustrating for new players; it can demotivate them or even cause them to stop playing altogether. Ultimately, this is speculation on my part –however, the fact remains that there is a marked difference between the first/third installment and the second in regards to the crossing of the first threshold.

4.3 Supernatural Aid

Moving on to what is under normal circumstances the third category in Campbell’s structure, the “supernatural aid” reoccurs in many forms and shapes throughout all three of the games. This category consists of characters/entities which, as the name implies, assist the hero on his/her quest. The manner in which this occurs varies: the supernatural aid may offer a weapon to the hero, a piece of information or insights which helps him/her during the journey,

they may even provide a means of transportation (such as the “Giant Crow” in *Dark Souls I*). What is crucial is that the actions of the supernatural aid help the hero progress, and as Campbell asserts, “such a figure represents [...] the benign, protecting power of destiny” (p. 71).

Players meet the undead character “Oscar, knight of Astora” before they encounter the asylum demon in *Dark Souls I*, very early on in the game. This character gives players the estus flask, a refillable item that heals the damage done to players whenever they consume some of the liquid held by the flask. The flask is the primary mechanism of healing damage in the game. It is clear how this benefits players, and therefore, why Oscar fits the profile of the supernatural aid. I already mentioned how the fire keepers in *Dark Souls II* help players in ‘remembering’ their names, their physical appearance and initial playstyle; this, too, is a form of supernatural aid. In *Dark Souls III*, players discover a corpse very close to the location where the game starts; the corpse is virtually impossible to miss. An item is located on the corpse, called the ashen estus flask: instead of restoring the health of the player, it allows them to recover “focus points”, the energy required to cast magical spells. Interesting to note is that the corpse on which the ashen estus flask is found wears elite knight armor, an Astora straight sword and a crest shield, the exact same items Oscar from *Dark Souls I* wore. A myriad of references to *Dark Souls I* similar to the one just mentioned permeates *Dark Souls III*. In any case, it can thus be argued that even while Oscar himself is dead, he reaches out from beyond the grave to help the player, providing him/her with a useful item.

However, the category of supernatural aid extends far beyond these three examples. A great number of merchants reside within the *Dark Souls* universe: the crestfallen merchant, Andre of Astora, Dusk of Oolacile, Oswald of Carim in *Dark Souls I*; merchant hag Melentia, Gavlan, laddersmith Gilligan in *Dark Souls II*; Yoel of Londor, Orbeck of Vinheim or Andre of Astora (again) in *Dark Souls III* just to name a few. These merchants offer players a variety of consumable items, teach them magic spells or even sell their services or goods required to access particular areas or progress in the narrative. In most cases, players are required to pay them to obtain their wares. In some cases however, these characters hand over items free of cost: an example of this, one I discussed earlier, is merchant hag Melentia, who gives players a free ring. In *Dark Souls II* and *III*, players are able to level up their characters by having the “emerald herald Shanalotte” and fire keeper (in *II* and *III* respectively) convert their accumulated souls into combat proficiency (for example physical or magical strength). This too is a form of supernatural aid: it is of detrimental value to ‘level up’ the hero so that he/she is

strong enough to face the challenges along his/her journey. Additionally, all three games include a system of online interactivity which allows players to ‘invade’ the gameworlds of others, either to harm the host or to help them slay their opponents. When invading players help the host, this could be considered a form of supernatural aid. Before certain boss battles, NPCs can be summoned to assist the player in defeating the boss. Finally, if online interaction is enabled, messages left by other players will appear on the ground. Players can interact with these messages to read them, and they sometimes contain useful info concerning an upcoming fight, ambushes or hidden areas. All of these previous examples illustrate how supernatural aid is featured throughout the entirety of the games. It clearly deviates from Campbell’s ‘ideal’ hero structure because supernatural aid is not confined to the departure sequence of the journey; rather, it is a core mechanic.

4.4 The Belly of the Whale

The three introductory zones (undead asylum, things betwixt and cemetery of ash in *Dark Souls I*, *II* and *III* respectively) all lead to areas of momentary repose. These are the central hubs of the game where merchants are situated, where characters are levelled up and from where many subsequent areas of the game are accessed: they are respectively called “Firelink Shrine”, “Majula” and (again) “Firelink Shrine”. Both these central hubs of repose and the introductory areas that lead to them function as Campbell’s threshold. It is in the areas past the introductory zones, past the thresholds, that the hero faces his/her biggest challenges. These zones contain the real threats and dangers, as well as the rewards and insights the hero requires to complete his/her journey. Campbell calls these zones of unknown adventures “the belly of the whale”.

Concerning the topics of time and space, all three games confer ambiguous and vague information in terms of when and where precisely the events that take place unfold. In this regard, it is important to note that it is heavily implied all three games are located within the same fictional universe, albeit in kingdoms that bear different names (Lordran, Drangleic and Lothric respectively). There is a plethora of proof that suggests this convolution of time and space: the example of Oscar, knight of Astora (mentioned in the section on supernatural aid) illustrates this. There is an abundance of references that connects the narratives of the three games (with time and space being part of that narrative structure). *Dark Souls III* contains “Siegward of Catarina”, a character that alludes to “Siegmyer of Catarina” in *Dark Souls I* because of their shared weaponry, armor, and personality. Certain bosses, especially the central ones required to progress the narratives, could be regarded as reincarnations of bosses

from previous installments: for example, “Gravelord Nito” from *Dark Souls I* and “The Rotten” from *Dark Souls II* are both representations of death, both are encountered in the underground, dark, tomb-like recesses of the game world and upon defeating The Rotten in a second playthrough, players receive the “Old Dead One’s soul” which is quite literally references Gravelord Nito (the Old Dead One).

Yet another lucid example is located in *Dark Souls I* and *III*. The city and home of the gods in *Dark Souls I* is called “Anor Londo”, however, all gods seem to have abandoned the city with the exception of “Dark Sun Gwyndolin”, who is an optional boss. During the boss encounter Gwyndolin fires a magical bow to bombard the player with arrows. *Dark Souls III* also features an area called Anor Londo, it is the exact same city of the gods from the first installment. One of the central bosses of the third game, “Aldrich, Devourer of Gods”, resides within the central throne room of that abandoned city. During the boss fight, Aldrich’s physical manifestation is identical to Gwyndolin’s from the waist up, indicating that he has consumed the god from the first installment. Moreover, the attack Gwyndolin uses in *Dark Souls I* (the barrage of arrows) is also used by Aldrich. On top of that, the music that is heard during the fight with Aldrich combines the soundtracks of the Gravelord Nito and Dark Sun Gwyndolin boss battles from *Dark Souls I* (an insight I owe to a YouTube clip made by user DaveControl). After defeating Aldrich, players can use Aldrich’s soul to manufacture the “Darkmoon longbow”, and the description of this item reads: “Longbow of Darkmoon Gwyndolin, who was gradually devoured by Aldrich. This golden bow is imbued with powerful magic and is most impressive with moonlight arrows”. These narrative, visual, auditory and mechanical elements illustrate how time and space are convoluted within the universe of the Souls games.

It is safe to assume that all three games share the same ‘belly of the whale’. The universes of *Dark Souls I*, *II* and *III* are connected to such an extent that they are effectively variations or alternations on the same universe. The belly of the whale is thus ubiquitous: it encompasses the entire fictional universe. The boundaries of the belly are ultimately the boundaries of the virtual world itself. This core aspect does not solely apply to *Dark Souls* but characterizes many RPGs. It is known as ‘the liminoid’.

4.4 The Liminoid

The liminoid, derived from the Latin word ‘limen’ (in English: ‘threshold’) constitutes the essential difference between the real and the virtual. In *When Life Mattered: The Politics of*

the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth, and Ritual (2014) Sun-ha Hong goes into great detail defining the phenomenon, which he characterizes as the ever-present barrier that separates the 'real' world from the digital universe of video games. Important to note in that regard is that he does not categorize all video games as containing equal liminoid qualities: this is related to the fact that all games are to some degree a reflection of reality. The player has to recognize something from the 'real world' in the game, otherwise he/she would not be able to make sense of it. Recognition of the real is a requisite, however small or transfigured it may be, for the player to understand what is happening within the game's universe. Therefore, games that show more affinity for 'the real', games that allow for a sharper recognition of existing social or cultural structures, grant the player faster access to and deeper understanding of the game world in question. Additionally, games that aesthetically and structurally simulate the real world logically allow the player more space to experiment with and explore social and cultural structures reminiscent of their 'real' counterparts. It is the space for exploration combined with recognition of the real, while knowing it is 'not actually real', that constitutes the liminoid nature of games. Thus, games that present more inclination towards these concepts are 'more liminoid' than others.

While the worlds of the *Dark Souls* series are unique in their own right, many elements they contain are derived from pre-existing sociocultural structures. The enemies the player has to fight are often skeletons, ghosts, deities or dragons, all of which are rooted deeply within a variety of mythic/cultural traditions around the world. The *Dark Souls* narrative scheme borrows elements from what Campbell calls the monomyth, a formal structure that many culturally diverse myths and literary works adopt (though, as I have explained, none are completely identical). Mechanically, the series utilizes principles that reoccur in the vast majority of roleplaying video games: defeating monsters, gaining experience and items, levelling up, the use of medieval armor and weaponry, magical spells, boss encounters –these are all elements which generally characterize the RPG genre. Visually, the games display characters and settings as realistically as possible. Unless there is a specific reason for it, image colour, depth, conceptualization and quality are as close to 'real' visual perception as the game engine allows them to.

When combined, the aforementioned elements create an underlying structure that facilitates player recognition. Because these elements recur in a wider context, players are much more likely to have encountered them before. Players are then able to apply that knowledge from previous experiences to facilitate their understanding of new and unfamiliar

contexts, which in this case is the *Dark Souls* series. This is what King and Krzywinska refer to under the name ‘functional realism’ (2002).

