



Dark Souls: Spatial-architectural features of the dystopian in a multivalent gamespace

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DARK SOULS

SPATIAL-ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF THE DYSTOPIAN IN A MULTIVALENT GAMESPACE

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (CONT.)

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Abstract:

Works of art portraying dystopian societies have historically been studied as being analogous to the critique of utopian socialist ideologies – typically viewed as speculative paradigms that are loosely connected by a shared satire or parody of utopian ideals. However, in increasingly precarious times, it has become ever more popular for dystopian artworks (in the broadest sense) to extend beyond this initial framework of ‘anti-utopian ideology’ to include more nuanced and expansive generic conventions that are markedly distinct from other, corresponding types of speculative or anti-utopian fiction.

Thus, the dystopian has developed into a self-standing genre that encompasses speculative futures of humanity in relation to a particular set of social and environmental conditions that are enacted within designated spatial boundaries. Dystopian characteristics seem intrinsically bound in the various storyworlds and imaginative realms that their narratives employ – gradually becoming standardised with pervasive motifs that demonstrate narrative spaces embodying prominent themes of desolation, human suffering, and misery. Beyond this, the tendency for authors and artists to foreground spatial matters by using more interactive media – such as video games – shows a need for more comprehensive bodies of practice regarding the analysis and interpretation of narrative spaces in dystopian works. Mainly, regarding how notions of spatial experience and a storyworld may be utilised to enhance one’s understanding of dystopian narratives and their themes.

Indeed, I argue that there are prominent spatial-architectural features that work to subtly guide one’s comprehension of the dystopian concepts portrayed in an artwork. These emerge as figurative expressions in narrative spaces, using literary devices – such as metaphors, metonymy, allegory, and leitmotifs – to facilitate the conception of a cognitive domain characterised by dystopian tropes. Such features thus allow one to develop a more complete understanding of the underlying metaphorical meanings communicated by various multivalent spatial-architectural forms and narrativised spaces they comprise.

In this sense, multivalence refers to the notion that spatial-architectural forms can express many different kinds of functional and metaphorical meanings, depending on who is interpreting their design and use. To explore these metaphorical meanings and how they relate to dystopian qualities, this study presents an analysis and interpretation of dystopian tropes in the gamespace of *Dark Souls* – a dark fantasy action-adventure role-playing game set in the desolate kingdom of Lordran. Further interpretations explore the gameworld that emerges from exploring this

gamespace, seeking to refine existing terminology regarding the structural qualities of narrative space and its macro- and microstructures.

The dystopian has thus become a genre of fictional domains that explores the consequences of corruptible human nature through a character's surroundings and setting. *Dark Souls*, in particular, offers insight into emotionally evocative content and engaging dystopian themes by confronting players with spaces that invite them into a desolate realm of heartbreak and hardship. Distinct areas that are most emblematic of qualities surrounding misery, dehumanisation, and suffering are thus the focus of investigation in interpreting how spatial-architectural features convey dystopian tropes.

Keywords: architectural language; *Dark Souls*; dystopian; gameworld; multivalence (in architecture); spatial-architectural features; video games

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*But then there was Fire.
And with Fire, came Disparity.
Heat and cold, life and death,
and of course ... Light and Dark.*

- Opening lines of narration from *Dark Souls* (2011)

1.1. Introduction

Recounting a dystopian story is often accompanied by narrative spaces and noteworthy representations of architecture that seem to reflect tropes prevalent across the genre. Dystopian environments appear as dark and desolate as the speculative image of humanity they surround. As dystopian fiction has become more popular in recent years, the storyworlds facilitating the assemblage of their narrative elements have arguably become more pronounced, especially with the appearance of dystopian settings in interactive hypertexts like video games.

This study investigates dystopian tropes in the video game *Dark Souls*, first released in 2011, as embodied in the game's spatial-architecture and environmental designs, which I discern as multivalent. Multivalence refers to the notion that objects of inquiry hold multiple values (meanings; multivalence also refers to double-coding, which I explain under section 1.2. below) that can overlap and even oppose each other (cf. Jencks 1977). In this instance, multivalence is applied to spatial architectural features in the gameworld of *Dark Souls*. The architect and scholar Charles Jencks (1977:97) argues that multivalency extends to objects and elements of a built environment that have the potential to shape and influence societies using analogy¹ (see also: Michael, Yaacob & Ali, 2020:53). This is the basis of Jencks' argument for a visual language of

¹ Adapted from the field of linguistics, Jencks (1977:39) uses analogy to describes how new architectural 'words' are procedurally generated based on regularities in the forms of existing ones.

architectural elements that use linguistic features of metaphor, allegory, and abstraction to guide one's understanding of buildings and the built environment.

