

PRAISE THE SUN: THE GAME *DARK SOULS* ILLUMINATED BY RITUAL THEORY

by

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ABSTRACT

AARON GONZALES. Praise the Sun: The Game *Dark Souls* Illuminated by Ritual Theory
. (Under the direction of DR. WILLIAM E.B. SHERMAN)

By focusing on the social meaning-making of ritual Catherine Bell paved the way for new avenues of exploration for religious studies. My paper pulls this theory into a realm of playful activity unique to the digital age: the world of video gaming. More specifically, this project applies Bell's method to the video game *Dark Souls* to show how elucidating this kind of analysis can be when discussing video games. I am not drawing from ritual theory to argue that *Dark Souls* is religious; I am showing how religious studies can help us understand social happenings outside of the category of religion. Applying ritual theory to this evidence led me to form the following argument: by approaching *Dark Souls* as ritual, we see that the game can open imaginative frames where players socialize values such as production, knowledge and honor through activity.

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Introduction: Gaming as Ritual

Catherine Bell's theory of ritual provides a method of analysis that reveals what rituals achieve socially. By focusing on the social meaning-making of ritual Bell paved the way for new avenues of exploration for religious studies. My paper pulls this theory into a realm of playful activity unique to the digital age: the world of video gaming. More specifically, this project applies Bell's method to the video game *Dark Souls* to show how elucidating this kind of analysis can be when discussing video games. I am not drawing from ritual theory to argue that *Dark Souls* is religious; I am showing how religious studies can help us understand social happenings outside of the category of religion. In discussing a video game artifact, I will have to detail the designs and experiences within the gamespace through my perspective as a player of the game. However, readers likely want more than just my word on what *Dark Souls* is, so I also provide videos from YouTube and web posts from Reddit and Steam to show the activity and socialization I discuss. Applying ritual theory to this evidence led me to form the following argument: by approaching *Dark Souls* as ritual, we see that the game can open imaginative frames where players socialize values such as production, knowledge and honor through activity.

This thesis draws upon two other ritual theories that differ from Bell's yet still prove useful for uncovering the social meaning-making of *Dark Souls*, so approaching the material with a sectioned format will help me keep everything organized. After the introduction I will explain what *Dark Souls* is for any readers who either have not played the game or are unfamiliar with video games in general. I try to lay out as clearly as I can the elements of the game which will be relevant later. Following that the thesis will move into a synopsis of the theories that play a role in the paper. These theories from Bell, Georges Bataille and Joseph Laycock provide a toolset for digging into three ritualized activities: the cyclical progression structure, the interface

between a player and *Dark Souls* and the player-versus-player dueling. Through those three sections of analysis, I will show the activity-driven meaning-making amongst the social bodies involved with the game.

Bell presented her concept of ritual in her 1992 book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, and a brief overview will help explain the basics of this project before I discuss this text more in-depth later. She begins the book with criticisms of ritual theories as they were in 1992. Prior theorists took a different approach to ritual that centered on the dynamics between categories of beliefs and actions.¹ These two categories were separate entities, with thought and belief actualizing in action and ritual. Even when theorists attempted to integrate such dichotomies, they did so without questioning whether those distinctions had validity in the first place. They were seeing their theory because that was what the theorists were looking for. As she puts it: “Descriptions of how rituals work have been constructed according to a logic rooted in the dynamics of theoretical speculation and the unconscious manipulation of the thought-action dichotomy is intrinsic to this construction.”² She proposed an alternative theory that spoke with a different set of terms: rather than distill ritual down to belief turned to action, Bell’s ritual analysis looks at the activity people do as part of the formation of socialized bodies and the creation of power dynamics.³ No part of her theory claims that religion is required for ritual. Bell’s breaking open of the category of ritual allows us to uncover how ritualized activities function without limiting the analysis by staying within the bounds of previously constructed categories.

¹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19-21.

² Ibid., 25.

³ Ibid., 104 and 197.

Another aspect of Bell's theory that helps to unravel *Dark Souls* is the way activity becomes ritualized through a demarcated opposition where ritual participants privilege one over the other.⁴ This demarcation happens in three directions: a vertical hierarchical opposition, a horizontal us-vs-them opposition and a horizontal central-vs-local oppositions.⁵ I will unpack the three kinds of demarcation in Bell's part of the theoretical section. During these privileged activities in privileged spaces, bodies are placed into relationships with each other—and, in the case of video games, that occurs with controllers and screens mediating the encounters. In these mediated encounters values are socialized by actors and thinkers together. Bell's contribution to this paper is visible in the questions I am asking, what kind of worldviews are being socialized in the meaning-making activity and how does that activity make meaning?

However, this is not meant to be a demonstration of how to precisely apply Bell's theory. She warns of the artificial nature of dichotomies and categories, yet I turn to Georges Bataille whose writings regularly speak of dichotomies between human and animal, production and expenditure and many others outside the scope of this project yet overlap frequently. I argue that whether or not Bataille's dichotomies are artificial, they provide insight into the game's productive and sacrificial qualities. The same goes for Laycock. He provides readers with categories of imaginative meaning-making, and I would not have seen such activity in *Dark Souls* if not for this theory. Yet, regardless of the deviation from Bell's method, he's helped uncover aspects of the relationship between the ritual body and the ritual space within the game.

Like Bell, I see fertile ground in breaking apart constructed categories—video gaming and ritual—to see what one can tell us about the other. While some choose to look for religion in video games, I aim to treat games and religion, specifically ritual, as similar things to uncover

⁴ Ibid., 74 and 80-81.

⁵ Ibid., 125.

what video games do.⁶ I am not the first to see religion as gaming, Oliver Steffen has investigated the spirituality of god-mode games and Rachel Wagner suggests scholars change the serious/playful dynamic to earnest/not-earnest with video games as her artifact.⁷ Both took the play of games and pulled from Religious Studies to say something new about the activities taking place within digitally-created virtual spaces.

If ritual theories can help elucidate video game activity, I will apply them to a kind of game that players commonly hold on a pedestal—FromSoftware's "soulsborne" games. Every game the studio has released since 2009's *Demon's Souls* is included in this informal category, named as such because, after that game's successor, *Dark Souls*, FromSoftware made a game named *Bloodborne* that was remarkably like the *Souls* games. Thus, "soulsborne" is the studio's signature style that has now spread to their games *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, *Dark Souls II & III*, and the current king of the RPG genre, 2022's *Elden Ring*. Whether or not these games are anything special, players treat them as such. For proof only look to *Elden Ring*, the game with the most game of the year awards ever, with 331 media outlets picking this game to be the year's winner.⁸ Soulsborne games often factor into people's "best games" lists.⁹ For whatever reason,

⁶ Frank G. Bosman. "The Lamb of Comstock": Dystopia and Religion in Video Games," *Religion in Digital Games: Multiperspective and Interdisciplinary Approaches* 5 (2014): 162-182; Richard Ferdig, "Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Videogames," *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014): 68-85.

⁷ Oliver Steffen. "'God Modes' and 'God Moods': What Does a Game Need to be Spiritually Effective?" *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 214; Rachel Wagner, "The Importance of Playing in Earnest," *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 197-214.

⁸ Paul Tassi, "'Elden Ring' Just Passed 'The Last of Us Part 2' in Total Game of the Year Awards," *Forbes*, January 4, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2023/01/04/elden-ring-just-passed-the-last-of-us-part-2-in-total-game-of-the-year-awards/?sh=5398555833e8>.

⁹ Miller, Greg and Brian Albert on IGN channel, "Why Dark Souls is My Favorite Game of All-Time," February 17, 2014, 2:36, <https://youtu.be/8lsIDOGAkrM>; Guydieed5, "Dark Souls is the Best Game of the Decade," Reddit, December 18, 2019. 825 upvotes, https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/ecajd4/dark_souls_is_the_best_game_of_the_decade; Andy Chalk, "Dark Souls named 'Ultimate Game of All Time,'" *PC Gamer*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/dark-souls-named-ultimate-game-of-all-time/>.

many in the video game community only talk about this game in a language of hyperbole.¹⁰ Sure, no opinion is ever unanimous, and there are players that see the series as nothing but more of the mainstream video game world. While looking into those people could be elucidating, or the players claiming this game is exceptional, I would like to see what the game, featuring both players and developers, *does* and ritual will help me with that. What are the activities at the source of the praise? Ritual theory will help me discover that.

Proving the *specialness* or the degree of impact of *Dark Souls* would be foolhardy and ritual studies provide an alternative way of approaching games that leads to insights into the socialization taking place. Bell's theory alone does not explain everything about the ritualized activity in the game, so I also turn to Georges Bataille and Joseph Laycock to elucidate more fully what *Dark Souls* is doing to its players and what those players do within that environment. I want to know more about *Dark Souls*' allure by analyzing the socialization, demarcation of authority, and negotiations of that authority. Through the application of those three ritual theorists, I found that developers and players structure the activity in *Dark Souls* in ways that demarcate the game, privileging some activities as sacred, with players having the ultimate power in that privileged space.