On the occasion that video games adopt a narrative structure that reminds one of myth (for example, the hero myth discussed in this dissertation), similarities between the two arise. Nicholas G. Cragoe states the following in *RPG Mythos: Narrative Gaming as Modern Mythmaking*, an article published in *Games and Culture* (2015):

The parallels between live RPGs on one hand, and oral mythology and folktales on the other, are perhaps not immediately intuitive but are not difficult to uncover. Both forms involve the communication of hyperbolized and exaggerated fictions with varying levels of resemblance to reality but always with a reliance on familiar environments and culturally archetypal characters, relationships, and events. Both forms come with particular structures that are predetermined, while also being subject to the creativity of the storytellers and open to potentially significant alterations to the content of the narratives. And finally (and perhaps most obviously), both forms are designed for entertainment. The structures, communication, and creativity are meant to be stimulating and interesting, if not outright fun, for the participants. Which is not to say that these are not socially significant types of social interaction or that they are not to be taken seriously. (p. 13)

While Cragoe focuses on live RPGs and oral mythology and folktales, I believe his arguments extend to video game RPGs and ‘textual’ mythology and folktales. Cragoe assigns characteristics to RPGs and myth that I have just identified as characteristics of the liminoid. The citation emphasizes the role of familiarity with and recognition of existing sociocultural and narrative structures, and the role of the player in experimenting with/exploring those familiar structures. These are the core characteristics of the liminoid. Cragoe suggests myth and RPGs are linked to one another because of their reliance on recognition of ‘the real’ as well as their openness to individual experimentation and variation. While I agree with that idea, neither myth nor RPGs (as a subgenre of video games) are limited to these characteristics. There are differences between them, but unfortunately the discussion of those differences falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, it is questionable to claim that “both forms come with particular structures that are predetermined”. I believe some patterns do reoccur, but it is always possible that some segments are missing or altered. To claim that they are “predetermined” deprives them of their variability and dynamic character, which comes awfully close to the universalism and generalization Campbell has been

criticized for. However, Cragoe himself revises that statement and offers additional nuance by asserting they are “subject to the creativity of the storytellers and open to potentially significant alterations to the content of the narratives”. Furthermore, Cragoe appears to equate myth and RPGs in term of social significance and entertainment value. I argue myth outweighs RPGs in terms of social significance, whereas RPGs are more designed for entertainment purposes than myth. However, Cragoe is correct in assuming they both possess these functions –just to varying degrees.

In any case, the main objective of this section has been to establish a relationship between myth and video games (RPGs specifically). This relationship is based on a mutual dependency on recognition of the ‘real’ and freedom of experimentation, which Sun-ha Hong terms ‘the liminoid’. It is precisely this liminoid world into which players are sucked when they play *Dark Souls*. The liminoid *is* the belly of the whale.

5. The Hero Myth in *Dark Souls* – Initiation

5.1 The Road of Trials

At this point, players have completed the introductory zones of the game and are ready to embark on their adventure. They are familiar with the basic gameplay mechanics and know what their (first) objective is. Henceforth, players will face one challenge after the other, progress from zone to zone, gather items, slay enemies and bosses and grow in power. The “road of trials”, the term Campbell utilizes to refer to the many challenges that await the hero, is according to Campbell himself “a favorite phase of the myth-adventure” (p. 97). He defines it as: “The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moment of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed –again, again and again. Meanwhile, there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land” (p. 109).

The road of trials in *Dark Souls I* consists of ringing the “Bells of Awakening”, venturing through “Sen’s Fortress” and into the aforementioned Anor Londo. Once there, the hero acquires the “Lordvessel”, a vessel which, as the name implies, absorbs the “Lord Souls”. These are the souls of the four key bosses of the game: “Gravelord Nito”, “the Witch of Izalith”, “Seath the Scaleless” and “the Four Kings of New Londo”. After satiating the Lordvessel with their souls, the player can use the Lordvessel to confront “Gwyn, Lord of Cinder” (the end boss of the game) and either rekindle the first flame which he guards, or extinguish the flame and usher in the Age of Dark. This is the rudimentary, condensed structure of *Dark Souls I*. However, the game offers more challenges to those willing to confront them –a total of 14 bosses in the game are optional, while only 12 are required to complete the game (downloadable content (DLC) included). Additionally, Lordran is littered with traps (e.g. Sen’s Fortress which houses several dozen of them) and an enormous amount of regular monsters, which all share a single purpose: they exist to kill the player character.

Dark Souls II adopts a core structure similar to that of the first installment. The player is tasked to acquire the four “Great Souls” that lie scattered throughout Drangleic. These Great Souls reside within four core bosses: “the Rotten”, “the Lost Sinner”, “the Duke’s Dear Freya” and “the Old Iron King” –all four bosses are implied to be reincarnations of the main bosses of *Dark Souls I*, or at least that they possess fragments of the Great Souls once held by the main bosses of the first game. Once players gain possession of these souls, they are able to

enter the capital of the kingdom, where supposedly the king resides. Upon arriving, players meet “Queen Nashandra” who claims the king has abandoned his duty and subsequently left the castle. Nashandra tasks the player with defeating the king and reclaiming the throne. As players progress, they discover the former “King Vendrick” in the undead crypt and learn that it was in fact Nashandra who caused the kingdom’s ruin. In order to defeat Nashandra, players must seek out the king’s brother, Aldia, and obtain an artifact which allows one to access lost memories, a form of time travel. In one of these memories of times past, players gain yet another artifact called the “Giant’s Kinship” by defeating the “Giant Lord”. Afterwards, Nashandra can be confronted and upon defeating her, players once again face the decision of linking the flame, letting it fade, or (if players have purchased the “Scholar of the First Sin” downloadable content and defeated one additional boss named “Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin”) they can abscond the throne to walk a path “beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of dark”. Like *Dark Souls I*, the game also contains dozens of traps, an innumerable amount of regular monsters, and 18 optional and 21 unavoidable bosses (DLC included).

The base structure of the road of trials in *Dark Souls III* is yet again comparable to previous installments of the franchise, but deviates upon the theme of collecting Great Souls. Here, players awaken from their deathly slumber to a world that is fading away, in accordance with the fire of the first flame. No chosen undead answers the call, and those that have previously rekindled the first flame, heroes known as “Lords of Cinder” refuse to do so once again. The player character’s objective is to forcibly obtain the ashes of these lords by slaying them: their names are “the Abyss Watchers”, “Yhorm the Giant”, “Aldrich, Devourer of Gods” and “Prince Lothric”. After combining their ashes, players enter the kiln of the first flame, and encounter the “Soul of Cinder”. This creature is an amalgamation of all the chosen undead that have rekindled the first flame in the past. Upon defeating this creature, the player-as-hero has completed the journey, and one out of four possible endings occurs. The player character links the flame, thus renewing the cycle: this is the standard ending. The player character can allow the flame to fade, which requires an item to be obtained in an optional area of the game, the “Eyes of a Fire Keeper”. The Age of Fire thus fades, ushering in an Age of Dark. Alternatively, this ending allows players to kill the fire keeper during the cutscene, as players gain control over their characters for a brief moment. This is the third ending.

The fourth and final ending requires players to follow a very strict pattern of interaction with the NPCs of the game during any single playthrough. As I previously mentioned, the player character is no longer an undead, but an unkindled in *Dark Souls III*.

This implies they cannot hollow any longer, and that they are not affected by the Darksign. The fourth ending of the game requires players to artificially (and magically) reinstate that Darksign, making them hollow once more. Two characters known as “Yoel of Londor” and “Yuria of Londor” bestow “Dark Sigils” upon the player character, which indicates that he/she is growing increasingly hollow. Moreover, the ending requires players to conduct a ritual analogous to marriage (the “Rite of Avowal”) with the character “Anri of Astora”. In reality, it is hard to complete all of these steps before confronting the final boss of the game, because if the player interacts with certain NPCs when he/she is not supposed to, he/she will trigger the questline to fail, preventing the fourth ending from happening. If the player does manage to follow the correct sequence of NPC interactions, the “Usurpation of Fire” ending will occur. The player character is then confirmed to be the “Lord of Hollows”, and revered by the other hollow/undead characters of the game as their rightful leader in the ending cinematic. The fire is absorbed by the player character. How this affects the cosmological order of the *Dark Souls* universe is, as of yet, a complete mystery, for no additional information is given. It is, in other words, up to the players themselves to provide a speculative outcome of this ending. Again, monsters, traps, 13 mandatory and 6 optional bosses impede the player’s progression, and all form part of the elaborate road of trials.

The aforementioned structures summarize the narratives of the *Dark Souls* games. However, I would argue that the road of trials does not limit itself to narrative interpretation. To repeat a previous citation of Campbell, the essence of the road of trials is “the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moment of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed –again, again and again” (p. 109). A crucial observation in this regard is that the player character is not the one who ventures down that perilous path, nor is it the player character that slays the dragons and passes the barriers over and over again. It is in fact the player himself/herself who accomplishes these achievements and manages to overcome the various obstacles along the path of the player character. Without the input provided by the players, there would be no progression whatsoever, and the heroes of the games’ narratives would not realize their goals. This is one of the central characteristics of the video game medium itself: the ergodic aspect.

5.2 The Ergodic

In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Espen Aarseth defines the ergodic as “nontrivial effort [...] required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1997:1). Swapping out ‘text’ for ‘game’ reveals the active endeavor expected from the player in order to wade

through the narrative structure of the game. As part of the Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference in 2002, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska argued in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces* (2002) that:

The video game player has to respond to events in a manner that affects what happens on screen, something not usually demanded of readers of books or viewers of films. Success often depends on rapid responses, effective hand-eye coordination and learned moves or skills effected through devices such as joypads and keyboards, or puzzle-solving skills. Games are, generally, much more demanding forms of audio-visual entertainment: popular, mainstream games require sustained work of a kind that is not usually associated with the experience of popular, mainstream cinema. It is possible to 'fail' games, or to be 'rejected' by them – to give up in frustration – if the player does not develop the skills demanded by a particular title, a fate that does not really have an equivalent in mainstream cinema. (p. 22)

In other words, video games require the player to grow accustomed with certain actions he/she is compelled to perform in order to advance in the game. Enactment, the physical performance of controlling and perfecting digital movements, is of absolute necessity to further the narrative. The road of trials as an obstacle course which needs to be overcome can thus also be regarded as perfecting the mechanical inputs of the player, the enactment. In *Dark Souls*, the player character as hero is only able to weather the road of trials if the player manages to execute the required actions. Additionally, the opposite also holds true: it is the narrative which motivates the player to continue his endeavors of manually controlling and carrying out certain actions. The narrative representation of the player character as a hero incites players to hone their mechanical skills. From a narrative perspective, the virtual world of *Dark Souls* needs a hero to surmount the looming dangers and decide the fate of the universe. The player feels as if his/her actions are meaningful within the boundaries of the virtual world, and the fate of that virtual world depends on whether the player can mechanically overcome the road of trials or not. Mechanical performance allows the player to better understand the hero structure; the hero structure incentivizes the player to hone his/her mechanical skills.