This study, therefore, explores how the man-made spaces rendered in a video game, as allegories of space found in real-world instances, use features of spatial-architectural 'language' (Jencks' [1977] term) to communicate underlying metaphorical meanings related to their narrative context. Thus, I argue that all of the spaces represented in a video game – from a character's immediate surroundings to the locations relevant to its plot – guide a reading of their composition as multivalent components of an overarching spatial construct. I call this construct a "gameworld"², referring to what Ryan (2001a:26-27) notes as the virtual potential of being in a video game. This allows one to distinguish between the interactive systems governing the mechanics of play in a video game and the visual representations of its processes, hereafter referred to as spatial-architectural features.

The present study also proposes a model for analysing and interpreting spatial-architectural features in video games based on the theoretical foundations of architectural and spatial theorists such as Charles Jencks³, Henri Lefebvre⁴, and Marie-Laure Ryan⁵. Due to the complex nature and structure of spatial architectural (re)constructions in video games, the study also considers the analytical perspective of a video game's hierarchical multi-modal system in a manner that is mindful of ludo-narratological⁶ concerns (cf. Wei, Bizzocchi & Calvert, 2010:14). These theories will be discussed in greater detail below as they become relevant, but the fundamental idea is that spatial characteristics (and complementary temporal relations) operate across multiple underlying levels of video game systems.

Consequently, this study hopes to pioneer an approach situated in the broader ambit of postclassical narratology (cf. Ionescu, 2019) which endeavours to explore narrative instances that are not conventionally text-based (as an extension of classical narratology which is focussed on

² I also use the term 'gameworld' to provide a link between the ludic (game) and narrative components of a video game because it forms both the environment where expressive agents exist and the areas within which they can take action during gameplay (Dennerlein, 2011:1; Eladhari & Lindley, 2004).

³ Cf. *The language of post-modern architecture* (1977).

⁴ Cf. *The production of space* (French: *La production de l'espace*) first published in 1974.

⁵ Cf. *Narrative as virtual reality: immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media* (2001a)

⁶ Referring to an intersection of the fields of ludology (game studies) and narratology (Aarseth, 2012; Jenkins, 2004; Koenitz, 2018; Ang & Zaphiris, 2006).

the study of literature – cf. Genette, 1980)⁷. Specifically, the present study presents a narratologically-inspired exploration of the spatial-architectural features of gamespace in *Dark Souls* by the Japanese video game developer FromSoftware, and how these relate to its dystopian narrative themes. As a result, I use the terms “reader”, “user”, and “player” interchangeably throughout this study to refer to those who engage with narrative (hyper)texts from a receptive position as an “addressee” (see: Bal, 2017:5). There are certainly finer discrepancies between these terms regarding how one interacts with a narrative text during the process of storytelling, typically dependent upon its medium, but regardless of whether one plays a video game or watches someone else play it, one is arguably experiencing similar actions and outcomes of events manifested *verbatim et literatim*.

The spatial-architecture in *Dark Souls* is eclectic, with many of the locations evocative, either overtly (see the figure below) or more vaguely, of real-world buildings from numerous architectural styles, including the medieval European Gothic, Khmer, and Romanesque. These visuals are ostensibly used to establish and maintain the setting of the game’s storyworld – the dark fantasy kingdom of Lordran. Still, there are also meaningful qualities deeply rooted beyond their surface value that emerge upon closer inspection of their design. Such underlying values are suggestive of an amalgamation of meaning-making devices (i.e., features that shape the spatial-architectural environment) that reflect the social, political, and cultural fears and anxieties of different societal groups inhabiting the kingdom of Lordran – prominent aspects of the dystopian genre, which I address below.