¹⁰ The Act Man, "Why is Dark Souls a Masterpiece?," July 24, 2018, YouTube video, 47:27, <https://youtu.be/LqhtBsxAZNo>; CircleToonsHD, "How Dark Souls Perfected Difficulty in Video Games," December 11, 2020, YouTube video, 6:05, <https://youtu.be/YL4OSaSF88E>; ; Misshapen Chair, "Dark Souls is a Perfect Game that I Have Zero Issues With," May 11, 2022. 5:46. <https://youtu.be/8hDy9CC8znI>; "Dark Souls was so Superior to any Other Game, that it Completely Ruined Everything Else," *Reddit*, October 9, 2022 https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/j8b6ad/dark_souls_was_so_superior_to_any_other_game_that/.

What is *Dark Souls*?

A description of *Dark Souls* will help readers understand the activity that is my artifact. FromSoftware's game plays with genre trends, so to describe *Dark Souls* I must provide an overview of both the game itself and the genres it subverts.

The Action Roleplaying Game genre is a packed one with common formulas for how content and rules are structured.¹¹ FromSoftware, a Japan-based developer designed *Dark Souls* as a third-person action-roleplaying game (RPG). The game is third-person because the camera in the 3D environment peers over the player's back.¹² This is a typical camera angle for action games because it allows the player to view their acting virtual body in its entirety while keeping the view aligned with the on-screen avatar's orientation. With a first-person game the camera is aligned with that avatar's eyes, allowing for a more immersive gaze but at the cost of full-body awareness.¹³ All that the game renders upon the screen in first-person games are usually hands holding tools or weapons, while *Dark Souls* renders a player's body in its entirety. That body is active, *Dark Souls* can be considered an action game because of this emphasis is on combat over story, navigation, agility, strategy, etc. The goal in such games is to fight through hordes of enemies. This can get repetitive for players, so many action games nowadays are designed with RPG elements. The games in the RPG genre feature character development of some kind. Usually there are many kinds of characters to play that represent a range of jobs. For example, in *Final Fantasy XIV* players can be a Warrior, Paladin, Dark Knight, Samurai, White Mage, Black

¹¹ Steam, the largest catalog for PC games, has over 5,800 ARPG games to choose from: Steam. *Steampowered*. Accessed April 16, 2023. <https://store.steampowered.com/search/?tags=4231&supportedlang=english&ndl=1>.

¹² Here is a quick *Dark Souls III* clip that shows how the camera moves in third-person games: Sleepyzets, "How 10.000 Hours in Dark Souls look like," February 9, 2022, YouTube video, 1:26, <https://youtu.be/eXcoQb729N4>.

¹³ Here is another short clip that shows the first-person perspective in the ARPG *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*: LyleShnub. "Environment Artists were on One that Day I Skyrim Gameplay Highlights." March 22, 2023. YouTube short, 0:19. <https://youtube.com/shorts/L7EN14xkLmU?feature=sharel>.

Mage, or one of the twelve others.¹⁴ However, I have played hundreds of games labelled by gamers and marketers alike as RPG and it really seems all it takes for a game to fall into the category is some kind of method for making one's avatar better, usually through levelling up and getting equipment that increase stats. *Dark Souls* features roles to play, referred to as "builds": one can be a strength build with large weapons, dexterity build with lighter ones or a bow, and the magically inclined can be a sorcerer pyromancer or a priest who each have their own respective spells.¹⁵ There are also methods through which players can make these builds more powerful: leveling-up (which comes with minor stat increases) and the acquisition of newer and better equipment as one plays. Thus, according to the unwritten rules which define this genre, *Dark Souls* is a member of the ARPG category and is considered as such in game stores.

FromSoftware designed the soulsborne series to upend the norms of ARPGs, allowing the possibility of privileged demarcation by way of novelty. FromSoftware emerged on the gaming scene at a time when most of the big products were aimed at the widest audience possible by allowing the player to choose an "easy" or "very easy" mode. The celebrated ARPGs released the year before *Demon's Souls* were *Fallout 3* and *Devil May Cry 4* and both feature a easy-mode options as do the other entries in their respective series.¹⁶ The unofficial king of the genre at the time, *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, has a slider where one can alter the difficulty at any moment in a menu that players can pull up with a press of the start button.¹⁷ The soulsborne games defied

¹⁴ SquareEnix, "Job Guide: Actions Overview—Final Fantasy XIV Online," *Finalfantasyxiv*, Accessed on April 16, 2023, <https://na.finalfantasyxiv.com/jobguide/battle/>.

¹⁵ DVS Gaming, "A Guide to Starting Dark Souls and Character Builds," accessed April 16, 2023, <https://dvsgaming.org/2021/11/a-guide-to-starting-dark-souls-and-character-builds>.

¹⁶ Playoff-P, "Is it Bad that I Play on Very Easy?" *Reddit*, July 13, 2018, 60 upvotes, https://www.reddit.com/r/Fallout/comments/8yphcm/is_it_bad_that_i_play_on_very_easy/; "Best Difficulty for DMC4?" *Reddit*, February 14, 2019, 5 upvotes,

https://www.reddit.com/r/DevilMayCry/comments/aqnqew/best_difficulty_for_dmc4/.

¹⁷ David Kwon, "Gaming - Oblivion Difficulty," April 29, 2009, YouTube video, 3:07, <https://youtu.be/RdCRbjvgpI4>.

this trend and provided no difficulty options whatsoever. The games market themselves as experiences that do not hold the hand of the player. The infamous slogan for the 2011 follow-up to *Demon's Souls*—*Dark Souls*—simply states, “Prepare to die.”¹⁸

Dark Souls will be the object of analysis here, although the entire soulsborne series could undergo this same ritual analysis and come up with similar observations given how similar the games are. *Dark Souls* is the centerpiece of this thesis because it was more popular and refined than *Demon's Souls*, there are many more people talking about it. The evidence store is massive in regard to conversations about this single game as readers can see that from the bibliography.

I also chose *Dark Souls* because it means the most to me, and it was my introduction to FromSoftware. When the *Demon's Souls* sequel was released, I knew of it from video game TV shows, which were a thing back then on the channel G4TV. My favorite show was X-Play and I remember the hosts Adam Sessler and Morgan Webb raving about *Dark Souls*. I found the idea of a game that lacked a tutorial or difficulty adjustments intriguing due to the novelty, but I had no desire to try it at the time. I preferred easy and cinematic game experiences. One night, on a whim, my friend and I picked up a copy from a Redbox. The difficulty lived up to the hype, but the mysterious setting drew me in as well.

Dark Souls presents a narrative structure that is less complete than a typical story found in ARPGs and other genres. As YouTuber The Act Man described it after completing the game: “I felt like I hadn’t scratched the surface, like I just played through the whole thing wearing a blindfold. I must have missed something, something that explains what the hell I was doing!”¹⁹ While most large fantasy games have deep lore and enough lines of dialogue to fill a book, the

¹⁸ Bandai Namco Entertainment, “DARKSOULS - ‘Prepare to Die’ Trailer,” May 20, 2011. YouTube video, 1:12. <https://youtu.be/AGEPwOKE8AI>.

¹⁹ The Act Man, “Why is Dark Souls 1 a Masterpiece?” July 24, 2018, YouTube video, 1:00-1:08, <https://youtu.be/LqhtBsxAZNo>.

Souls series reveals its narratives in fragments with minimal text and dialogue. *Fallout 3* has 40,000 lines of dialogue.²⁰ In *Dark Souls*, players enter this strange story with a cutscene that plays upon starting a new game, the only video of its kind within the experience.²¹ All other cutscenes are nothing more than a boss introduction or traveling. This opening scene is the only one with exposition, but it is also incomplete. The game suggests that, at the beginning of time, eternal dragons made up the entirety of existence. But a flame appeared and brought with it foundational dichotomies such as: “Heat and cold; life and death; And of course, light and dark.”²² From the dark, “they” arise and seize the “souls of lords” from the flames.²³ Four god-like beings are created in the process (all are bosses in the game): Nito the First of the Dead; The Witch of Izaleth and her Daughters of Chaos; Lord Gwyn, a bearded lightning God not unlike Zeus or Odin; and the forgotten “furtive pygmy.”²⁴ Together they destroyed the dragons with the aid of Seath the Scaleless, a massive drake that betrayed his own kind. An age of fire began, but now the fire is fading, and some people are being born with an accursed mark on them. That’s all the information that the intro provides the player before thrusting them into a world of constant combat where the rare friendly character offers nothing but mutterings. The “furtive pygmy,” the ancient being who took the eponymous Dark Soul is not explained in any way until *Dark Souls III*.²⁵ Bosses and enemies just attack without a word. To see how fragmented *Dark Souls*’ narratives can be, one needs only look at the Crestfallen Warrior. He broods by the first fire the

²⁰ Patrick Garret, “Over 40,000 Lines of Dialogue in Fallout 3,” *VG247*, July 8, 2008, <https://www.vg247.com/over-40000-lines-of-dialogue-in-fallout-3#:~:text=Speaking%20in%20a%20fan%20interview,Thanks%2C%20CVG>.

²¹ MichaelXboxEvolved, “Dark Souls – Opening Cinematic HD,” October 6, 2011, YouTube video, 3:36, <https://youtu.be/yIFzJ3wRgHw>.

²² *Ibid.*, 0:34-0:46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1:00.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:08-1:44.