The mechanical aspect of the game, the ergodic, is in itself a road of trials for the player. In turn, that road of trials is echoed within the narrative structure of the game itself. The value of each is strengthened by their reciprocal relationship. It is thus a valid claim that the ergodic aspect of video games, the playing itself, contributes to the comprehension of

narrative/heroic structure of *Dark Souls*. This is especially relevant if the ergodic or physical action of playing intertwines with or in some way resembles the message communicated by the mythic structure. Consider the following citation, derived from *The Mind Behind Dark Souls* (2011) on IGN, wherein Keza MacDonald conducted an interview with the *Dark Souls I* and *III* lead developer, Hidetaka Miyazaki:

Dark Souls' genius – the hook at the heart of its gameplay philosophy – is the concept of death as education rather than punishment. Death can teach you something in other games too, but here it's an intentional learning device. It's a wonderfully elegant piece of game design, and one that I hadn't seen anywhere before *Demon's Souls*. [...] "But the main concept behind the death system is trial and error. The difficulty is high, but always achievable. Everyone can achieve without all that much technique – all you need to do is learn, from your deaths, how to overcome the difficulties. Overcoming challenges by learning something in a game is a very rewarding feeling, and that's what I wanted to prioritise in *Dark Souls* and *Demon's Souls*. And because of the online, you can even learn something from somebody else's death. I'd say that was the main concept behind the online, too. [...] The game focuses a lot on death, but what is death? What does it look like? What does death mean in this world? What does it mean to live and to die? That is something we discussed very closely. The story is about a fire in the world, a symbol of both living and death. The fire is what brought death to *Dark Souls'* world, but also the only hope for life. Demons, chaos, dragons, all of them are different incarnations and representations of our idea of death in *Dark Souls*."

Miyazaki here discloses how the mythic narrative and the mechanics of the game, the actions, share a similar philosophy. They contribute to one another –both player controls and the narrative add to the overarching mythic structure of the game. The ergodic aspect (the enactment) is interwoven with the narrative, thematic and mythic context.

Not only does this non-trivial effort of playing a game add to the uncovering or better understanding of the narrative mythic structure, it also carries other significant functions for the player. Eric Csapo (2005:49-50) asserts that sometimes psychological, historical or social causes motivate myth and ritual. He illustrates this by referring to Wittgenstein and Harrison, who give the examples of kissing a picture or tearing up a hurtful letter: the enactors do not believe they are actually kissing the person represented in the picture or tearing up the author of the letter, but rather achieve a psychological or emotional result from performing these

acts. In *Myth* (1940: 133), Laurence Coupe refers to Jacqueline Rose who claims that watching a performance of Hamlet induces in the spectator the same neurosis watched on stage (1986: 43). Extending that thought, playing video games can in some cases trigger very specific effects. The function of playing video games as such includes a wide range of emotional or mental responses that result precisely because the player partakes in the event; the ergodic requires the player to enter and act *as if* he were part of the game world. ‘As if’ is crucial in that regard: it is quintessential to remember that the player is conscious of the fact that the events he/she partakes in are virtual and not real; in other words, as I stated before, true player agency remains an illusion. Nonetheless, even though the player is aware of the fact that the world he/she is entering is not real and that his/her actions within the universe of the game do not have real consequences, it can still provoke emotional, psychological or social responses. The same holds true for some rituals: talking to the grave of a loved one does not mean one believes the deceased will talk back, it merely has a function to the one performing the action.

As such, another curious link between myth/ritual and narratives/video games is established. While active participation in ritual or roleplaying video games is required to act out or ‘complete’ their respective narratives, participants have no real impact on the outcome of the narrative. In both mythic narratives and the narratives of roleplaying video games, the outcome of the narrative is to a certain extent predetermined even though they both allow individual narrative adjustments. The central feature of the ergodic/enactment is that it allows participants to engage with the fictional narratives in a more involved manner by means of the illusion that their enactment is meaningful. In conclusion of this section, I believe the road of trials extends far beyond the merely narrative aspect of video games. It constitutes the essence of video games as an act which requires non-trivial player effort. To complete games (and advance the narrative structures they contain), the adequate mechanical input is of the utmost importance. This process in itself forms a learning curve, a road of trials, for players. The reciprocal relationship between the mechanical and the narrative aspect clearly illustrates the nature of video games as a patchwork medium.

5.3 Final Bosses and Interpretational Ambiguity

After players have endured the onerous hardships of the game and slain hordes of formidable enemies, they reach the pinnacle of the games’ narratives. This pinnacle encompasses the final bosses (Gwyn, Lord of Cinder; Nashandra; and the Soul of Cinder respectively) and the ending scenarios elected by the player. Campbell distinguishes between five different formal

categories to describe the climax of the hero's journey. He labels these "The Meeting with the Goddess", "Woman as the Temptress", "Atonement with the Father", "Apotheosis" and "The Ultimate Boon". In the case of *Dark Souls* it is redundant to discuss them separately with the exception of the ultimate boon. The other four categories are more easily analyzed in conjunction with one another. This is partially the result of Campbell's own vague description of these categories: the meeting with the goddess, atonement with the father and apotheosis are delineated ambiguously in terms of their function. Moreover, the category of woman as the temptress is essentially an inversion of the meeting with the goddess. The function Campbell assigns to these four categories is of a remarkably spiritual disposition. The meeting with the goddess symbolizes that the hero fully understand the essence of his adventure and the state of the world. Woman as the temptress signifies the inverse: the hero acknowledges the foul state of the world and the hero is expected to reject this condition if there is to be any hope of salvation or renewal. Atonement with the father suggests the hero has become aware of the falsehoods of the world and is henceforth himself/herself the authority which judges and renews the world itself. Apotheosis is the hero's mental attitude of peace, serenity and acceptance of the state of the world before the hero returns from whence he/she came.

Throughout *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell consistently explains the function of the formal categories he proposes from a spiritual/Jungian perspective. He uses enigmatic and cryptic language to explain equally confusing, intangible concepts. Campbell's obscure and nebulous language reaches an absolute peak in these four sections. As such, the previous explanations I provided for these four categories are what I make of Campbell's writings, but in truth these sections are marked by such elasticity and vagueness that it is hard to define in black and white terms what exactly their function is. Additionally, as Robert Segal points out during an interview conducted by Demian Farnworth (*The Beautiful Message Joseph Campbell Was Really Trying to Tell Us*, 2015), Campbell suddenly, without any explanation whatsoever, resorts to a male-centric view of the hero. When he talks of the meeting with the goddess, atonement with the father or especially the woman as the temptress, he does so from a male-centric perspective. In other words, he suddenly limits the scope of the hero figure to male characters. If the hero is feminine, a possibility which Campbell more than illustrates in the departure and return sections of his work, then a meeting with a goddess is, in essence, atonement with the mother, or so one assumes. A crucial element during these four sections is the idea that the hero's gender is opposite to that

of the entity he/she encounters; this is essential to how Campbell interprets the function of these sections.

This explains why it is hard to pin down which of the four sections one is dealing with when analyzing *Dark Souls* based on Campbell's structure. For example, when players encounter Gwyn, Lord of Cinder at the end of the first game, how one interprets this encounter depends on the gender of the player character. The *Dark Souls* games allow players to pick either a male or female player character, so if male player characters confront Gwyn, the encounter can be interpreted as the atonement with the father. If the player character is female, then atonement with the father is no longer possible because this formal category presupposes a same-gender relationship between Gwyn and the player character. This situation illustrates the importance of personal experience when one academically evaluates video games. The way a critic analyzes these four sections depends entirely on his/her own experience: was the game completed with a male character, a female character or both? No two playthroughs will yield identical results. Therefore, the application of Campbell's formal structure to *Dark Souls* is at times problematic.

In order to circumvent this issue I propose to analyze these four categories in light of their common function. In *Dark Souls*, all final bosses share an identical purpose: their defeat unlocks the full potential of the player character as a hero. When the player beats them, he/she gains the insight that he/she is subsequently in the same position as the final bosses once were. Moreover, players face a crucial choice: like the final bosses that have just been vanquished, the player is henceforth in control of the lifeforce, the energy of the *Dark Souls* universe (the first flame). It is the player's decision to determine the cosmological order of the universe, a decision that was previously safeguarded by the final bosses. The player character has surpassed the guardians of the old order and has acquired the power and right to shape the new order of the universe. In a way, the final bosses are inverted versions of the threshold guardian. Whereas the function of the threshold guardian is to mark the transition into the unknown, the mysterious and dangerous, that of final bosses indicates the hero/player character has successfully confronted the dangers and mysteries of the unknown world.

5.4 The Ultimate Boon

After the final bosses have been defeated (Gwyn in the first game, Nashandra in the second and the Soul of Cinder in the third), players decide the fate of the universe. At this point, the

energy of the first flame is in the hands of the player. This is the “Ultimate Boon” Campbell speaks of:

The boon bestowed on the worshiper is always scaled to his stature and to the nature of his dominant desire: the boon is simply a symbol of life energy stepped down to the requirements of a certain specific case. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that, whereas the hero who has won the favor of the god may beg for the boon of perfect illumination, what he generally seeks are longer years to live, weapons with which to slay his neighbor, or the health of his child. (p. 189)

The ultimate boon in *Dark Souls* consists of two complementary aspects. One is the physical manifestation of life energy, the force whose presence or absence governs the cosmological order: the first flame. In more general terms, this is the ‘reward’ gained by the hero after successfully overcoming the hardships of the game. The other aspect of the ultimate boon is the insight which the hero has acquired concerning the true nature of the first flame. The aforementioned citation by Campbell illustrates that the boon carries the potential of ‘perfect illumination’ but is in most cases utilized to accomplish trivial purposes. This dichotomy is reflected in the ending of the *Dark Souls* games: does the player rekindle the fire or let it fade? Moreover, which of the two options is the trivial one and which the favorable? To answer these questions, one must first understand the nature of the cosmological order of *Dark Souls*.