This amalgamation of visual imagery and literary devices leads to the realisation of over-layered meanings that emerge during gameplay, and which are embedded in – and embodied by – the various elements of the game’s environmental designs (Jenkins, 2004:123; Juul, 2005:163; Rieger, 2004:425-427). The implication is that combinations of spatial-architectural references in the gamespaces of *Dark Souls* bear recognisable themes, motifs, and imagery to suggest deeper levels of narrative meaning associated with aspects of the dystopian. This study thus sets out to refine extant approaches towards interpreting multivalent spatial-architectural environments in video games using spatial and architectural theories to analyse the gameworld and its composite gamespaces.

⁷ The present study is interdisciplinary in nature, embracing the transformative openness towards an interpretation of visual phenomena other than what are, strictly speaking, regarded as “art” and therefore worthy of art historical inquiry (Ferne, 1999:19).



Figure 1.1: Screenshot of Anor Londo, the godly seat of power in the kingdom of Lordran, which draws inspiration from Romanesque and Early Gothic architectural styles.

1.2. Theoretical points of departure

1.2.1. Multivalent architecture and spatial practices

Architecture is fundamentally concerned with an organisation of the experience of built spatial environments (Sauchelli, 2012:55). In any human-designed space, there are multiple layers of meaning that one perceives simultaneously. These overlap and are encoded with particular aspects of spatial meaning associated with what is perceived, understood, and enacted in that space (Zoran, 1984:311-315). These levels coalesce into 'frames', to establish and define an understanding of one's experience of that space (Lefebvre, 1991:33; Tschumi, 1994; Zoran, 1984:315). However, the value of architecture also extends beyond this spatial dimension to include diverse cultural aspects and influences as well.

According to Fourie (2018:292), several architectural theorists argue that architecture may, indeed, act as physical manifestations of cultural identities, as it inherently deals with socio-cultural concerns. Humans have historically used architecture not only as a means of constructing vernacular dwellings, but also as a medium to express their needs, values, and behavioural norms through visual means (Fourie, 2018:293; Smith, 2010; Bronner, 2014:3-4). As cultural artefacts, architecture has held a major influence over the activities that take place within the confines of its forms (McGregor, 2007:537). This influence is predicated upon the features of spatial-architecture

used to convey meaning through its visual design and the patterns of spatial use within its boundaries – two key points that form the basis of the arguments laid out in this section and expanded upon in Chapter Three.

The first of these points – architecture’s ability to carry multitudes of meaning – can be understood with reference to Jencks’ (1977) reflection on the ‘language’ of architecture⁸. His theory includes exploring the visual *codes* of architectural communication – a term Jencks (1977:39) uses to explain how architectural codes (which may be historical, functional, geographical and the like) function like a language, with variance and growth over time. Accordingly, Jencks (1977:42) further propounds that notions of duality inform a reading of architecture, and are, therefore guided by the concept of double-coded meaning. To this end, Jencks (1977) proposes a range of useful tools for interpreting architecture and the built environment.

Double-coding is also described as *multivalence*, which entails that an architectural instance can hold multiple values (meanings) that emerge as a result of interactions between its interpreted and coded meanings (Jencks, 1977:46; Guermazi, 2014; Michael *et al.*, 2020:53). By this, Jencks proposes that built structures are often subtly coded with metaphorical meanings that are not apparent until closer inspection, and that these can diverge from the practical use of a building by society at large (Jencks, 1977:60-62). An architectural object is therefore said to have both functional and allegorical dimensions that express deeper meanings beyond its surface value (Szacka, 2022).

The notion of multivalence thus serves as a basis for Jencks’ conception of an architectural language comprised of meaningful units – what he refers to, in linguistic terms, as architectural ‘words’ and ‘phrases’ that are combined according to conventions of ‘syntax’ and ‘semantics’ (Jencks, 1977:39) – with the assumption that there are common features of architectural and spatial designs present throughout numerous architectural styles. These elements are propounded to include any formal constituents that make up the stylistic design of an edifice or structure – details such as doors, windows, columns, partitions, and the like, as well as larger architectural features identified with styles (such as Gothic, classic, regional, and so on). These smaller, and larger elements constitute the literal building blocks of a structure and are then

⁸ In *The language of post-modern architecture* (1977), Jencks offers a critique of modern architecture and post-modern architecture as a frequent solution to perceived problems of modernist trends. More salient for the present study, however, is that in so doing, he explores how architecture communicates as a language, using codes, markers, metaphors and the like, which I discuss below (cf. Szacka, 2022).

thought to be used in conjunction with one another to guide one's understanding of architectural designs and styles (Jencks, 1977:72-75).