²⁵ This reddit user trying to piece together all the info on the furtive pygmy shows just how much effort some players put in to put in to fill in the blanks: Draxoneli, “I Have a Theory ‘who is the furtive Pygmy,’” *Reddit*, June 9, 2020, 2,300 upvotes, https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/gzhyvk/i_have_a_theory_who_is_the_furtive_pygmy/.

player encounters and appears in three separate scenes (a lot for this game series). First, he provides the player with their main goal:

You must be a new arrival. Let me guess, fate of the undead? Well, you're not the first... Let me help you out. There are actually two bells of awakening: one is up above in the undead church, the other is far, far below, in the ruins at the base of Blighttown. Ring them both and something happens. Brilliant, right?²⁶

That is *Dark Souls*' vague call-to-adventure. "Fate of the undead" and "bells of awakening" are both brand new terms, and he does not explain them at all. After exploring far enough to ring both the bells players can return to him where he will provide meager congratulations followed by a complaint that something smells. He announces that he will investigate said smell, and when the player encounters him for the third time it is in an ancient city beneath the deepest part of the crypts, far later in the adventure. The Crestfallen has no words for this meeting; he just attacks. The character you play offers no exposition at this point or any other: they do not even speak. So, one explores the end of the age of fire with few clues as to what has occurred between the present and the beginning of the age where dragons and gods made war. They awaken in an asylum and are confronted by demons and zombies—two categories of beings that made no appearance in the introduction.²⁷ Yet, it seems that civilization once thrived in the land of Lordran: abandoned medieval towns cover a good chunk of the mountain the game takes place on. The inhabitants have vanished and the fiends are all that is left. All the space FromSoftware freed up by burying the lore gives players the chance to build the myth themselves.

That freed up space where most games have story also contains a hardcore gaming challenge serving as the foundation for the ritual activity to follow. Basically, *Dark Soul's*

²⁶ Annoying Killah, "Dark Souls: Remastered I Crestfallen Warrior Questline." May 28, 2018. YouTube video, 0:40-1:30. <https://youtu.be/xmbdPWk9KeI>.

²⁷ Dodgy Dodgson, "Lets Play Dark Souls Part 01 Undead Asylum," December 17, 2015, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/hgozccF3yLw>.

content is more of a *game* than a movie or book, making it unlike other fantasy RPGs and more like the “dungeon crawler” subgenre which includes games almost exclusively fighting encounters.²⁸ In *Dark Souls* Instead of a village being filled with dialogue and intrigue, it will just be hostiles.²⁹ The primary goal is to reach the end of the game by pushing past every area. When one dies, they return to the nearest bonfire at which they rested and every enemy, except for bosses, is resurrected.³⁰ This is a form of checkpoint: a moment in gaming that a player will return to upon failure. It is why someone can fail in a game and not have to start over from the very start. The player presses ever-forward, from bonfire to bonfire, until a path is cleared to the final encounter with Lord Gwyn. At the simplest level, *Dark Souls* is mathematically difficult: the enemies subtract much of the player’s health while losing less of their own, and the bosses can eat dozens of heavy strikes before falling. Shifting around the settings which determine how damage is calculated is one of the primary methods through which other games allow for an alteration of difficulty in other games. Easy-mode players are as tough as a tank and their enemies are paper. The opposite can be said of hard-modes. *Dark Souls* stays on hard mode with no option to change the calculations in one’s favor without earning it through many level-ups and upgrades. However, even when a player has thick armor and immense vitality, a lowly rat can still cut them down if not careful.³¹ This leads to a space where safety is a rarity outside of the nooks and crannies where bonfires provide shelter. The math not being in the player’s favor would not make for a compelling challenge on its own. To increase the challenge, enemies move quick and alter the timing of their attacks. The same enemy might have the ability to leap

²⁸ The *Diablo* series kickstarted the ARPG and dungeoncrawler genres: Blizzard Entertainment. “Diablo III: Gameplay Trailer.” January 21, 2010. YouTube video, 19:20. <https://youtu.be/Q17FDfU7-ds>.

²⁹ FightinCowboy, “Dark Souls Remastered – Walkthrough Part 2: Undead Burg,” May 23, 2018, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/9qF1bQY1ayE>.

³⁰ Ibid., 3:00.

³¹ Tyrannicon. “Dark Souls Death Montage!” April 23, 2014. YouTube video, 0:53-55 <https://youtu.be/XtH2UlrdZn0>.

forward and strike quicker than a player can react or offer a delayed attack after an early dodge. Many of these enemies will populate a zone, requiring the player to strategically approach each encounter to avoid being overwhelmed.³² However, it is not just enemies the player has to worry about, for the environment is a deadly one filled with traps, ambush spots and steep drops.³³ All of this is made worse by the fact that whenever a player dies their souls, the currency they need for upgrading, fall to their feet. The *Dark Souls* player must then fight their way back to their dropped resources without dying. Death in such moments means the souls are lost for good.

The setting borrows from the horror genre, adding cultural codes associated with dread—look to the demons, possessed humans, and lifeless masks in the clips linked in the footnotes—to the already tense combat. The difficult creatures between the bonfires feature freakish anatomies that signify the monstrous with their impossible forms. FromSoftware only deserves partial credit for the well-received monster designs, for most of the hostiles are ripped straight from the pages of Kentaro Miura's *Berserk*.³⁴ The recently passed artist left behind a disturbing fantasy-epic where sexually violent demons stalk the characters through a hopeless representation of medieval Europe.³⁵ Miura's twisted imaginings, minus the pornographic content, haunt the paths between the fires and the most fearsome of all are the bosses. Thirteen of these powered-up monstrosities stand between the player and the ending of the game. A highlight would be the Gaping Dragon, waiting at the end of a deadly labyrinth of sewer tunnels.³⁶ Its torso is one giant mouth with hundreds of teeth, and players must be wary not to stand in front of it. Some can be

³² FightinCowboy, "Walkthrough," 1:00-1:15.

³³ Tao, "Dark Souls – Fast and Easy Sen's Fortress," June 11, 2014, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/7nvc3BsX3pI>.

³⁴ Richter, Jon, "How Berserk Inspired Dark Souls, Bloodborne, and Sekiro," November 15, 2021, <https://gamerant.com/berserk-dark-souls-bloodborne-sekiro-inspiration-influence/>.

³⁵ A post about a famous Miura splash-page from a climactic moment in *Berserk* that showcases the author's overwhelming style (No Sexually Explicit Content): The_Lazarus007. "Berserk 'writing down the Eclipse.'" *Reddit*. June 1, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/Berserk/comments/8nqhqk/berserk_writing_down_the_eclipse/.

³⁶ Boss Fight Database, "Dark Souls: Gaping Dragon Boss Fight (4k 60fps)," September 4, 2015, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/kVk4vtLEEV8>.

less disgusting, like the Moonlit Butterfly.³⁷ This boss floats far above the player and sends down homing masses of energy one must dodge within a window of less than half a second.

Fortunately, the colossal insect comes down to rest after a few volleys. *Dark Souls* bosses may be difficult, but they always have their openings. While this is happening, soft music plays that is both haunting and serene. The Butterfly's soundtrack is in sharp contrast to the pounding orchestral scores of the other bosses.

Dark Souls is a multiplayer game in which all but the player-versus-player "invasions" are optional. When a player consumes an item that lets them regain "humanity," they will notice the appearance of glowing kanji marking the ground where players left them.³⁸ By touching one of these marks that player can be brought into the world. They can help until someone dies or beats a boss, but the only available communication takes place in gestures.³⁹ Instead of summoning a silent friend, a player can touch a red-colored marking and summon a hostile player for a fight. Such encounters will be discussed in further detail later, here I am merely highlighting social structures within the game.

As a complete package, *Dark Souls* is a fast-paced and challenging experience that plays with the genre expectations of players. While ARPG fans are familiar with difficulty settings, expansive narratives, and clear directions, *Dark Souls* forgoes all that and the result is a game that sits oddly within its genre. Each ritual analysis below evaluates the structure and meanings of departures from the norm, because these departures draw particular attention to certain choices made by the developers and players of *Dark Souls*. The theorists that follow helped me see what

³⁷ Shirrako, "Dark Souls Remastered – Moonlight Butterfly Boss Fight (1080p 60fps) PS4 PRO," May 25, 2018, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/pSWM8q3qnDQ>.

³⁸ Fauntus, "The Language of Dark Souls ep 4: Summon Sign Script," March 8, 2017, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/P9XRUTuW5do>.

³⁹ Soulslayer434, "All 15 Gestures in Dark Souls 1 Remastered," June 10, 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/hK9aiBJfN8>.

those choices were, what they meant and what they are doing. Those involved in *Dark Souls* ritualization choose the rules and possibilities of gameplay, and in doing so they generate values of production, honor, time, the body. I would not have found the means to identify or the language to describe the consequential social practices inside and around *Dark Souls* without the following ritual theories.