5.4.1 Cyclicity

A central notion within that cosmological order is the concept of cyclicity and the succession of subsequent “Ages”. The introductory cinematic of the first game immediately broaches this topic. In a distant past, the world was gray, in a state of permanent stasis (nothing ever changed) and was inhabited by everlasting dragons. For no explicit reason, the first flame suddenly came into existence. Out of the first flame, four Great Souls were created, which were given to Gwynn (Lord of Sunlight), the Witch of Izalith, Gravelord Nito (First of the Dead) and the fourth soul, the Dark Soul, was given to the Furtive Pygmy. Together these lords (with the exception of the Pygmy) slayed the dragons, broke the static character of the world and brought into motion the Age of Fire. After an era of prosperity, the first flame started to fade, and in a desperate attempt to extend the Age of Fire, Gwynn sacrificed himself to kindle the flame anew. Should he not have done so, the flame would have faded, ushering in the Age of Dark. Eventually, the rekindled flame would fade as well, and yet another hero

would have to rise forth to rekindle it, in an endless cycle of linking the flame. These are the events that precede *Dark Souls I* and which underlie all three installments of the series' plot. In each game, the quest of linking the flame (or deciding to let it fade) remains the central task of the player character.

Fire thus represents life force, but of whom exactly? The first flame is necessary to sustain the Age of Fire and the lords who rule this age. However, if it were to fade, the world would not fall in ruins. Just like the downfall of the immortal dragons and the Age of Ancients was not an absolute end, so too would the fading of the flame not herald the complete destruction of the world. It would simply usher in the next Age of the cosmological order, the Age of Dark. Crucial to note is that the game implies at various points that mankind (undead/hollows) is inextricably linked to the Age of Dark, similar to how dragons are linked to the Age of Ancients and lords are linked to the Age of Fire.

5.4.2 The Dark

As previously stated, one of the four Great Souls is the Dark Soul, claimed by the Furtive Pygmy. Contrary to the other three Great Souls, the Dark Soul actually grows stronger as the first flame fades, demonstrating the inherent connection between the Age of Fire/Age of Dark and the Great Souls/Dark Soul respectively. The Furtive Pygmy shattered his Dark Soul into countless fragments which would later become the essence of human beings, a theory which is supported by the consumable item in *Dark Souls I* called "humanity". This is an item that hollow characters consume in order to restore their lost power. Visually, the player character regains a normal human appearance, as opposed to the decomposing, rotten physical appearance of hollow characters. Mechanically, the health bar of the player character is restored to its original size when humanity is consumed. The icon which represents the humanity item depicts it as a dark glob or black sprite –approximately what one imagines to be a visual rendering of the Dark Soul. Consumption of this item benefits the player character, which establishes a link (based on the concept of darkness) between mankind and the Dark Soul.

Moreover, the dialogue between the player character and "Darkstalker Kaathe" reinforces the link between mankind, the dark and the Furtive Pygmy:

After the advent of fire, the ancient lords found the three souls. But your progenitor found a fourth, unique soul. The Dark Soul. Your ancestor claimed the Dark Soul, and waited for fire to subside. And soon, the flames did fade, and only dark remained.

Thus began the age of men, the Age of Dark. However... Lord Gwyn trembled at the dark. Clinging to his Age of Fire, and in dire fear of humans, and the Dark Lord who would one day be born amongst them, Lord Gwyn resisted the course of nature. By sacrificing himself to link the fire, and commanding his children to shepherd the humans, Gwyn has blurred your past, to prevent the birth of the Dark Lord. (*Dark Souls I*)

For that reason, the Furtive Pygmy is often regarded as primeval man or the first human being. In fact, the darkened silhouette in the introductory cutscene seems to be that of a human figure. Hidetaka Miyazaki himself commented on this topic, stating that “it isn’t written anywhere, but, the image is something like the human’s ancestor. It found the Lord Soul, fragmented it, and humanity is like the fragments of it. Kind of like an ancestor, yes. So the descendants, the humans, have a part of that Lord Soul” (English translation of an interview conducted for *Game no Shokutaku* in Japanese, 2011). All of these illustrations support the claim that, essentially, to be human means to be dark. In order for humanity to achieve its full potential and attain its natural condition, the flame needs to wither; for the Dark Soul fragments (human souls) to flourish, light needs to be snuffed out.

5.4.3 Waste of the Boon

With that in mind, linking the fire at the end of the game appears to be a foolish act when one considers the consequences for mankind, i.e. the countless hollows and undead, among which the player character himself/herself. If the player chooses to rekindle the flame, the Age of Fire would repeat itself, an event which in the canonical reading of *Dark Souls* has occurred numerous times. This is evidenced by the final boss of the third game, the Soul of Cinder, of whom I have already stated it is an amalgamation of all the characters who have linked the flame. Moreover, in the third game as well, the player character’s objective consists of retrieving the ashes of Lords of Cinder. These are characters who have once rekindled the first flame (hence the reference to cinders in their name); the final boss of the first game is named “Gwyn, Lord of Cinder”, a title that stands in contrast with Gwyn’s former title before he sacrificed himself to rekindle the flame (“Lord of Sunlight”, mentioned in the opening cinematic). It is thus clear that the flame has been rekindled numerous times. However, this act has not improved the state of the world; in fact, the living conditions of mankind in particular have worsened. Linking the fire does not remove the curse and throughout the course of the three games, most of mankind remains undead/hollow. Therefore, if the player at the end of each game chooses to rekindle the flame, they are committing a ‘trivial act’. The

true power or ‘ultimate boon’ available to the player character is only used to reinstate a cosmological order that has proven to be flawed, lacking and downright detrimental to the state of mankind. In this case, the ultimate boon, and by extent the knowledge and power of the player, is not utilized to its full potential.

The player’s second option is allowing the first flame to fade. The player rejects the fire and ushers in an Age of Dark. I have already provided a detailed analysis of why the prospect of darkness is favorable to mankind. This is the second out of two options the player has at the end of the first game, the second out of three options in the second game (downloadable content required) and the second out of four options in the third game. At first, one would presume this ending to have an enormous impact on the cosmological order of the world. Ultimately however, it does not. To illustrate that claim, consider the following excerpt from the “End of Fire”-ending of *Dark Souls III*: “The first flame quickly fades. Darkness will shortly settle. But one day, tiny flames will dance across the darkness. Like embers linked by lords past.” The narrative of the game itself affirms that whether the player rekindles or snuffs out the flame, his/her decision is not everlasting. I believe this particular narrative sample is the most lucid and explicit acknowledgement of cosmological cyclicity in *Dark Souls*. What is ‘the right decision’ at the end of the game if the universe repeats the pattern of light and dark endlessly?

Regardless of whether players elected the dark ending in *Dark Souls I* (and *II*), this decision has not impacted the cosmological order of the later installments. The world of *Dark Souls* is still in shambles in the second and third game; hollows and undead are in the same precarious position they have always been in, and no real progress has been made. In other words, if players decided to let the fade flame, their choice has had no lasting effect on the game worlds of subsequent games. Their choice is trivial. While this option demonstrates the good intentions of players as well as a thorough understanding of the cosmological order, application of the ultimate boon proves to bear no real significance. This is a clear example of how player agency is an illusion. While players may feel their actions impact the narrative of the game, in reality this is not the case. In hopes of ushering in an Age of Dark, players allow the flame to fade. In the second and third installments of the game, however, players find that the game world suffers from the same issues as before, regardless of the decisions players made before. Within the boundaries of the *Dark Souls* universe, player decisions only affect the world insofar as the games’ designers allow them to.

Hence, both renewal and abolition of the flame are equally trivial. Players have gained the illusory ‘freedom’ to do with the flame as they please. If they put in the effort to learn the lore of *Dark Souls*, then by the end of a playthrough, they are also adequately aware of the impact of the flame’s absence or presence on the game’s universe. This dynamic exemplifies how a game’s narrative structure (and the interpretation thereof) can help create or reveal the pre-defined nature of the game world. Knowing that player decisions are not authentic but just one out of a handful of options reveals the boundaries that are characteristic of virtual worlds.

5.4.4 Rupture of the Cycle

With that in mind, there is one particular ending of *Dark Souls III* (the only one in the entire series) that can be considered a ‘true’ application of the ultimate boon. This is the ending which I stated required a strict interaction pattern with the NPCs of the game. The player is only able to unlock the ending which is known as the ‘Usurpation of Fire’ if those requirements are met. Instead of rekindling the flame or snuffing it out, the player usurps the fire; he/she absorbs it within his/her own body. There is very little information to be found as to how this is possible and what the result of the aforementioned process is, so it is best to keep in mind that the following analysis is based on speculation and my own personal interpretation. Upon completing the game (assuming the aforementioned requirements were met), a cinematic is prompted, in which a voice says: “Ah, gracious lord... Make Londor whole.” The player character is revered as Lord of Hollows: visually, the cinematic depicts several dozen hollows bowing before the player character who has overcome the cyclicity of the universe and incorporated the power of the flame within himself/herself. The sun (which was reminiscent of the Darksign) previously had a red hue –after the player ‘absorbs’ the flame, it suddenly has a white hue. The ‘Londor’ of which the voice speaks is a society of hollows, a city-state as it were. Not much is known about Londor as of yet, but community forums speculate that the DLC of *Dark Souls III* will likely revolve around Londor and its society of hollows. Furthermore, a key NPC that helps players obtain the usurpation of fire ending, Yuria of Londor, whimpers the following upon dying in game: “Kaathe, I have failed thee”. The ‘Kaathe’ referred to is the same Kaathe from *Dark Souls I* which I already discussed, the NPC that incentivized players to break the cycle of Fire in order to initiate the Age of Man. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that this fourth ending, the Usurpation of Fire, holds a unique position in relation to the other ending scenarios. The Usurpation of Fire might actually be the only ending in which the player character effectively succeeds at rupturing the cosmological cyclicity and which consequently allows mankind to break free from the

chains of their curse of undeath. This ending implies that the ultimate boon is finally put to real use, and thus, this ending is the only one in the entire series that can be interpreted as a heroic conclusion to the player character's journey.