Grouping these elements together also constitutes *metaphorical codes*. This notion refers to how people tend to read and react to buildings in terms of similar objects or layouts that they have encountered before; often referring to how one may interpret something they see as another thing they know (Jencks, 1977:40). Furthermore, metaphorical codes suggest that as architectural elements are permeated through societal use, they become conventional, like a language, and thus sets of specific meanings are derived from the elements' physical context and visual forms by the viewer (Jencks, 1977:60; Morris, 1978:3). These design conventions amalgamate into a dynamic system of meaningful forms, elements, and patterns that arguably guide one's ability to read and understand the intended purpose of a building of any society in any context (Kurokawa, 1996).

Additionally, working with metaphorical codes gave rise to the consideration of 'spatial patterns' in architectural styles. Patterns⁹ are repetitions of architectural elements, recognisable from the rest of the built structure as a whole, that are thought to refer to previous instances of their workings in similar buildings, built environments, and surroundings (Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein, 1977:x). However, metaphorical codes may also refer to the underlying range of social activities suggested by these coded elements in specific instances of architectural designs or mimicry (McGregor, 2007:537; Venturi & Scott Brown, 2004:120).

The notions of architectural codes and patterns, and the conventional meanings associated with them, echo Lefebvre's (1991) approach to the social production of space, which entails that one perceives space as a multi-levelled architectural construct regarding the production (and subsequent reproduction) of meaning through human movement and activities. In other words, both spatial designs and architecture anticipate user engagement to produce a meaningful and immersive experience (Melnic, 2018:24; Roth, Van Nuenen & Koenitz, 2018:42). Similar phenomena have been observed in video games, where Jenkins (2004:121) has argued that video games enact storytelling through their world design and gamespace, usually to the benefit of gameplay needs; surmised in his now famous entitlement of game designers (and level

⁹ Christopher Alexander is another architect who picked up on this phenomenon. Alexander (1977) uses the term 'pattern language' in his discourse on architectural design solutions, but his focus was centred more on the practical application of this theoretical point of departure – something that would be better suited to the construction of gamespaces and is beyond the scope of the present study.

designers, specifically) as “narrative architects” that design worlds for storytelling complementary to gameplay.

Therefore, spatial and architectural meaning requires a measure of familiarity with patterns and codes developed from one’s own experiences to make sense of the meanings embedded in spatial-architectural features found in other physical (and virtual) contexts. However, their related meanings allow new paths to be discovered between these patterns and for new meanings to emerge from conventional forms based on their context *and usage* in any space – whether real or virtual. Thus, the present study explores how meanings associated with the dystopian emerge from the codes, metaphors, and patterns (and the like) in the spatial-architectural gameworld of *Dark Souls*.

Although Jencks’ (1977) theory offers a helpful approach towards reading the meaning of architectural and spatial designs, his ideas can be supplemented by highlighting the importance of anticipated changes in the *dynamic* meanings of spatial-architectural features and the environments they constitute. In this regard, Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualisation of space as socially constructed phenomenon acknowledges that the meanings of spaces can change over time, according to the needs of those inhabiting it. Thus, spatial-architectural metaphors are not fixed; instead, they convey meanings according to the metaphorical associations that one ascribes to its visual presentation, as well as the functional needs and practices of the people who use it for a particular purpose at a particular moment in time (Alexander, 2002:13; Michael *et al.*, 2020:51; Jencks, 1977:58; Kurokawa, 1991).

1.2.2. *Dark Souls* and the dystopian storyworld

*Dark Souls*¹⁰ is an action-adventure role-playing game set in the fictional dark fantasy kingdom of Lordran. It provides players with complex, challenging spatial experiences, such as dungeon crawling, cinematic boss fights, navigation through unmapped areas, and the exploration of a

¹⁰ I feel it pertinent to note here that I use ‘*Dark Souls*’ throughout this study to refer to the first entry into FromSoftware’s *Souls* trilogy. *Dark Souls: Remastered* (2018) is the latest version of the game currently available, with no plans for future updates, and the game remains – on a technical level – mostly unchanged since its initial release in September 2011. Thus, the gamespace as I have observed it over the course of this study does not differ drastically between the most recent and earlier versions of the game, aside from the later inclusion of additional areas in the *Artorias of the Abyss* DLC from 2012 onwards.

medieval European-inspired kingdom on the brink of collapse. The main premise of its fictional storyworld revolves around the cyclical nature of Fire, brought into being by the advent of Disparity, and how manifestations of its flame – also known as ‘souls’ – granted exceptional power to four exalted beings who came to rule over its domain as Lords. The main storyline of the game deals with the prophesied downfall of Lordran, in the aftermath of (what is implied to have been) a centuries-long war between the combined forces of the Lords and the ancient dragons that once ruled the world before Fire came into being, and the more recent rise of a mysterious curse afflicting humanity in the wake of Fire’s fading.