Three Key Theories

The point of this section is to show that the application of ritual theory to video games is a valid method due to the way they show what video games are doing while also providing a gamified way of looking at ritual. Catherine Bell's touchstone text on ritualization provides an opportunity to determine the ritualized aspects of a video game. Her goal in upending the typical Western views on ritual was to show how rituals are not merely "beliefs put into practice," as previous scholars had suggested. Opposed to a functional or expressive view on ritual, Bell instead turns to activity: "A Focus on activity itself as the framework within which to understand ritual activity illuminates the complex nature of power relations."⁴⁰ She characterizes the rituals with their complex power relations as structures of alternative symbols given meaning by social actors, like a designed video game with its distinct systems that makes meaning when player and developer connect through gameplay.⁴¹ Gamers can play to make meaningful values but only within the structure the developers provided, giving both parties an influence over the proceedings. For example: in the narrative-focused RPG game *Disco Elysium*, through dialogue structures the player can choose whether to be a communist, a capitalist, or a mad drunk.⁴² In the process, the developers condition their meaning for what these ideologies value and how they operate. The communist choices involve loud criticisms of the capitalist system and the re-framing of general acts of kindness as part of a greater social project. The developer seemingly has dominance in the relationship, only allowing the player to work with the props and dialogue they choose: there can be only one prescribed brand of communist. Yet, despite the control the thinker/developer has, the actor is required for any ritual activity to take place at all, and there is

⁴⁰ Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 197.

⁴¹ Bell, 31-32.

⁴² Gamespot, "How Awful can you be in *Disco Elysium*?" April 9, 2021, YouTube video, 12:00, <https://youtu.be/5xijCtokEK4>.

no stopping a player from developing their own spin on values about production and ownership as they play.⁴³ The two rely on one another to make the ritual space a social interaction, but the player has the ultimate power.

Ritualized activities are activities that both ritual planners and actors demarcate and privilege like how gamers play in a specific way within the designs of a developer's game. Here Bell discusses the three kinds of oppositions that form the demarcation:

Three interrelated sets of oppositions in particular reveal the more systematic dimensions of ritualization: (1) the vertical opposition of superior and inferior, which generates hierarchical structures; (2) the horizontal opposition of here and there, or us and them, which generates lateral or relatively egalitarian relationships; and (3) the opposition of central and local, which frequently incorporates and dominates the preceding oppositions.⁴⁴

For gaming, while one is in the act, they are vertically positioned above other ways of leisure. In their free time players choose to dive into a game as opposed to a book, movie or going outside etc. Going into the game context there is also privileged activity in the ways to play. The *Metal Gear Solid* series of games has an opposition present between lethal and non-lethal.⁴⁵ The design of the game privileges non-lethal over lethal: by capturing sleeping targets one can convince them to join the player's personal army. The levels are scored by the program, and non-lethal actions award more points. Yet, the player has the ultimate power in deciding exactly what play is privileged. Non-lethal takedowns leave sleeping bodies on the ground that can wake up and alert their friends to the player's presence. Some players privilege the lethal route to sidestep the complications a sleeping enemy presents. Within this ritualized activity even more demarcation

⁴³ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁴ Bell, *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice*, 125.

⁴⁵ Zealotlee, "[MGSV] Lethal vs Non-Lethal: is Lethal Ever Worth it?," *Reddit*, March 30, 2016, 18 upvotes, https://www.reddit.com/r/metalgearsolid/comments/4cm4ca/mgsv_lethal_vs_nonlethal_is_lethal_ever_worth_it/; 3DHero, "MGSV [FOB] - Lethal vs Non – Lethal," October 12, 2016, YouTube video, 14:45, <https://youtu.be/VBUntXhiGW8>.

can happen that puts lethal above non-lethal or vice versa. A lethal player can ignore stealth and go guns blazing. A non-lethal player can try to succeed without a single tranquilization. My ritualized activity, how I shape the environment whenever I play this series, is with a playstyle that puts as many people to sleep as possible and carry the sleepers away to an extraction point. That playstyle is above all others to me. Also, in doing this a us-vs-them dynamic has formed between lethal and non-lethal players. Yet, according to the central-local opposition, I still situate myself within the non-lethal brand of players.

She argues that ritual studies should consider cultural distinctions and the duality of human beings.⁴⁶ Cultural distinctions make a universal theory of ritual inadequate because distinction inevitably resists a common mold. As for the duality of man: her argument in this regard comes from Emile Durkheim and she uses his own words about the soul to criticize the action-belief dichotomy in his concept of ritual: “Those representations whose flow constitutes our interior life are of two different species which are irreducible to one another. Some concern themselves with the external and material world; others with an ideal world to which we attribute a moral superiority over the first.”⁴⁷ Bell is using this quote to argue that Durkheim’s material and spirit observation is a reverse of his idea of action and thought as two separate things which blend in ritual⁴⁸ Similarly, video games are not an actualization of beliefs: to murder or steal does not mean a player believes murder and stealing are acceptable. An acceptance for crime is not prior to playing *Grand Theft Auto*. Beliefs and gameplay will happen at the same time in the same place and what meanings players construct through activity shape the setting.⁴⁹ The body and environment are important for Bell, as she puts it:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁷ Bell, 24-25.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Bell, 98.

Hence, through a series of physical movements ritual practices spatially and temporally construct an environment organized according to schemes of privileged opposition [mind over body]. The construction of this environment and the activities within it simultaneously work to impress these schemes upon the bodies of participants. This is a circular process that tends to be misrecognized, if it is perceived at all, as values and experiences impressed upon the person and community from sources of power and order beyond it.⁵⁰

The goal with *Grand Theft Auto* is not to unleash one's inner psychopath or to teach people how to be a psychopath, but to become a thieving murderer in an imaginary setting where thieving and murdering lets one shape the environment. Values will be made along the way, but that does not necessarily mean outside notions of crime are part of the equation.

To her, the end of ritual is the shaping of the ritual's social environment and shaping the environment in some way is often a primary goal of a game. For the shooter genre of games, part of what makes them fun is the ability to interact with the environment and form a relationship with it. When shooting, one points towards an object on the tv screen, clicks a button, and that object reacts immediately to the touch of the player. In *GTA* a red barrel always explodes, shooting a leg will make someone tumble, and aiming a shot at a tire can pop it, sending the car careening off the road. The developers at Rockstar Games structure *GTA* in a way that lets the player's body reach out into the screen's environment and form a connection with it. Yet, players, and ritual practitioners, do not recognize the meanings they are making through this activity. It is not the most profound kind of meaning to make, but players in *GTA* are making meanings about this physical makeup of the world when they shoot things and they explode.

Bell also attends to the way bodies interact with their social environment according to their familiarity with it.⁵¹ Given that developers tend to share/copy their structures with one another, a player often maintains an awareness of how things will go. There might need to be

⁵⁰ Bell 98-97.

⁵¹ Ibid., 98.

some adjustment, like moving from one button to somersault to two, but the general movement and camera operation remains identical across game genres. To put it another way: someone who has not gamed before would first need to learn how the controller works, how navigation is normally ordered, the lingo in the menus and/or what they will need to do first. Someone familiar with games such as myself would not be slowed by any of those hurdles; rather, I can play in the structures of the environment with few difficulties. My body has the information recorded in my muscle memory and I have a store of meanings that allow me to navigate ritual activity in the way that people have privileged. In ritual recitation, if one is learning the words for the first time, they are not participating in the same ritual process as those who have had it memorized for decades. The learner must think about the structure, while the learned can move with the flow of the procession without missing a beat.

For Bell's perspective on ritual, those bodies are involved in a power structure that limits them, and this is like the hierarchy of developer over gamer.⁵² The interface of a game is how the developer provides the player with their bodily options. The interface consists of digital and physical methods through which one can control the game, and it is limited by the developer's capabilities and choices. If a coder cannot string together the equation that allows for functional flying movement, no flying will exist in the game. In many ways games limit the body like this while allowing for freedom with other means. Maybe a player cannot fly, but the code allows them to jump higher than any NBA star, and for gravity to be more forgiving than the ankle-shattering reality. The real-world body also finds itself subject to the structures of the physical interface before it. Some games require a keyboard and mouse while others operate entirely off motion control. I may need to stuff a mask on my face or hold my phone sideways.

⁵² Ibid., 101.