In summary, the formal category of 'the ultimate boon' illustrates several topics I have addressed throughout my dissertation. Firstly, what the 'right' or the 'wrong' decision is in terms of the ending depends entirely on the player's interpretation. The games do contain numerous hints (item descriptions, character dialogues, visual elements etc.) that convey information about the lore, but ultimately it is the player's responsibility to unearth that information and subsequently interpret it. To phrase it differently, which ending players pick and their understanding of those endings depends on the ergodic aspect of video games. What information players encounter throughout the game (and thus, how they understand the narrative) depends on the choices they make and how they interpret those choices. The value of personal experience in the interpretation of video game is therefore again validated. The non-trivial effort required of players is absolutely necessary if players want to understand the entire narrative structure. As such, the link between narrative analysis and the ergodic aspect of video games is reinforced, as opposed to the aforementioned ludologist perspective which would see them separated.

6. The Hero Myth in *Dark Souls* – Return

6.1 Absence of the Return Sequence

The final sequence of Campbell's formal structure is the hero's return. The hero, after successfully terminating his/her voyage into unknown lands and obtaining the power of the ultimate boon, returns to the normal world from whence he/she came and applies the newfound wisdom or power to alter the state of that normal world. To put it bluntly, the return sequence is simply not featured in *Dark Souls*.

The first argument which justifies that claim is derived from the narrative of the games themselves. After defeating the final bosses and choosing the fate of the first flame, the story ends. The player character is in no way seen to return to the land from whence he/she came, rather, he/she remains within the land of Lordran/Drangleic/Lothric. The player character has failed to dispell the curse and is still afflicted by the Darksign. The player leaves the kiln of the first flame, presumably in search of a cure, or simply unable to pick up the thread of normal life (that is, a life without the curse). In fact, continuing to live within these newfound worlds is a best case scenario –it is what happens when players choose to move “beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of dark” and reject the flame altogether in *Dark Souls II*. In the first installment, players only have two options, either burn themselves ritually to begin a new cycle of fire, or envelop the world in darkness. The former option prompts the death of the player character; the latter implies the player character revels within a world of his/her own making that is in accordance with the nature of mankind (i.e. living in harmony with ‘darkness’, as I explained earlier). In both cases, the player character does not return from whence he/she came. These two options are featured in all three installments of the game.

The final option is the fourth ending of *Dark Souls III*, where the player character becomes a Lord of Hollows. However speculative the future of the player character is in this scenario, it is highly unlikely he/she returns to his/her place of origin. First, the third game does not refer to any ‘outside’, normal world as opposed to the other two games (in the first game, the player character is moved to a designated prison for hollows, implying there is a normal world; the second shows the existence of a normal world in the opening cinematic). Secondly, the player character in the third game is resurrected: he/she was already dead. Therefore, returning to a place of origin would entail the player character returning to the grave. Thirdly, and most importantly, if the player character becomes the Lord of Hollows, his/her quest is not yet at an end. Although it is (not yet) featured in *Dark Souls III*, one can

presume there is still a future for the player character. It would not make much sense for the player character to absorb the power of the flame and subsequently not do anything with it. As a leader of the hollow race and by extent mankind, it would be illogical for the player character to abandon his/her people in order to go back to a place where the curse is absent altogether. In whatever way the three games conclude, there is no indication of nor any reason for the player character to return to the normal world.

On the other hand, it could be argued Campbell's hero never truly returns to the normal world either. Robert Segal, a renowned Campbell critic, alleges in *Theorizing about Myth* (1999) that:

Campbell's hero never returns to the everyday world. He surrenders to the unconscious. Yet Campbell himself demands the hero's return to the everyday world. How, then, can his hero really be spurning it? The answer is that the world to which Campbell's hero returns is not really the everyday world. It is the strange, new world, which turns out to pervade the everyday one. No separate everyday world exists. The everyday world and the new world are really one: "The two worlds, the divine and the human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other –different as life and death, as day and night ... Nevertheless ... the two kingdoms are actually one ... the values and distinctions that in normal life seem important disappear with the terrifying assimilation of the self into what formerly was only otherness" [Campbell, 1949]. The hero need never have left home after all: "Hence separateness, withdrawal, is no longer necessary. Wherever the hero may wander, whatever he may do, he is ever in the presence of his own essence –for he has the perfected eye to see. There is no separateness" [Campbell, 1949]. (p.128)

Related to *Dark Souls*, such a reading of the return sequence signals that there was never really an outside world to begin with. The virtual world of the game series is in its entirety pervaded by magical, mystical elements such as the curse. The supposed outside world, as illustrated by the opening cinematic of *Dark Souls II*, is not truly separate from the unknown world that follows: the player character becomes afflicted by the curse when he/she is still within the normal world. If the two worlds were truly separate, then the curse would only manifest itself after the character crosses the threshold. Still, one is under the impression that there is a normal world outside of the lands of Lordran/Drangleic/Lothric. The reason for that is linked to player activity. Players feel as if a new story begins at the exact time when they pick up their controllers. Combined with the fact that very little, if anything at all, is known

about the life of the player character before the curse, this leads players to believe that there is a marked difference between ‘the time before’ and ‘the time after’ players assume control over their characters. In this case, players confuse the necessity of non-trivial player effort to advance the narrative (the ergodic) for discontinuity of the narrative world when players are not present. However, from a narrative point of view, the world from where the hero originates is just as much defined by magic and mystery. Whether the player actively experiences this world during his/her playthrough or only hears of it in the introductory cinematic does not change that it forms part of a single, cohesive fictional universe to which the same magical laws apply. Within the virtual boundaries of the *Dark Souls* universe “there is no separateness” as Campbell phrases it. From this perspective, there is no return sequence because there is nothing to return to: the hero has always remained within a singular world, which is simultaneously unknown and normal.

It is possible to analyze the lack of a return sequence in relation to the liminoid nature of video games. *Dark Souls* is a virtual world that does not exist in outer reality; it is confined by the boundaries of virtual space. As I pointed out in the chapter on the liminoid, virtual worlds are to a certain extent modeled after ‘real’ structures in order to facilitate recognition of and identification with the ‘real’. On the other hand, video game structures partially deviate from the ‘real’; this is why players know that what they are experiencing when playing has no impact on outer reality. Essentially, video games are a medium that combines both fictional and real structures. The latter motivates players to engage with the virtual world of the game; the former constitutes the core of what Jan Simons called “models of behaviour” –the imaginary aspect is what grants players the freedom to experiment. It is that imaginary aspect which allows RPGs to incorporate fantastical elements without crippling the credibility of the game world. Obviously, players are aware that these fantastical elements only exist within the boundaries of the virtual world: it is self-evident that such fantastical elements do not exist in outer reality. Elements such as magic, ghosts, gods, demons, resurrection, the curse of undeath and others only exist within the boundaries of *Dark Souls* (and other fictional narrative structures). In that sense, it is impossible for the hero to return to the normal world.

As I pointed out in the previous paragraph, the normal and unknown world are one and the same in *Dark Souls*. If the hero were to venture to a world that is clearly separate from the one players face, it would imply the existence of a second, more ‘real’ world that still exists within the boundaries of virtual reality. It would imply that two clearly separated worlds exists within the same virtual universe. This would rupture the unity of the imaginary *Dark*

Souls universe. The liminoid aspect of games draws its strength precisely from the intertwinement of imaginary and normal (i.e. virtual and 'real') structures. I believe the return sequence of the hero's journey is thus omitted because it would otherwise hamper the liminoid character and 'virtual credibility' of the game.

7. Context, Participants and Motifs

In *Theorizing about Myth* (1999), Robert A. Segal illustrates how Campbell's theories are flawed (p. 138-141), claiming he operates dogmatically, ignores rival theorists, does not explain or provide justification for his claims or even contradicts himself as to the meaning, function and origin of myth. He argues circularly and deems myth self-validating, much like "a Christian fundamentalist urges everyone to accept the bible because it is true" (p. 140). Maybe most importantly, he is "lopsidedly universalistic", and "brazenly ignores lingering differences". Campbell thus arduously searches for similarities and disregards the differences between myths. While the study of similarities between mythic structures has its benefits, so too does the study of how they deviate from one another. Regrettably, Campbell does not utilize his vast knowledge of individual myths to analyze in what ways they are different.

Moreover, Segal alleges that "Campbell uniformly ignores the adherents of myth" and "never asks who invents and uses myths". The individual context of myth creators and myth consumers is irrelevant in Campbell's eyes, and I believe this is a crucial flaw in Campbell's logic. Myths are primarily cultural artefacts created by and consumed by human beings, yet Campbell only considers myth in relation to 'The Human Being'. Regardless, Segal says, "despite these many criticisms, Joseph Campbell merits much praise. [...] Campbell's work is an important introduction to myth. It is simply not the last word" (p. 141). The application of Campbell's hero structure to video games has already proven to yield interesting results. This chapter to further supplement those insights by addressing the topics of context, participants and motifs.

7.1 The Medium is the Message

A first element which makes the narrative of *Dark Souls* unique in comparison to other hero myths is the medium itself. As stated earlier, video games are a patchwork medium that present their narratives (if there is one) only when the required non-trivial effort is met. Players interact with the world in a more direct manner than when one for example reads a book or watches a film. In the case of *Dark Souls*, players shape the physical appearance of the hero (i.e. the protagonist/ player character), choose a background story for their character out of a limited set of options and pick a preferential playstyle at the start of the game. As the hero overcomes numerous obstacles, he/she gains experience (in the form of collecting souls of fallen enemies) and it is the player who decides in what way their character grows stronger. Heroes in written/oral traditions are much more static in that regard because they leave less

space for individual modification of the hero's traits or characteristics. In a considerable portion of roleplaying games (and sometimes in games pertaining to other genres) the player is able to determine the hero's traits or characteristics more freely. Players are given a number of choices (which is not infinite but limited by the laws and restrictions of the game's code) to determine the 'statistics' of their hero. In *Dark Souls*, players can choose to increase the physical prowess of their character by levelling up the 'strength', 'dexterity', 'vitality' or 'vigor' statistic. Alternatively, they could level up their character's 'intelligence' or 'attunement' statistic to create a wizard-like hero that is proficient at the magical arts.