Players assume the role of an undead warrior – a human cursed to return to life after death, at the incremental loss of their will and sense of self – who embarks on a pilgrimage to Lordran. Here, they are tasked with uncovering the fate of their kind, and to eventually succeed these once powerful beings as the new ‘Lord of Cinder’. By the end of the game, the player is therefore offered an existential choice that determines the future course of the storyworld (cf. Podgorski, 2019). They may either sacrifice their character – with all the power they have accrued over the course of playing the game – to ‘link’ the Fire and preserve the world as it is or, they may leave Fire unkindled and thus, seemingly, allow Lordran to fall further into a state desolation – as it is inevitably anticipated to do so.



Figure 1.2: Screenshot of an undead human openly weeping in Lordran.

The gameworld of *Dark Souls* hereby presents an intriguing approach to fictional worldbuilding and storytelling that actively encourages player-led exploration through large, interconnected environments reminiscent of grim, and somewhat dystopian tales. From demon-infested ruins to unsettling forests filled with sentient flora, trap-ridden medieval fortresses, and even a ramshackle town on the edge of an immense sewer system, *Dark Souls* incorporates the layout of intricate spatial-architectural designs with interconnected gameplay levels¹¹ that suggest subtle expositions of its thematically driven narratives. The true significance of each area is often left unknown to the player because they first need to uncover and piece together contextual clues, often of a spatial-architectural nature as well, that are intermittently revealed through environmental set pieces, optional interactions with non-player characters (NPCs), and in-game item descriptions found by thoroughly exploring the gamespace.



Figure 1.3: Screenshot of a knight, Solaire, contemplating a damaged altar in Lordran.

¹¹ Picard (2023:170) uses the term 'level' to refer to the distinct stages of gamespace involved in the player's progression of a video game. However, this implies that gamespace is partitioned into separate subspaces that are loosely connected to each other, which is not comparable to the study of a more cohesive gameworld like Lordran where areas of gamespace lead directly into one another without the need of selection menu or similar ludic interface.

The interconnected areas and environments constituting the gameworld of *Dark Souls* are thus comprised of multiple layers of underlying metaphorical meanings that tie in with their use as the setting for narrative and gameplay events, and allegories of types of spaces found in the real world. In *Dark Souls*, parallels are often drawn between the suffering faced by inhabitants in its dystopian society and the actions taken by their rulers of state. Yet a contrast exists in the ways these characters appear to define their own lived space as something separate from what is anticipated (upon first arrival) to be a ‘derelict wasteland’ – and thus dystopian since the term primarily refers to a diseased, unfavourable, or ‘bad’ place (Doron, 2000:254; Claeys, 2017:4-5).

Through their own actions and spatial practices, many of the non-player characters in *Dark Souls* seem to have transformed their spaces into welcoming havens for those like them who do not conform to the ideals set by their rulers of state. As a result, the player is often left questioning whether they should believe what they have been told about the areas visited, or whether they should work to uncover the truth of matters for themselves. Dystopian narratives typically feature a speculative society built on state secrecy or prevarication, using this to explore the lengths people in power will go to ensure their social privilege is upheld. Early dystopias thus emerged in literary works of fiction that deal with an antonymic form of ‘utopian ideals’ or the utopia – the latter referring to either a “good place” (Greek: *eu-tópos*) or a “not-place” that cannot reasonably exist (Greek: *u-tópos*).

Whereas utopian treatises like Sir Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (1516) and Plato’s *Republic* (375 BC) describe a perfect commonwealth – places that are said to be exceptionally beautiful and impeccably well-governed – the dystopian is often intended to be read as a critique of such utopian enterprises (Sargent, 1992:188). Dystopias (as a foil to various notions of the utopian) entail an anticipated state of decline in an imagined society, with implied references to actual or imagined instances, historical situations, or events (Claeys, 2017:4-5). Some of the most prominent examples of dystopias are seen in novels like Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) – works that have arguably laid the foundational groundwork for the dystopian to emerge as genre in its own right.