However, Bell's ritual theory is not enough to uncover the meanings made in *Dark Souls* in full detail, so Georges Bataille helps us see the values being made around the resources that play a prominent role throughout the game. Bell calls attention to power, meaning, and demarcation of activity in ritual, but it is Georges Bataille who provides a language for describing energy, production, and futility in ritual. Bell sees ritual as a productive site, while what interests Bataille about ritual is its potential break from production. A French philosopher/social theorist/transgressive writer from the time around World War II, Bataille often found himself contemplating the social self. The writings relevant to this conversation come from his theories on religion and economics. Key to this discussion is his idea of expenditure. He argued that scarcity being the driving force of economics and the idea of economics as a separate and restricted phenomena both lacked consideration of the general flow of energy. He means energy in its broadest, cosmic sense, and how it moves through human bodies and into our created world.⁵³

Bataille asks readers to consider that life—economic activities included—functions as part of the universe's explosion of energy. That is quite a leap, but it makes sense. When life collects all the energy it requires to function through nourishment that energy then flows out of life, unable to be contained. People want to do things with their free time, and they have “free time” to begin with because they have efficiently used their energy to provide for their needs. With a break in production, that energy can flow in a variety of ways, but it must flow.⁵⁴ Humans may release their excess energy with luxuries, and this is the force that drives the economy and life in general.⁵⁵ Bataille does not apply these ideas on energy only to the realm of humanity,

⁵³ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, 20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

however. In all animals, early life is devoted to storing energy, the surplus of energy being directly fed into personal growth. But when they fully grow, that energy is spent on growing the group, having sex with their grown form.⁵⁶

According to him, a means by which people release their available surplus is ritual.⁵⁷ The dynamic at play is the tension between construction and destruction. People can sacrifice a goat to a deity if they will be able to survive without its meat. Yet, production is central to being a person. In producing the meat, the individual became a human working towards a project and creating an awareness of the flow of time along with the sense of a self within a larger world.⁵⁸ When our ancestors constructed the first tool, they made humanity with it.⁵⁹ Tools are directed by us towards the future and require the user to envision the very meaning of the future to determine how and when to use their tool. When they made something, the early humans would then need to differentiate themselves from the made thing to do something with it. In this need to organize around production, Bataille believes the felt difference between subject and object came to be. Yet, he claims there is a desire in humanity to return to the pre-work world, where we were indistinct animals without intrusive meanings generating subject and object distinctions.⁶⁰ When an energetic being's productive processes are disrupted by that same being, this is a sacrifice in Bataille's configuration of religion. In these sacrificial moments energy is not put towards a future project but a meaningless now. In this way, Bataille sees in rituals the want to be a jobless and nameless animal. *Dark Souls* contains a considerable amount of production within its design, but there are moments of sacrifice as, well.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁷ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 54-55.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

There also exists a third illuminating theory that shows the ways genre expectations around time are toyed with by the gameplay and further proves the usefulness of ritual theory for understanding *Dark Souls*. The book *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic Over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion and Imagined Worlds* might be about pen-and-paper games and the Christian resistance to them, but within it is an idea about “frames” that can be helpful for analyzing ritual in *Dark Souls*. Frame-analysis originated in Gary Fine’s writings on fantasy role-playing games. The frames in gaming are the content of the world, the rules of the game and the real world.⁶¹ An example of a sentence a player could say that switches between the three respective frames would be “I am throwing a grenade because my shooting stat is low, could we order a pizza?” In the content a grenade is thrown, the rules around statistics are remarked upon, and an edible item is asked for in “reality.” For this player, there is no confusion over whether the pizza will show up in the game, in the game’s logical structures, or in real life.⁶² However, Laycock makes the point that the lack of confusion does not mean that the frames are independent of one another. In discussing the testimony of a soldier who listed the competencies he gained through gaming, Laycock wrote, “This account demonstrates that the experiences of frame three--his heroic adventures with his friends [in *D&D*]--resulted in a tangible effect in frame one. Rather than escapism, this reveals a reciprocal relationship between the fantasy world and the world of daily life.”⁶³ Frames then factor into his theory that moral panic over the game *Dungeons and Dragons* served to cover the insecurities that certain Christians had over the role of imagination in American culture. These frames and the ability to

⁶¹ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3–5.

⁶² Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic Over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 10-11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14.

separate the imagination are dangerous when they appear before someone insecure about whether their religious world is imaginary.⁶⁴ While I find Bell to be as a particularly elucidating point of departure for treating gaming as ritual, Laycock places games and ritual under an umbrella of play in accordance with Huizinga's idea that games formed the basis of myth and ritual.⁶⁵ His main argument is that Evangelicals buying what the moral entrepreneurs were selling showed insecurity about the imaginary nature of their religious world. As he puts it:

I suggest that much of the energy that evangelicals put into framing fantasy role-playing games as either madness or a heretical religion was actually a defense mechanism to assuage their own doubts. The realization that a game of imagination can resemble a religion naturally leads to the suspicion that one's religion could likewise be a game of imagination.⁶⁶

If we are to take seriously the idea that games of imagination and religions both have these frames, what happens when we look at the way *Dark Souls* presents the three frames? It turns out that FromSoftware manipulated them intentionally, in a maneuver I refer to as a "convergence" of frames.

This theoretical section is not exhaustive in its treatment of these scholars and their ideas of ritual, but what relevant concepts I have shared will serve as a foundation for how I apply the theories in the sections that follow. The main aspects of Bell's theory that will be relevant are the privileging of some activity over others, bodies shaping the ritual environment and the simultaneous generation of action and belief. The latter appear in this thesis as values: meanings that provide agency in a social environment. For example, production as a value is made through collecting and spending resources. However, in *Dark Souls* this value of production is more complicated than that, and Georges Bataille will help show how. The key ideas from him are the

⁶⁴ Laycock 24

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 24.

pressure of life to expand, knowledge as production and religious sacrifice as a return to animal immanence. Laycock rounds out the analysis with a discussion on what *Dark Souls* does with frames to facilitate meaning. The main points that will be relevant are the three imaginative frames: content, rules and real-life, and that these frames can influence the others. First, we turn to Bataille, for the cycle of production and futility is the experience at the heart of the game.

Sacrifice to the Flames: Production and Futility

While Bell reveals the methods through which a developer and player enact a ritualized loop of activity which facilitates socialization, some help from Bataille will flesh out what values are socialized by the experience. Informed by this perspective, I discovered that playing the game in sequence involves a loop of production and futility, yet the player can direct the activity's movement away from futility and resist the pressure to play the game sequentially. This sequence is the movement from one bonfire checkpoint to the next. There are two ways to produce in the game, and the sequential one is much riskier than the one that rejects sequence. Yet, this riskier option is the "correct" way to play *Dark Souls*. It is the "correct" way to play in the same way it is "correct" for two to come after one. This leaves players with a choice that determines what values the activity socializes: they can move through the game with the "proper" ritualized activity and generate a value of production *with* inevitable loss, or a player can exploit the game's systems to bypass sacrifice and socializes the value of constant production *over* sacrifice.

To be specific about what the ritual of sacrifice is in *Dark Souls*: it is the span of gameplay where a newer player has a surplus of resources and no way to spend, loss is their only option. This is only possible if a player moves through the game in sequence, trying with attempt after attempt to move to the next area to the point where it seems like they are playing for no reason. This is like an illusion of what Bataille says about the "true end" of objective things "Only a world in which the beings are indiscriminately lost is superfluous, serves no purpose, has nothing to do, and means nothing: it only has a value in itself, not with a view to something else, this other thing for still another and so on."⁶⁷ These are fleeting moments because

⁶⁷ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 29.

production likes to fight back, and matching what Bataille says in this same paragraph, the losses in *Dark Souls* eventually enter the plane of utility and cease to be meaningless. Transactional forces, namely the latent learning capabilities of the human mind, *gain* knowledge from this sacrifice even when players express their actions as futile. This means that the longer one plays *Dark Souls*, the less possible this sacrificial ritual will be because even in loss production is running in the background. A player will expect to carry their souls forward because their ritual mastery undoes the ritual, making loss a mistake and not a sacrifice. This makes the *Dark Souls* sacrifice ritual a kind that requires enough mastery to partake but not so much that the ritual loses its meaningless character.

Bell suggests that ritualized activities are demarcated by those involved in the ritual and in *Dark Souls* this applies to playing the game the “correct” way or not. As I discussed with *Metal Gear Solid*’s lethal and non-lethal playstyles: in video games, the privileging of some activity over another appears in the different approaches game structures leave available for players to opt in to. The “correct” way to play is an attempt by those who constructed the ritual environment, FromSoftware, to lead players into privileging a certain way to play. For instance, to play *Super Mario* the “correct” way is to move from level one to level two and so on.⁶⁸ I would say the reason a sequential progression seems like the “right” way to play—to both the player and the developers at Nintendo who built *Super Mario* that way—is not because they value sequence but because of Bataille’s concept of life’s “pressure.”⁶⁹ Pressure of life, which is the pressure of cosmic energy ever expanding, cannot be contained by anything and will always overflow when hitting a wall. He says that the opening of space, like when one opens the next

⁶⁸ Gameplay and Talk, “Super Mario Bros. Full Playthrough (NES) I Let’s Play #262 – Better than Last Time!” May 7, 2017, YouTube Video, <https://youtu.be/9Och7bYFMc4>.

⁶⁹ Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 29-30.

level of a game, leads to the filling of that opening: “...if, by some means, the available space is increased; this space will be immediately occupied in the same way as the enjoining space.”⁷⁰ As players move through the sequence of bonfires, they produce power within the ritual environment and a knowledge of the game.

Action RPGs at-large are rituals developers designed to reward productivity. Most video games meant to keep the player plugged in for an extended time have something called a “gameplay loop,” which appears at a micro and macro level as noted by Emmanuel Guardiola.⁷¹ The micro loop is as simple as shoot, kill, aim, shoot and so on. The macro level, the kind this section of the thesis discusses, is when an activity leads to another in a feedback loop. Although called a “loop” it might be more accurate to name many of these loops “spirals,” because they progress somewhere. Here is the basic model of the gameplay loop in ARPGs like *Skyrim*, *Borderlands*, *The Witcher* and many others: kill monsters, sell what they dropped, upgrade gear with the coin then take on tougher monsters with more valuable drops. At every point, the player makes more money than before and therefore more powerful equipment is within reach. This allows them to take on tougher monsters with more valuable drops—rinse and repeat. The play is made meaningful by this spiraling structure, with the player oriented towards the future, the next upgrade, the next boss. There is an expectation set up by the spiral that all work leads to gain. Some players take this to extremes, the internet is flooded with guides on how to work the least and gain the most.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Guardiola, “The Gameplay Loop: a Player Activity Model for Game Design and Analysis,” *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*, 2016.