Moreover, the *Dark Souls* series allows players to collect a wide variety of weapons and armor sets with which they can equip their hero. Player characters can utilize bows, axes, shields, two-handed swords, magical spells, helmets, daggers and many more items related to combat to aid them on their journey. The decision of which of these items the hero uses is in the hands of the player. All of this not only determines the way the player mechanically fights hostile NPCs, it grants the player character his/her own unique personality, traits, defining armor and combat style as a hero.

Each player's created character is thus unique, which again illustrates the value of personal experience when analyzing video games, as well as the value of the ergodic in the video game medium. It is the ergodic aspect which allows players to decide who the hero of the game will be out of a plethora of possibilities, all of which drastically alter the personal experience of the player. This also illustrates the freedom granted by the liminoid or what Simons calls 'models of behaviour': *Dark Souls* incentivizes experimentation by granting players the possibility to model their own hero. Thus, the characteristics of the medium itself account for the dynamism of the hero figure in RPGs.

7.2 Mythopoesis

Segal (1999: 135-141) indicates the importance of the myth maker and the myth consumer. This is an aspect of the social function I referred to when I introduced the concept of myth. Interesting to note is that the players of *Dark Souls* are at the same time myth makers and consumers. As I explained in the previous paragraph, players decide who the hero of their own personal story is. They also decide which optional bosses to fight, which areas they linger in or which ones they skip, and non-trivial player effort is an absolute necessity to advance the narrative. While game designers create the boundaries, the laws, the restrictions and possible paths of the hero myth structure, the players themselves also play a crucial role

in determining which of those paths their hero follows. In other words, game designers are myth makers because they define the formal aspects of a video game; players are myth makers because they define what Jan Simons called the “colour” of the mythic structure. The following paragraph serves as an illustration of that claim.

Video games exist which consciously allow players to create new in-game content. A well-known example is the *Elder Scrolls* series created by Bethesda. Players are given the tools to create their own mythic structures should they so desire. Assuming mythic structures are created (for example, when players create a quest that follows Campbell’s road of trials), then players become myth makers themselves. Such games authorize individual player ‘adjustments’ to the liminoid world –Hong rightfully claims that mods (player-made software modifications) do not endanger the mythic structures of the game, as the games themselves are an interlacement of various cultural bits and pieces. In fact, it is very much in line with the philosophy of the liminoid that the player contributes to the universe of the game: the space for experimentation these games allow, along with their patchwork nature incentivizes player input within the universe of the game.

In other words, liminoid games motivate mythopoeic player activity, not only because they themselves are the result of mythopoeic construction by the developers, but because their very nature and core philosophy falls in line with such behavior. Mythopoeic player activity, or possibility thereof, is reminiscent of what Laurence Coupe (1997) termed “radical typology”: the inherent characteristic of myth to be reinvented, retold, readjusted according to historical, cultural and social context. One could even argue that it is the ‘liminoid nature’ of radical typology that explains the open-endedness and adaptability of myth. Coupe refers to Marina Warner who asserted that: “Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account” (1994:8). Warner’s comment applies equally to video games, insofar as she suggests myth is open-ended, dynamic and always subjected to mythopoeic variation. In that regard, there is a link between Coupe’s radical typology, Simons’ models of behaviour and Hong’s liminoid.

The liminoid aspect of video games grants players the space to virtually experiment with or enact certain narrative structures. Based on Simons’ definition, RPG narratives thus act as models of behaviour: within the boundaries of the video game, players can flesh out their own character in a variety of ways. They can interact with the virtual environment and create a story of their own preference within the confines of the liminoid. The boundaries and core narrative pattern built by the game designers may resemble parts of Campbell’s hero

structure, but the freedom within that liminoid construct allows players to deviate from Campbell's monomyth. Narrative experimentation or inclusion of "models of behaviour" as an inherent characteristic of liminoid video games thus exemplifies Coupe's radical typology: it is the individual player's freedom of narrative choice that reinvents, retells or readjusts the core pattern of the hero myth.

In addition to player-made content, there are other cases that clearly illustrate how liminoid freedom and narrative experimentation occasionally come together to enrich the pre-existing mythic structure of the game. An example can be found in *Dark Souls*: the game includes a number of pre-set physical gestures that cover a wide range of emotional responses. As the game does not allow direct communication between players (no voice communication), players employ the gesture system to 'communicate' with each other when they play together online. One such gesture, labeled "Praise the Sun", has made a reappearance throughout all three of the games. The gesture consists of stretching one's arms skyward, which is basically all there is to it. However, the community of *Dark Souls* uses said gesture on many occasions. The origin of the gesture is traced back to *Dark Souls I*, where a non-player character called "Solaire" teaches you to use it. Taking into account that Solaire is one of the few friendly and cheerful characters the player meets early on, the gesture he teaches is commonly used as a representation or symbol of that friendliness and cheerfulness. It is widely practiced as a sign of companionship between players, and invoked to inspire them or boost their spirit. Such motivation is well-received seeing that one of the core mechanics of the game revolves around exploring an unforgiving world and fighting difficult boss battles. In fact, using the emote to instigate a feeling of perseverance and camaraderie ties in with the general context of the game in terms of 'overcoming certain death'. A second interpretation consists of analyzing the gesture as a sign of bravery, of heroism. Despite the ubiquitous threat of the 'road of trials', using the gesture shows that the player retains a positive attitude and is confident of success in the long run. The gesture itself does not inherently possess these connotations; it is the players, the community as a whole who arbitrarily and conventionally decide its meaning and context. "Praise the Sun" as a gesture has thus become a ritual among *Dark Souls* players when meeting each other, fighting each other or supporting each other. As such, the gesture is a prime example of the mythopoeic activity players indulge in without breaking the rules of the governing mythic paradigm nor do they transgress the virtual boundaries imposed on them by the game designers.

7.3 Make-believe

The previous section sought to explain how players assist in the making of myth and how that mythopoeic activity is linked to a broader context of video game analysis. In the following section, I will discuss what the relationship is between myth and video game players as consumers of myth.

Robert Segal's contribution to *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2006) offers an incisive perspective on that relationship. In his essay *Myth* (p. 337-355 in the *Blackwell Companion*), the final subsection Segal examines connects the concept of 'play' and 'myth'. Segal refers to D.W. Winnicott, an English child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose analysis of play resonates with how Segal interprets myth:

For Winnicott, play is *acknowledged* as other than reality: children grant that they are just playing. But play is no mere fantasy or escapism. It is the construction of a reality that has personal meaning. To pretend that a spoon is a train is to take a spoon and turn it into a train. Far from the projection of oneself onto the world, as for Freud and Jung, play is the construction of a distinct world. As Winnicott continually declares, play is "creative". Far from the confusion of itself with reality, play demarcates the difference. Play grants itself the right to treat a spoon as a train, and a parent is barred from asking whether the spoon really is a train. Once play is over, the train is again a mere spoon. (p. 352)

What is striking is that Winnicott's explanation of play is closely related to what Hong calls the liminoid. Both are "acknowledged as other than reality", both are forms of reality construction that bear personal meaning, and both are marked by the necessity of "creative" human agency (p. 352). One could even argue that in defining the concept of play, Winnicott is practically delineating the concept of the liminoid although he adopts different terminology. Segal points out that Winnicott labels play a "transitional activity": not only does it produce a transition from childhood to adulthood, but also from the inner world of fantasy to outer reality (p. 352). Extending that logic, when video game players enter their virtual worlds, a similar process occurs. Players are free to interact and explore these virtual worlds of video games as they see fit. They apply their inner world of fantasy to 'outer reality', i.e. the virtual world of the game which acts as a temporary, fictional substitute of the real. The only difference between Winnicott's conception of play and how it applies to video games is that video games are 'limited'. The software laws and restrictions of a video game only allow

players to enact their inner fantasies insofar as the pre-determined boundaries of the video game permit them to, whereas Winnicott's definition of play applies to the human imagination and is thus practically unlimited and endless. To phrase that differently, the medium of video games imposes restrictions on players: when players fantasize about shooting guns to kill monsters, they cannot act out this inner world of fantasy within the virtual world of *Dark Souls* because the game does not contain guns. If a child plays soldier, any object can be transformed into a gun as long as the child acts as if the object is a gun. Video games are subjected to technical restrictions, but human imagination is endless.

Segal continues: "A transitional activity or object [...] does not confuse the symbol with the symbolized" (p. 352). The imaginary or virtual is not mistaken for reality; people engaging in play or video games know that what they are experiencing is not reality, but pretend that it is for the time being. According to Segal, something is "transitional" in this regard when it "straddles the inner and the outer worlds. It partakes of both, while remaining distinct from both" (p. 352-353). In liminoid games, Hong asserts, "the player is never required to believe, but to only act as if they believe enough" (p. 43). I argue that statement applies equally to transitional objects or activities. Both video games and Winnicott's concept of play are cases of what Segal calls "make-believe" (p. 353). Additionally, Segal alleges that myths are also a form of make-believe. Scholars have debated over whether people who participate in myth and ritual consider that myth/ritual to be real or imaginary (for example, Paul Veyne's *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constituante* (2014) examines this topic). Segal proposes a third possibility –that of make-believe: "To view myth as make-believe is to allow for a third way of characterizing myth. The choice is not simply either delusion or reality. The third option is make-believe. Taken as make-believe, myth can again be true about the world, and not just about the social world but even about the physical world" (p. 354). In other words, myth, play and video games are connected in terms of how all three weave together parts of reality and imagination into a new distinct liminoid realm –the realm of make-believe.