Although dystopian narratives may typically deal with instances of societies that often have no tangible relation to real-world experiences, they do still require a measure of familiarity on the part of the reader with spatial experiences in the ‘real world’ – or player, in the present instance – for one to be able to engage with the text (in the broadest sense; to include any instance of its visual material that can be ‘read’) and understand its narrative content. The anticipated decline of social

and political order is thus projected into a speculative landscape, and the setting of a dystopian narrative arguably becomes central to examining social and political systems taken to the extreme. The term ‘landscape’ is used here to refer to environments – either real or depicted, in the case of literary and digital media – that are shaped and modified for use by human agency and thus become inscribed with narrative markers (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016:163).

Moreover, dystopian narratives are almost always focused on a well-established city-state (or similar civilised place) that, despite experiencing a decline in living conditions and social structures, continues to hold significant value to the people who choose to live there – a literal *tópos* (Greek: τόπος; “place, location”) gone bad, as it were, that relates narrative concerns of space with character and event¹² (cf. Bal, 2017:130). Narrative space – in this instance, the gameworld – therefore provides a means of organising the dystopian, allowing one to not only read it through association to their own experiences, but understand it through narrative comprehension (cf. de Certeau, 1988:115; Phillips, 2008:73). This sense of embodiment is only further enhanced by the use of interactive fiction – like that found in video games (cf. Murray, 1997:25; Attademo, 2023:39).

Most of the inhabitants in these dystopian settings are shown to lead fearful and dehumanised lives, which leads to the tendency of their narratives to explore darker, despondent pictures of one’s own reality. Dystopian settings thus offer critical perspectives on the corruptible nature of humanity through the medium of storytelling, complemented by environmentally embedded narratives, alongside a forced confrontation with the faults present within socio-cultural structures (Barton, 2016:7-13; Beecher, 2000:90; Claeys, 2017:7). Such representations of dystopian settings are often seen as ironic commentaries on the real world, using exaggerated, satirical portrayals that serve as vehicles for commentary on contemporary socio-political issues using narrative devices like metaphor, allegory, and parody (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:413).

In Lordran, this is achieved by implementing architectural and other spatial components that link each environment to an overarching theme of the dystopian using narrative unfolding. In a sense, there are repetitions of spatial designs and elements prevalent throughout the gameworld-as-text

¹² A similar sentiment is expressed by the Japanese word *machi* (Japanese: まち; “town”), which is often used to denote an intimate relationship between the material structure of one’s physical environment and the social activities associated with that site (Satoh, 2019:128).

that mark, relate, or allude to deeper levels of meaning – akin to thematic leitmotifs¹³. As I explore below, leitmotifs of the dystopian in *Dark Souls* are most prominently presented through allegorical aspects present in its visual forms and narration; thematic concerns of sovereignty, chaos, death and decay; and dilapidated architectural designs in the gameworld.

1.2.3. The spatial-architectural nature of gamespace

Video games are often said to contain a network of ‘active’ spaces that enact staging grounds for gameplay and narrative events to take place – what Edrei (2016:19) refers to as paradigms modelled on active real-time engagement and actions, and what Zoran (1984:315) and Jenkins (2004:123) refer to as ‘chronotopic zones’ of (gameplay) action or player movement. These active spaces may be interspersed with more ‘inert’ spatial pathways and routes that allow for breaks between these events, thus organising the player’s progression through gamespace into a ‘rhythm’ of movement that emerges between their character’s avatar and the fictional space they inhabit (Whistance-Smith, 2022:52-54). In other words, most forms of gamespace thus employ a series of connected nodes or cores – sites that become noteworthy because of the activities associated with their positioning or layout – that allow players to engage with, disrupt, and replicate spatial experiences through the act of playing the game (Lammes, 2008:94).