⁷² Naewulf, “How to Beat Dark Souls FAST: Shortcuts and Useful Tips!” *Steamcommunity*. July 8, 2015. <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=484103362>; WatsonKHD, “Dark Souls Remastered: Overpowered in 10-20 Minutes! Best Way to Start a New Game!” May 29, 2018, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/RRIVKnlysBc>; Ryan Taylor, “20 Ways to Level Up Fast in Skyrim,” *TheGamer*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.thegamer.com/elder-scrolls-skyrim-methods-level-up-fast/>.

The design of *Dark Souls* includes all the above, but FromSoftware did this with the intention of rupturing the cycle of productivity, because nothing exists that one can sacrifice if one has produced nothing. A player can buy better gear with a combination of currency (souls) and gathered resources.⁷³ The next level, and a choice of statistical increase with it, players can buy with the currency alone. The souls drop off every killed character in the setting and force players to choose between using them to purchase items or purchase level-ups. The bosses leave behind enough for a player to buy a level or upgrade with just their souls—perhaps purchasing both improvements in the early game. More souls lead to more power which lead to stronger enemies which drop more souls which lead to... and so on. There is just one rub: the game’s punishing difficulty. A typical game scales the difficulty with the player’s statistical growth, but *Dark Souls* starts out at a hard difficulty and only gets worse, never quite allowing the player to catch up. A player may struggle with amassing resources when every source has been designed to send them back where they came from by the ritual-designer. To make matters worse, players do not always have the option to buy something useful with their souls, the vendors and upgrade options are limited in quantity. The player hits a wall without any options to progress statistically and must continue with hard-earned materials on the line.

“Prepare to Die” is more than just a slogan the publisher Bandai-Namco slapped on posters, covers and the extended edition’s subtitle—it is an invitation to privilege a different kind of game, to “prepare for squander.”⁷⁴ Although death happens in most action video games, this one tells the player that violent defeat is part of the experience. In “preparing to die” a player must expect something that happens all the time anyways in games. In those other games though,

⁷³ Empty Apartment, “Dark Souls – Undead Male Merchant – 1st Merchant,” October 25, 2011, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/CX2dU887wUE>.

⁷⁴ Bandai Namco, “DARKSOULS - ‘Prepare to Die’ Trailer,” 0:00-1:12.

death is an obvious mistake, it is not supposed to be part of the gameplay loop. It is not supposed to be a ritualized sacrifice of resources—death is just an accident that can be fixed with work. FromSoftware funnels the player down narrow paths filled with lethal danger that essentially makes loss of the surplus of material inevitable. After every bonfire lie the same thing—a more difficult route. Zombies lurk in the “Undead Berg” branch of the map that leads to the sewers below where the gaping dragon waits. Beneath that monstrosity is the lovely place known as “Blighttown.” The poison there kills anyone who lets it build up, and the ground floor is covered in knee-deep slime that also just happens to be poisonous. Players who conquer that challenge find themselves facing a giant spider with a naked woman as its head who shoots fireballs. Get past her and a player then enters a city of demons. Then a lake of lava and finally the nightmarish boss known as the “Bed of Chaos.” Each terror is on the way to worse terror. When new players enter the next room with their surplus it is as good as gone. But the game’s central message, “prepare to die,” accounts for that loss. The actors in the ritual are told that sacrificing the fruits of their labor is supposed to happen.

For experienced players that loss might turn to a lesson learned and knowledge produced. That knowledge would be enemy-layouts, animation patterns, shortcuts, the best weapons—any idea that players can then use as a tool. Bataille describes the tool as “As Bell points out however, actors have the ultimate power in ritual, and it is possible to turn around to produce in earlier parts of the game to avoid the dangers which lead to sacrifice. One can play it safe with their surplus, and that means performing the *Dark Souls* ritual as carefully-planned work, allowing the infinite production from other games to replace the gameplay loop that comes from the *Dark Souls*’ layout-suggested movement. However, such actions go against the pressure of life to expand. If a player instead undergoes the ritual FromSoftware structured and push forward

to the next bonfire with a surplus of souls—they expose themselves to suffering. The user SpawnMan on GiantBomb.com details his struggle:

I can't move forward! I either get roused up by that knight with the horns under the walkway or the bunch of hollows I usually try to run past (my own laziness and lack of patience is punishing me) to the Taurus Demon. Not that it matters, since every time I've versed that sucker he's squashed me into the cobbles.⁷⁵

He has the fervent desire to push forward, yet this one part of the game keeps finding ways to disappoint and humiliate him. Instead of getting the expansion he wants, he only experiences cyclical failure.

This sacrifice resembles the sacrificial rites found in Bataille's *Theory of Religion*. He says, "Sacrifice destroys an object's real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice." FromSoftware leads the player out of the productive motion of the game, its genre, and the contemporary world. While in most other games every action is productive, while stuck between two bonfires a player gains nothing (virtually) tangible. To me it feels like throwing oneself into a meatgrinder for no apparent reason. On the *Dark Souls* reddit, user Cimejies compared the experience to a Greek myth "In the end, is it worth it? Is there a point? One can say no, there is no purpose to the game, linking the fire or leaving it is an inconsequential decision, but it puts me in mind of Camus and the myth of Sisyphus, pushing the boulder endlessly up the hill."³ There does not need to be a reason, according to Bataille's concept of pressure. Energy must be spent in some way by anything and everything. Especially by living beings, and when that energy is producing nothing but instead squanders, it allows a player to step away from what it is that makes people human. For Bataille the work towards a project creates time and self, pulling one free from the world of

⁷⁵ SpawnMan, "Dark Souls. Do I have the will to go on? Noob stuck at 7 hours," *Giantbomb*, April 15, 2012, <https://www.giantbomb.com/forums/dark-souls-6255/dark-souls-do-i-have-the-will-to-go-on-noob-stuck--519075/>.

indiscriminate things. When the project is neglected and resources squandered, that self has its boundaries rocked. A *Dark Souls* players' self, constructed as a gamer caught up in the world of grinding loot and experience across titles, loses its grip on the productive processes that make them a gamer. But if the ritual stopped there, *Dark Souls* would be a short game. No, instead productive meaning fights its way back into the picture.

One way production overrides futility is through a production of knowledge about the game's workings that allow a player to avoid making the same mistakes. Bataille Even while dying at the hands of demons, the gamer's muscle memory and reflexes are beginning to adapt. The environment becomes familiar enough to provide advantages. After many deaths, a player will know which pillars one can hide behind, where there is space to roll without getting caught on a ledge or falling off a cliff, or what areas the giant cannot reach. All the while the movements of the enemies appear to the players repeatedly, allowing them the chance to know what their opponent will do before they do it. This is all knowledge gained vicariously through repetitive suffering. Knowledge is a kind of production, FromSoftware structured their game so that humanity's knowledge-gathering faculties could be forced to take the unproductive and bring it back into the domain of production. With the strategies the knowledge produces a player can finally make their way to the bonfire, the project that once seemed impossible now completed. And it all begins again.

Players have plenty of room to learn and space to move into due to the limitless number of times they can replay the game while keeping what they earn. The ritual between the bonfires never has to stop, because once one makes it to the final bonfire after the final boss the entire game begins anew. Keeping in line with the designed fluctuation between futility and production the player can keep all their equipment and upgrades from the previous playthrough. If the game

were to toss everything out and make the player start with a blank slate, it would only be an exercise in futility. Their project is not over because the materials and tools are all there. But again, this productivity is only there to be undermined. The monsters are all tougher, their damage and armor numbers boosted to match the player's strength. Despite all their efforts, the player's game-beating kit is just enough to beat the zombies at the beginning. Yet, production may have the last laugh, for there is a key difference between the first playthrough and all subsequent ones—the knowledge I discussed. The game's structure always brings the player back to their projects, and eventually those projects can override the futility altogether.

Viewing *Dark Souls* as a sacrificial ritual has opened a reading of the game that pays attention to the methods by which it is structured to play with the gamer's productive self. Along the way, a meaning is conditioned by the game that might not be readily obvious—without material gain one will always still have their knowledge. To learn this, players must have that material production made moot, with the use of knowledge the only way out of a state of futility.

The Abyss-Walker: Frame Convergence

This brief interlude of a section will show how Laycock's idea of ritual that utilizes Fine's three frames of imaginative worlds reveals how the *Dark Souls* produces meaning within imaginative frames. Although not as immersive as a VR game, *Dark Souls* attempts to immerse players within it, partially, through a syncing of game time and real-world time. In *Dangerous Games* Laycock suggested that conflict between the moral entrepreneurs of the satanic panic and *Dungeons & Dragons* gamers was drama over the imagination.⁷⁶ For them, the possibility of religion being made from imaginary frames that influence one another like imaginative worlds of games was a serious concern. *Dark Souls* plays with frames intentionally, and in certain locations within frames the influence reaches a degree that makes the events of the separate frames identical. The game blends its systems with the user's frame of everyday life to lend an air of immediacy to what is nothing but animated pixels following a prepared algorithm.