I suggest that people who participate in myth therefore, similar to people who play video games, interact with a realm of make-believe. These people engage with what Simons calls models of behaviour. The realms of make-believe (which I argue form the common ground between video games and myth) provide ample space for the people interacting with them to narratively discover, enact or explore social principles, morality, ideas or fantasies in a safe environment that bears no impact on outer reality. I do not claim that myth and video

games are exactly alike; not by any stretch of the imagination are video games and myths identical. Myths play a much more profound role in the lives of human beings than video games. I am merely attempting to analyze what connects them, and in doing so, I hope to establish a better understanding of both concepts.

7.4 Identity Creation and Identification

The concept of make-believe is particularly crucial when one examines how players interact with and relate to their player characters. I believe that, as a direct result of the make-believe nature of video games, players not only shape but also identify with the characters they create. In *Dark Souls*, there is a distinct reason why the game developers allow players to physically design their character, to assign his/her strengths and weaknesses and determine which armor and weapons he/she will utilize. It is the same reason why games such as *Dark Souls* are called roleplaying games: the principle which governs these games is identification.

Roleplaying games such as *Dark Souls* are designed to facilitate player identification with their character. A myriad of customization options are given to players which allows them to determine the physical appearance, the playstyle, the narrative structure of the game, all of which facilitate identification. However, these tools still require the player to engage in make-believe behaviour in order to be effective. Players must temporarily suspend the awareness that the world of the video game is imaginary and not real, and instead act *as if it were real* in order to identify with their characters. During my own playthrough of the *Dark Souls* games, I spent much time thinking about which statistic of my character I wanted to improve or which armor or weapons I imagined my character would use. I also spent much time trying to piece together the lore of the NPCs, the bosses, or locations I encountered. I believe the reason for all of this is because I interacted with the virtual world through the eyes of my character and identified with the character I myself created. Players identify with their player character and are therefore genuinely concerned and invested in him/her for as long as they engage in make-believe behaviour, that is, for the duration of the playing session.

Playing video games is entirely optional, and the reason why anyone would play them results mostly from their entertaining character: in contemporary Western society, video games are commodities which are created and sold as a form of entertainment. Like reading, exercising, or any other form of leisure activities, playing video games can be a relaxing, enjoyable experience. Identity creation plays a pivotal role in enhancing the entertaining aspect of video games: to some people assuming the identity of someone else, e.g. a fictional character, has an unwinding effect as a result of detaching oneself from reality, from 'the real

self'. Some people enjoy acting or dancing for a similar reason. In video games, the possibilities are endless, mainly due to the virtual nature of the medium, which is only restricted by the narrative and technical framework of the game itself. The player actively controls the character he/she plays as, whose identity he/she assumes, acting and thinking as if he/she were the character himself/herself. Again, the emphasis is on 'as if', for the player is always aware the gameworld is not reality.

Regardless, the connection between identity creation and player agency is still one of the principal factors why people enjoy playing video games and consider it a form of entertainment. Tanya Krzywinska's contribution to *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: a World of Warcraft Reader* (2005), edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, asserts that:

Although it is still the case that many game worlds make use of mythic structures (such as the hero quest, frontier myths and myths around the 'fall' of a culture), the mode of delivery, and therefore the nature of our engagement is altered, and players are, of course, agents in the world. Nonlinearity and player agency therefore make for a significant material difference to myth-based narratives found in other arenas. [About mythic structures:] these can provide a pattern (or archetype) that Raph Koster (2005) claims is core to the pleasure of playing games. [...] With ancient precedents and popular articulations, the hero quest figures strongly in the collective consciousness and thereby provides a shorthand way of setting expectations and a proven mode for encouraging identification. As well as enriching the text, I would argue that playing as or identifying with a hero, fictional or otherwise, affords a vicarious yet pleasurable sense of agency, the sphere of which is extended and exploited by many games. (p. 126- 127)

As Krzywinska contends, identity creation is a process that is facilitated by inserting mythic structures. Krzywinska refers to the hero myth as a particularly recognizable paradigm which facilitates the identification process of the player. Such a claim revitalizes Campbell's theory even though one should keep in mind that not all mythic narratives pertain to the hero paradigm. Moreover, the lion's share of video game narratives are not myth-based altogether. However, games that do contain such myth-based narratives render identification easier. In turn, it is that identification that leads to enjoyment and the notion that video games are primarily a form of entertainment. As I pointed out, identification is never absolute: the player is always conscious of the make-believe nature of the gameworld. Players are fully aware of

the fictionality of their character, but for the duration of playing suspend that awareness for the sake of enjoyment and pleasure.

Krzywinska also suggests “nonlinearity and player agency constitute a crucial difference to myth-based narratives found in other arenas”. With that statement, Krzywinska presents the ergodic aspect (player agency) and the experimental/’model of behaviour’ aspect (nonlinearity) as core characteristics of the video game medium. More importantly, she claims that these aspects are precisely what makes mythic narratives in video games different from myth-based narratives in other arenas. While I agree that both concepts play a key role in the nature of the video game medium, I believe ‘mythic narratives in other arenas’ do show similarities. As an example, some myths are enacted in rituals. Narratives are thus ‘acted out’ in these rituals in a manner that is similar (though not identical) to how players act out narratives in video games. I do not wish to imply there are no differences between the two, for there are many: as an example, ‘traditional’ myths and rituals have the power to cement social practices or even social order itself. Video games do not have this power. One trait which they do share, however, is that both consist of a textual component (a narrative) and a practical component (enactment/ergodic). In both cases, the practical component adds to the understanding of the textual component. Enacting a ritual or playing a roleplaying video game offers additional insight into the fictional texts they refer to. Identification with the fictional text as a result of active participation occurs both in the enactment of rituals and the playing of a game. How myth/ritual and narrative/video games are different is a subject that unfortunately exceeds the limits and scope of this dissertation.

7.5 The Motif of Death

As I hope to have proven at this point, video games allow players the necessary freedom to experiment with and interpret virtual structures that are to a certain extent modeled after recognizable, ‘real’ structures. Video games occasionally adapt recognizable formal structures such as the hero myth to facilitate experimentation and identification. Aside from formal structures, they at times also rely on motifs or themes that are particularly important in ‘real’, contemporary society. In other words, video games may choose to include subjects that are relevant in the sociocultural context in which the games appear. This is what renders each mythic narrative unique. What grants *Dark Souls* its unique ‘colour’ is the series’ attitude toward the themes of death and humanity.

The universe of the *Dark Souls* games plays with the concept of death in many different ways. The player character is undead, dying or resurrected. A central aspect of the game, for which it is notorious among gamers, is that the series is mechanically challenging and will prompt death upon death of the player character, each time emphasizing this by showing 'You Died' on the screen in red capital letters. The development team is quite aware of the importance of death within the universe of their game: when a revised version of the first game was published which included all DLC, it was dubbed the "Prepare to Die"-edition. Indeed, the game seems obsessed with the concept of death: a central trope within its plot is what the curse of undeath really is what differentiates life from death. Player character death in *Dark Souls* complements the central narrative theme of death: when the player character dies and consequently respawns, what happens is merely a miniature variant of the life/death cycle on a cosmological scale. For an unfathomable amount of time, the concepts of life and death (and the endless repetition thereof) have played an enormous role in all facets of human society. Death as a central theme in *Dark Souls* proves that, even in this day and age, man's fascination with death is still as prevalent a notion as ever. Despite titanic leaps in science, we are still no closer to answering the questions we have obsessed over for so long. What is the meaning of life? What is or comes after death? Does one's life and death hold any significance or are they microscopic parts of an eternal cosmological cycle?

Earlier, I referred to the article *The Mind Behind Dark Souls* (2011) featured on IGN, wherein Keza MacDonald conducted an interview with the *Dark Souls* creator, Hidetaka Miyazaki. Miyazaki explained how "the game focuses a lot on death, but what is death? What does it look like? What does death mean in this world? What does it mean to live and to die? That is something we discussed very closely." This indicates Miyazaki and the development team consciously chose to centralize the theme of death. The citation illustrates that death remains a central concept in the life of modern man. Additionally, the implementation of death as a central gameplay mechanic reinforces the thematic value of death even further. But how exactly does the development team of *Dark Souls* value the concept of death? How do they narratively incorporate their stance on death in their game? The answer to that question is found in the games' narrative structure. However, much depends on how individual players interpret those narrative traces. As such, the following evaluation of death in *Dark Souls* is unavoidably rooted in personal experience and interpretation.

I believe that death in *Dark Souls* is initially represented quite negatively. Death is closely linked to violence: almost every single NPC in the game is hostile towards the player

character, which leads to a 'kill or be killed'-scenario. Death is the punishment for being inferior in combat –this applies to players too. Hence why players occasionally quit the game in frustration after being repeatedly killed. The “YOU DIED” message players receive after dying reinforces that feeling: the message adds insult to injury.

From a visual perspective, death is ugly, loathsome and horrid. A considerable amount of monsters are skeletons, rotting corpses, maggots, infected or dead animals, ghosts. As I already illustrated, several bosses (particularly the core bosses needed to advance the game) are 'reincarnations' of bosses that were featured in earlier installments. What should have been an end to the suffering of these bosses often renders them even more malfigured, hideous and wretched than before. For example, the implied reincarnation of Gravelord Nito from the first game is The Rotten in the second game. Nito is the lord of death, wears a black, shadowy cloak, wields an enormous scythe and his body is composed of several dozen skeletons. His appearance is that of a king, and the location where he resides is named “Altar of the Gravelord”. Nito is thus characterized as a macabre boss, yet graceful in his own right. On the other hand, Nito's supposed reincarnation, The Rotten in *Dark Souls II*, is not at all graceful. Its body is composed of dozens of rotting corpses stitched together (hence the name of the boss) and it wields a dirty, bloodstained cleaver. It has no legs and instead squirms around using the arms of rotting corpses. The arena where The Rotten is found echoes Nito's boss room, albeit a defiled, corrupted version of it. A second example is that of Dark Sun Gwyndolin and Aldrich, Devourer of Gods which I discussed in the 'belly of the whale'-section. This does not apply to all bosses, but a recurring tendency is that whenever bosses 'reappear' in later games, they are more abhorrent and foul than before.