Across a single dimension within the three frames, the dimension of time collapses. The entire framework does not collapse, that would make a player lose sight of what is real and what is game entirely. The collapse only occurs across the temporal axis: it is a convergence. What does this entail for a player? The existence of the convergence makes *Dark Souls* unlike other single-player games where the three frames all have separate timelines. In a game where one can "save" progress and "load" that progress at any point very distinct timelines exist. A player can "load" what they were doing an hour previously and pick up from there in a new timeline according to the game's content. In other words: the characters in the story have no idea that a player reversed time because they have their own separate timeline. Also consider what happens when a gamer pauses. The player moves through time and the game world stays static until they

⁷⁶ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 24.

are ready to start things again. This results in two separate timelines: one from the point-of-view of the narrative, where the pause is not acknowledged as if it never happened, and the timeline of the player which includes whatever they did between presses of the pause button. There is no saving or pausing in *Dark Souls*. When a demon drops from the ceiling in front of a player, they have to face it then and there. There is an immediacy to it, like an animal in the moment it sees another pouncing at it.

When a player loads up a *Dark Souls* save file the game is always exactly where one left it, meaning one cannot manipulate time through loading. I can share a tragic tale from my own *Dark Souls* experience to show just how precise the game is with recording the details of the world as a player left them. About halfway through the game is a friendly giant that can make the best weapons in the game. Once I got my faith stat high enough I would have him create a holy-powered greatsword from the soul of the moonlight butterfly. He is the only one that can perform this feat. Lacking the requirements for the sword, I was visiting him for some other reason that day. In the real-world frame, I stopped to text someone, and my controller fell to the floor. The impact pressed the attack button, and my character swung at the blacksmith. I dove for my PlayStation 3. Maybe if I turned it off quick enough it would not record that I had struck the character. When I came back the giant had his weapon raised, no longer offering any services except ass-whopping. I did not get that sword until beating the game and looping back to him. By turning the game off, I could force the convergence to come undone, but that did not allow me to manipulate anything. It was not like saving and loading. Essentially, I made the game pause through physical means despite that not being my intention. I just could not stay *within* the ritual space with a distinct timeline from the game's timeline. The departure caused by the shut-

off pulled me from the frames entirely. So, the only way to pause in *Dark Souls* is to remove oneself from the activity entirely.

But it is not just the removal of pausing that syncs the players' timeline with the games', but also the narrative structure that makes the events of one's death a part of the story. In your typical action game, it is as if the players' death never happened. The gameplay moves backwards in time to a point where the player's avatar still drew digital breath. A linear piece of entertainment like a book or movie will not let the main character die unless the creators will it. For action games, the storytellers in charge must account for the fact that the main character will be exposed to death throughout the narrative. This is easily resolved with reverting to an earlier saved game on death. In that way, the game can force the main character to stay alive with the player left in a story where what did not happen happened. In *Dark Souls* a dead player does not journey back in time. They are an unkillable entity willing to continuously throw themselves into the fire—which is exactly what any action gamer does in any action game. Only in *Dark Souls*, the constant exposure to digital death is not something erased from time, but something that one moves past. The frame of a gamer constantly retrying levels is melded by FromSoftware into the frame of a knight dying over and over in the narrative.

This process generates real-world values. On a Reddit post where someone complained about an important call interrupting their boss fight, u/PraiseTheHighGround replied to say:

One of the purpose [sic] of the game is to be extremely immersive, you are more than just a player when playing Dark Souls, the game breaks the 4th wall without even telling you and that's what amazing about this game. A good example of that is the reason of it's difficulty, if you give up, you are still in the game, you just turned hollow because you lost all you will. That's part of the game.

The English might not be pretty, but they are speaking about the process at the center of this paper: the socialization of values through activity. The convergence or “4th wall” breaking led

this user to re-evaluate their notion of willpower through the language of the game. “Going hollow” in the game translates to “becoming undead.” Through the syncing of time, they began to see their world in the game and the game in their world. To lose the will to go on was rebranded as undeath, and undeath became a hollowness. Whether or not that is philosophically interesting, u/Praise shows that the convergence of frames is a way in which the activity in *Dark Souls* socializes meaning.

Phantoms in the First Kiln: Socialization through Action in Player versus Player Duels

A look at the dueling taking place outside the final boss arena with Bell's ritual theory in mind reveals the authoritative role an unspoken ideal of honor achieves in these meetings between players and what that ideal socializes in the process.⁷⁷ The players abandon the bonfire ritual--the endless loop FromSoftware structured. Despite the subsequent actions occurring within that space, the developer's power as an authority has been diminished. Instead, the players turn to an imagined authority that pulls from undefined ideas of real-world one-on-one combat. For instance, the major martial arts from Asia such as karate, tae-kwon-do and kung fu have etiquette featuring an honorable bow before fighting.⁷⁸ An idea, gains agency in this space born from silent negotiations between players, usurping Fromsoftware's claim on the player's rules and structures. They still provide fundamental limits, however. *Dark Souls* lacks voice or text chat, and that means players must communicate these ideals with only unspoken action. This analysis will demonstrate Bell's point that the ritual actors have the ultimate power in privileging the activities of ritual through an *idea* of honor instead of the authority of a ritual planner.

The influence of concepts of honor is visible in conversations outside the game and by gestures inside. While playing *Dark Souls* and another player comes to fight, there is a chance they will command their avatar to perform a bow. In forums on the game platform Steam and Reddit, players debate which actions to privilege as honorable with little agreement. Within the conversations though, onlookers can see evidence of a population in the game concerned with ritualizing their gameplay under the authority of an unspoken code of honor. These rituals are not

⁷⁷ Here is a selection of recorded duels in the First Kiln: Sekundes666; "Dark Souls – PVP – Kiln Duels," November 27, 2011, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/iNSUK5gFC0Q>; DarkSoulsMindEye, "Dark Souls PvP Skillful Kiln 3," February 12, 2012, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/ruvbSG73bZw>; NAUSEA1978, "Dark Souls PVP: Kiln of the first flame PART 1," May 9, 2013, YouTube Video, 12:19. <https://youtu.be/4X5Ah56sRIM>.

⁷⁸ <https://karate.sites.yale.edu/dojo-etiquette>; <https://youtu.be/HTsBCFG2szU>; https://youtu.be/o2pbP_cqOmw; <https://www.taekwondonation.com/bowing-in-taekwondo>.

set in stone, but actively socialized worldviews and ethos where the power of players makes it difficult for agreement to occur. For example, steam user lucmobz expressed confusion over pre-fight actions and whether they fit the “honor code.”⁷⁹ They were concerned about what players were doing after a bow, such as casting beneficial self-spells, or coating their weapon in fire. These kind of temporary upgrades gamers refer to as “buffs” as in “buff-up.” Answers range from “Everyone should check the PVP honor codes about that buffs part, you could use beckon gesture when you are ready” to “Honor code? Lol. You guys are dumb for even bowing in my opinion.”⁸⁰ This kind of disagreement leads to situations where two players with different codes of honor meet and must adjust to the other on the fly. In this clip shared by TheSunBros, their avatar performs the bow gesture and so does the other player.⁸¹ TheSunBros then casts a spell that covered their sword in crystals, but the other player rushed forward. Desperately, the player casting the spell backs away.

The reason such discussions need to take place in forums is because players have to work within FromSoftware’s limited social systems that involve silent negotiations. They designed this social system to be obtuse. Players do not share worlds in the *Dark Souls* series and must travel to and from their own worlds to interact with others. There are a few methods through which players can travel. Most involve runic sigils the player’s avatar draws on the ground with vendor-bought chalk that comes in a few colors that correspond with their function. These chalk markings will appear on the ground in other worlds. White chalk is for helpful players who are concerned with the bonfire ritual—the spirit they form in the world they travel to is white and can only attack the programmed enemies of the game. They’re great for difficult boss fights, and

⁷⁹ <https://steamcommunity.com/app/211420/discussions/0/882959903317834904/>

⁸⁰ <https://steamcommunity.com/app/211420/discussions/0/882959903317834904/>

⁸¹ TheSunbros, “Dark Souls PVP: Kiln Duels 1,” December 15, 2011, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/gQrxQprjYF8>.

complicated rituals in ways that would be worth discussing someday. But I am more concerned here with the players who target one another. A red chalk marking means that one wishes to fight. If a player in a distant world sees the chalk and touches it, a moment later the hostile player will rise from the ground as a spirit, gaining control over their body after the animation completes. The player base calls these players “red phantoms,” and they are capable of stealing souls through violence.

Once worlds have been properly linked the demarcation goes further into an intentionally limited rulesets in specific spaces. Not every interaction with red chalk is a duel, a summoned phantom or the summoner can violate the rules for honorable combat. Both players must be allowed a degree of space while the phantom goes through the animation that plays when one enters a world. That space must have certain qualities. A duel will typically take place in an opening away from the game’s monsters. The space for the committed player-versus-player aficionado is the empty platform before the final boss’s chamber, the “first flame” where the game’s lore began. Fighting there means one will not face the dreaded noob—combating new players like them is too pathetic and cruel to be honorable. Bell’s argument that the ritual environment shapes the ritual activity of bodies, and the decisive power of those bodies, is visible in the way those players have *chosen* their honorable dueling ground, and that they choose open and flat surfaces¹ Once all these conditions are met, there is usually some kind of signal that one is ready to fight. A gesture of some sort is made to ignite the action. It could be as simple as a jump, or it might be a roar. In the most honorable combat, players begin with a respectful bow. All this differentiating and demarcating of ritualized activity, and I have not begun to discuss the ritual itself.

The ritual of an honorable *Dark Souls* duel demonstrates Bell's idea of the body as the production of socializing activity. Without language as an option, there is no way to communicate but with the avatars inhabiting the same limited space. Even if language was not ruled out, the ring is not the debate chamber. Players do not meet at the end of the game to discuss its meanings. Instead, they enact those meanings through a fight. To say how *not* to fight honorably will be the most appropriate way to sketch what duels are socializing. The first dishonorable act is wrath-spamming. Wrath-spamming involves building a maximum magic character and repeatedly using a single spell. That spell is a powerful area attack that damages and knocks over any opponent within a five-meter radius. One should not be able to cast a spell like that repeatedly, but they levelled-up in a specific way, producing a certain type of character that may be frail and out-of-breath but also a pulsing bomb. The fight, not a duel, goes like this: the spammer runs up and casts his spell, the other player falls on their ass, and that repeats until that player is dead. There is no combat, no chance for players to display their skill and agility. An insidious alternative is the lag-stab. When one player positions themselves directly behind another and attacks both will become locked in an animation. The attacker impales their opponent and then shoves them aside. During the flurry of blows both players must be always aware of this possibility and always keep themselves facing the other. Evaluating the skill and agility required to keep up with the increasing intensity of the positioning game is what honorable combat strives for. If a player is not wrath-spamming, they can also act in a way that subverts honorable combat by exploiting the lag in communication between one player and another over the internet. The exact game logic that allows this to happen is unfamiliar to me, I just know of the exploit: if one sprints at the other player's right shoulder at a forty-five-degree angle and attacks, they teleport to the back and initiate the backstab animation due to the lag.²

Hence, “lag-stab.” By not doing that, and not wrath-spamming, players are allowing a sense of honor to be socialized through a dance-like combat with room for both players to test themselves.

Bell’s idea that power is socialized through ritual in opposition to an authority led me to ask, “who is the authority in a silent duel between equals?”³ FromSoftware provided their limits, but their gameplay structures are suppressed for players to focus on structures made by something else: their ideal of honor. Through combat players are building this ideal with their own hands, giving them the power in the situation. The power of the players has been present throughout this entire section. They choose where, when and how they play within the game, and can subvert any ritual I have discussed at any time. Wrath-spammers have the power to shut off possibility for the duel at all. Summoners have the power to choose who comes to the ritual. Invaders have the power to force combat on some poor soul trying to do the bonfire ritual. Yet, this power works within guiding structures that they can either go with, against, or somewhere in-between like the lag-stabber needing a certain degree of participation in honorable combat before the dishonor becomes available. And when that structure is not FromSoftware, it is the nebulous concept of honor in the imaginations of the players that is guiding the proceedings. There is no official ruleset, and what I consider honorable combat could differ from another players. Yet there is still a force of honor pressuring certain ways of acting that socialize agility and skill as that honor.

Concluding Thoughts

This project took three approaches to *Dark Souls* from religious studies writers and found activities socializing values around production, futility, time and honor. It would be wrong to treat that list as exhaustive, there is no telling what values someone will take from a game. I have merely exposed potentials and sometimes matched those potentials with internet commentary. Look to u/PraiseTheHighGround and their talk of will in opposition to hollowness. A reaction like that is not one that is easy to predict, through the immersive frame convergence and their grappling with failure a new outlook on willfulness emerged that treated the game's lore as a real-world meaning. This lesson did not come from lore however, the story barely explains what hollowing is. Their view of willpower is based on the act of dying in the game and having the humanity of their avatar removed by the rules. It is a *doing* that generated u/Praise's value. A different project could dive directly into the accounts like that, but here the account meant to show the presence of gameplay in the generation of values. It is evidence of the potential for the game's structures to alter the way someone views a thing, and I would not know to even look for such processes without help from ritual theories. Before wrapping things up, I will review the potential values I uncovered in the structures of the game through those theories.

Georges Bataille's theory of ritual helped uncover a motion from production to futility and back. Could this help explain why such a difficult game has such a positive reputation? The design of *Dark Souls* demarcated the game with activity structured to evoke both pleasure and suffering. FromSoftware took advantage of the satisfaction from collecting resources with one's hands to work them into something useful—what drives the gameplay loops in the ARPG genre—to slam players with the opposite of what they expect. As fresh players move from bonfire to bonfire the game's mechanics force them into a place where resources will be sacrificed to the nether unless they are perfect gamers. In doing this, *Dark Souls* opened a

ritualized space where ARPG players might be jolted by a novel experience. This teaches that ritualization can have a use in allowing a project to branch out from its genre. By putting someone in a position where their typical productive activity is teased and taken away by the structures of the experience, a designer can subvert the genre they enter.

Bataille also revealed just how caught-up a video game genre is with productive activity. Looking at *Dark Souls* helps us see what *Dark Souls* is not. The regular ARPG game is filled with work. *Skyrim*, *Path of Exile*, *Devil May Cry*, and other games all feature what Bataille would call “work.” Subjects manipulate objects with an expectation of the future. In game terms, players use their avatars in ways that will allow them to level-up. Given that the ARPG genre does not seem to be going away, it might be prudent to look deeper into what meanings around capitalistic production these video games socialize. *Dark Souls* is different due to the sheer number of spots in which a player can be “stuck,” dying on repeat in the same fights over and over. Knowledge and mastery might pull players back into the capitalistic fray with time, but the moments in which it undermines the genre-typical production, *Dark Souls* exposes the reliance many video games have on that production as the driving force of the gameplay loop. *Chess* does not require a “build” to play it. *Tic-Tac-Toe* does not provide any reward that keeps players hooked. Yet many video games have weapons to build, achievement points to collect, several currencies, potions to brew, dozens of levels and the list could go on. Since ritualized activity socializes values, the over-reliance on production to drive the experience might create a loop that stretches outside of the gameplay to produce capitalist people that play capitalist games.

With the aid of Joseph Laycock, I discovered a way *Dark Souls* demarcated itself by merging frames along the axis of time, showing that frames can be convergence together in certain points while keeping the rest of the three-frame structure intact. With the removal of

pausing, one's character has to react to a threat in the same timeframe as their game self. The revision of time also took an unexpected turn with *Dark Souls* that helped demarcate from the ARPG crowd. Players used to the game rewinding when they die are not going to find that in *Dark Souls*. Instead, they discover that *Dark Souls* is a world where death is impermanent, robbing death of its revisionary ability, ironically making mistakes permanent. But this frame collapse idea does not need to stay confined to *Dark Souls*. A more fleshed out theory could serve as a framework for analyzing ways in which other ritualized activity convergencies frames together.

Catharine Bell's theory which sparked this project when applied to the dueling in *Dark Souls* revealed a democratized and disorganized kind of power structure built through player-versus-player combat. *FromSoftware* still owned the house, but the kids decided to play by their own rules. Without any mics or text to communicate with, everything socialized needed to happen through action. These actions usually took the form of gestures or time allowances. Given that it is a ritual that starts upon contact with another actor, within moments a player makes known whether the space and time have been demarcated for a special kind of combat. From there it gets complicated because players often disagree on what that ritual even is. They wonder when it is okay to say, "No, you cannot cast that spell while I just stand here all honorably." It is an uneasy ritual; participants awkwardly socialize the worldview and ethos of the players. This dueling ritual does not resemble others with clear authority figures or repetitive routines. A concept having authority could grant more power to people, but with language a solid structure might be built out of that concept. Both language limitations and a concept serving as authority leads to what could potentially be the most structurally chaotic kind of ritual. It could

be interesting to look for concepts as authority in ritualized activity elsewhere and how participants socialize that concept.

Although lacking the nebulous communication that makes the previous ritualization fascinating to me, the other two windows on *Dark Souls* provided by Bataille and Laycock showed the power of the players, which is why the game demonstrates Bell's point that ritual actors have the ultimate power. When faced with a deadly path ahead, a player could just not follow it and instead produce power in earlier parts of the game. They could go back and ignore the ritual suggested by the layout of the game and direct the pressure of life away from a path of squander and toward more production. If someone is uncomfortable with the way *Dark Souls* changes what they expect time to be, if they do not want their frames smashed together, they can shut off the game when they want to stop, like I did after striking that blacksmith. *FromSoftware* cannot actually force someone's real time to the game's time, a player has to opt in.

Thinking about *Dark Souls* as ritual has illuminated how the game works as a space for players to come in and make meaning. Gaming is a socializing process where a developer, as a ritual planner, has the authority over the structures of the space and a gamer, as a ritual practitioner, shapes the environment. *Dark Souls* players are encountering a game whose playful experience teaches something about the real world. That something may be how to work, or what honor is. The point is that this video game is not some meaningless play, or even something that can be reduced to a mere drive to win. *Dark Souls* has a socializing force within it. It is a space where people give and take across the boundary between game and real as they fight through the horrors of FromSoftware's Lordran.

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