Furthermore, the theme of death permeates the aesthetics of the various zones and areas in the game. The world itself is dying. Cities and towns have been abandoned and are sprawling with demons and undead. Sacred shrines have been defiled. Natural environments such as swamps have become poisonous. Colours in the game are often bleak (shades of black, gray, dark green and blue are frequently used) and it is uncommon to encounter flashy, bright and radiant colours. Death is in that regard valued (and represented) negatively. It is characterized as something that leads to despair, ugliness and coldness. The player's potential self-sacrifice at the end of the game ultimately leads to nothing: death is thus pointless.

One could also interpret death from a second perspective. There is honour in death for those that face it courageously: several NPCs (Siegward of Catarina, Anri of Astora etc.) help the player on his/her quest and assist in defeating bosses. From this point of view, death can

serve as a test which brings out the best in people and forges bonds of friendship. Choosing to burn oneself to rekindle the first flame is a selfless, altruistic act. Moreover, ‘true’ death grants serenity and peace to those who obtain it, freedom from the curse of undeath and hollowness. In this sense, death is liberating and there is a certain allure to it. While on the surface, death is primarily represented in a negative manner, it does contain a silver lining. Death connects all human beings, and everyone is destined to perish one day. Rather than persevere in that pessimistic outlook, the game subtly suggests that it is precisely because of death that life gains value. Amidst the desolation, there are moments when one receives the help of other players or cheerful NPCs. More than once I interrupted my character’s journey to gaze at the dreary landscape and marvel at the beauty of this dystopian world. Death saturates the game world, which is why such brief moments of beauty and respite are all the more cherished. The idea that death can add to one’s appreciation of life is a lesson that one can carry over to the real world as well. Moreover, the series heavily suggests death is simply a part of the cosmological order and cannot be avoided. Gwyn was the first to rekindle the first flame in a desperate attempt to keep death at bay and extend his Age of Fire. This act is later on referred to as the “First Sin”. The second game even has an entire DLC that examines this issue in greater detail; the DLC itself is called “*Scholar of the First Sin*”. In other words, Gwyn’s attempt to cheat death is not only futile, it is regarded as a sin, as something which is immoral.

7.6 Darkness and Humanity

Intimately related to death is the theme of humanity. *Dark Souls* retains a much more cynical outlook on what it means to be human in comparison to the theme of death. A crucial factor that supports this claim is that, as I have already illustrated in the ‘ultimate boon’-section, humanity is intricately tied to darkness.

In most video games (and generally in a wider sociocultural context as well), darkness is related to evil whereas light is related to good. *Dark Souls* on the other hand adopts a more vague and ambiguous stance on the connotations of darkness. Darkness is occasionally described as a warmth and form of serenity that soothes the human soul. The NPC “Felkin the Outcast” in *Dark Souls II* sells dark-magic spells known as ‘hexes’ (as opposed to the regular white-magic ‘sorceries’). When asked about his past, Felkin responds: ““What drew me to the Dark... I.. I.. I... I do not know. Hexes are... are more than mere tools to me... I feel affinity... and warmth... Something universal, nostalgia... even... Those who discover Dark... realize this... And... they never come back.” One of those hexes is ‘Whisper of Despair’, which reads:

“A hex that releases verbose darkness. [...] The Dark blankets the world in black. A thing of tranquility, a thing serene.” In this regard, if darkness corresponds to humanity, then being human is still evaluated in a positive manner.

In most cases, however, darkness retains its more traditional connotation of evil. The *Dark Souls I* spell ‘Dark Fog’ reads: “Although Dark Fog is, in theory, relatively close to humanity, it also happens to be a terrible poison for humans. Perhaps it reflects man’s cruelty against his own.” Strangely enough, while darkness constitutes the essence of human beings, it has the power to horribly transform them, both physically and mentally (for example the *Dark Souls I* boss ‘Manus, Father of the Abyss’ or the *Dark Souls III* boss ‘High Lord Wolnir’). If humanity is equivalent to darkness, then mostly it is represented in a negative manner. The consumable item ‘humanity’ which restores the player character’s lost power illustrates this: the essence of what makes one human is here displayed as a measly clump of darkness that is to be consumed like a piece of candy. Additionally, human souls are all fragments of the primordial Dark Soul. If the darkness within a human being (the Darksign) causes the curse of undeath, then being human *is* the curse. The objective of the player character is thus to transcend the bonds of human existence and find a greater purpose in life: this is the ultimate boon I have discussed. Only when the player character succeeds at finding that greater purpose or enlightenment (symbolized by the first flame) does his/her existence become meaningful. However, the player discovers rekindling the flame or letting it fade ultimately has no impact: the choice is insignificant. As such, human existence itself is portrayed as meaningless, which is an extremely pessimistic mindset.

With that in mind, the only potentially positive reading of humanity is the fourth ending of *Dark Souls III*, the Lord of Hollows ending. The usurpation of the flame symbolizes that players acknowledge the futility of their actions. Neither letting the flame fade or rekindling it has any real impact on the cosmological order of the universe. Therefore, the fourth ending does not even attempt to influence it. Instead, the player character ‘consumes’ the flame; this represents the insight that such attempts at altering the cosmological order are futile. To phrase this differently, usurpation of the flame entails that the player character has come to terms with the futility of human existence. He/she has accepted the human condition, the curse of undeath, as a part of the cosmological order itself. The player character expands his/her intellectual horizon and becomes enlightened (symbolized by the usurpation of the flame). Rather than reject his/her hollow nature and resolve the curse of undeath, the player character embraces it and becomes the Lord of Hollows. A simplistic interpretation of this is

that man should stop brooding over the meaning of human life and the essence of human existence. From Software seems to imply that human existence is pointless, and that one should simply accept this fact in order to fully experience life itself while it lasts.

In a time where mankind is becoming increasingly aware of its position in the vast, infinite universe, such a message holds great value. Rather than fret over the (in)significance of human existence, one should be glad to be alive and marvel at the beauty of life itself. By means of that message, the narrative of *Dark Souls* exhibits a function similar to that of ancient myth: this is the sacred/spiritual function I referred to. It helps humanity understand its role and position in the world and in the universe. Ironically, in a contemporary postmodern society there is no 'meaning of human existence' in absolute terms; the meaning of life is what mankind perceives and constructs it to be. The deeper philosophical message *Dark Souls* conveys to the player is thus a glorified 'carpe diem'. *Dark Souls* urges players to abandon existential preoccupations and to see life for the wonder that it is.

8. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to establish connections between myth and video games, for which I mainly focused on narrative structures. In particular, I relied on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) as a blueprint of the mythic hero narrative, which I applied to FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* video game trilogy. However, I first needed to validate the use of my methodological tools, as these have been criticized in various academic circles.

I pointed out how narrative analysis contributes to the understanding of video games, even though ludologists (who generally adopt a 'purist' stance toward video game analysis) discredit that technique. I suggested video games are a patchwork medium which occasionally incorporate narrative structures to enhance the experience of gaming. Roleplaying games are particularly dependent on that narrative structure. The central concept that supports this idea is Jan Simons' "models of behaviour" (2007). This suggests that narratives function as mechanisms of experimentation. I added that an important aspect of that experimentation is the 'colour' of narratives: this aspect accounts for the differences between individual interpretations of a text. In video games, this narrative colour converts into personal experience –Stephanie Jennings (2015) asserts that it is unavoidable to incorporate subjective elements in video game analysis as the act of playing is the result of a highly personal experience. Personal experience itself is linked to the freedom video games (especially roleplaying games) grant players to experiment. In other words, not only do narrative structures function as models of behaviour, so do roleplaying games in general.

Narrative experimentation is a crucial element that relates video games to myth. On one hand, it reveals the liminoid (Sun-ha Hong, 2014) character of (roleplaying) video games: virtual worlds are constructed that combine fictional and 'real' elements. Players are required to act *as if* the virtual world were real even though they know it is not –D.W. Winnicott (1982, 1987) sees this as an essential characteristic of play in general. Robert Segal (2006) defines this as "make-believe" behaviour and suggests it is a central feature of myth aside from play. Players rely on that make-believe attitude to become invested in the narrative structure; it is what allows identification with player characters and what causes enjoyment. Aside from further illustrating the importance of personal experience, make-believe also indicates the active effort that is required of players to insert themselves within the narrative. This effort extends to narrative progression as a whole: non-trivial player effort is of absolute necessity to traverse the narrative structure. Without player interaction, the narrative would be

inaccessible. This links narrative structure to the mechanical requirements of video games, which Espen Aarseth (1997) labels “the ergodic”.

In that regard, myth and video games intersect. Active participation (the ergodic) allows participants of both myth and video games to better access, understand and identify with their respective fictional narratives. Participants do not believe in the ‘realness’ of these fictional narratives, but are willing to suspend that belief and engage in make-believe behaviour for the duration of the enactment. As such, myth and RPGs are marked by a dependency on both real and fictional elements which together form a liminoid realm. Additionally, how participants interpret those mythic narratives depends on sociocultural context and personal experience.

To support these theoretical claims, I have analyzed the *Dark Souls* series in relation to Campbell’s hero monomyth. I have examined the similarities between both narrative structures in order to support the aforementioned ideas. However, their differences are equally important. This is a crucial flaw in Campbell’s theory: as Segal (1999; 2006) points out, Campbell’s universalistic approach disregards individual context, which can be just as informative. After all, the differences between narratives are what make them unique. This again proves the importance of ‘colour’, personal experience and individual interpretation.

I attempted to supplement the narrative analysis by discussing the role of individual players in the creation and interpretation of mythic narratives. I discussed mythopoesis in *Dark Souls*, as well as my personal interpretation of two key themes in the series: death and humanity. In doing so, I reviewed the unique elements of the series’ narrative after pointing out how it relates to the more widespread mythic structure of the hero narrative. In fact, the unique narrative elements of *Dark Souls* add to the overall value of the hero myth. Retellings, adjustments or reinventions of mythic narratives *add* to the overall value of that mythic narrative –this is what Laurence Coupe (1997) labels “radical typology”.

Myth and video games are both more than simple stories and entertainment; detailed analysis reveals they contain much more depth than meets the eye. Like other cultural artifacts, they are the very embodiment of human spirit, creativity and culture. That quality alone justifies the academic attention they receive, as their study continues to teach us more about ourselves, our imagination and the world we live in.

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