Gamespace thus remediates the spatial narrativity inherent in real-world architecture, installation art, theme parks, and designed landscapes by employing techniques of spatial expression unique to these domains to the benefit of environmental storytelling (cf. Jenkins, 2004; Ryan *et al*, 2016). This perspective suggests a ludonarrative¹⁴ intersection between the textual aspects of a video game and the experience of gameplay activities without downplaying the game’s rules of play or supplementary narrative content. In this sense, engaging with a video game means that one should strive to ascribe equal measures of importance to ‘reading’ the text (through what is

¹³ Originating from musicology, the term refers to a recurring theme throughout an artistic composition that can be associated with a particular person, idea, or situation (Sadie & Tyrrell, 2001:49). In *Dark Souls*, the leitmotif of the dystopian is most prominently presented through allegorical aspects present in its visual forms and narration; thematic concerns of sovereignty, chaos, death and decay; and dilapidated architectural designs in the gameworld (Podgorksi, 2019).

¹⁴ This term refers to the intersection of the ludic (gaming) and narrative elements of a video game (Koenitz, 2018:1). Roth *et al.* (2018:10) use the term ‘ludonarrative’ in direct reference to investigations concerned with the ‘phenomenon of narrative in interactive media’.

represented in gamespace) and the responsive actions of one who engages with its content – the ‘story’ that a player co-authors with the game (cf. Iser, 1972:279). Both activities require substantial effort and continuous input from the player to navigate and comprehend their meaning, but they arguably work together to form the game’s ludonarrative construct – its gameworld (Aarseth, 1997:2; McManus & Feinstein, 2006:363).

Additionally, a ludonarrative perspective also allows one to bypass the tediously heated debates regarding the academic standpoint one ‘should’ take when analysing the content of a video game as either a simulated system of play or a visual representation of narrative texts (see: Aarseth, 2012; Jenkins, 2004; Koenitz, 2018; McManus & Feinstein, 2006:363; Ang & Zaphiris, 2006). Video games are intricate works of art that usually challenge a player to operate from any singular point of ontological reference. As software programs with the ability to emulate multi-media art forms, they simulate complex multi-modal networks of interplay and interaction that are actualised via the representation of visual forms across multiple channels, effectively making them multi-modal forms of interactive media (Aarseth, 2012:2; Massey, 2005:24; Rieger, 2004:425; Szymański, 2018:87-88). In practice, these are key interwoven aspects of how a video game functions – that of its narrative content, and the actualisation of its rules and mechanics of gameplay. Therefore, to investigate how any kind of meaning is conveyed in a video game through visual representation, one must consider the *means* by which it is actualised in gamespace.

I highlight gamespace as a principal entity of ludonarrative concern, because it constitutes the virtual environment that a player experiences during gameplay. The difference between *gamespace* and the *gameworld* is that the former refers to all the spatial frames and locations relevant to the ‘plot’ of a game, while the latter extends to include the continuous space between and beyond the locations named in the text (Aarseth, 2012:2-4; Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24-25). Therefore, one can regard gamespaces as apposite for the present study because they can express narrative meaning and thematic issues, since their formal units constitute the game’s “tangible dimension” that seeks to evoke meaningful responses in the player (Aarseth, 1997:2-3; Bruner, 2004; Eco, 2006; Melnic, 2018:23). Simply put, gamespace is the object of inquiry while the gameworld is a cognitive domain that assists one in conceptualising the game’s setting.

This distinction between space as a setting and space as an object allows one to further distinguish between their aspects of meaning by identifying values of spaces that are *functional* (mainly referring to means of use in-game) and those that are *metaphorical* (referring to deeper levels of underlying referential meaning) (Aarseth, 2012:3; Gerber, 2019:171; Stockburger,

2006:75). Jenkins (2004:123) posits that this manner of utilising spatial forms as vehicles of narrative meaning creates the ‘preconditions for an immersive narrative experience’, accounting for the treatment of gamespace as a means of spatial or, indeed, environmental storytelling. When utilised with visual storytelling techniques, gamespace effectively creates the “preconditions for an immersive narrative experience” (Jenkins, 2004:123). This is achieved via the implementation of embedded meaning-making features such as metaphors, analogies, patterns, and the like, that allude to a preconceived purpose or function in the context of the game (Austin, 2020a:157; Jenkins, 2004:123; Koenitz, 2018:2-3).

The gameworld of Lordran in *Dark Souls* can therefore be divided into self-contained areas charged with narrative possibility that each serve an important role in the development of the game’s accompanying story; gamespaces which themselves are comprised of unique instances of spatial-architectural constructions. These spatial-architectural constructions, in their various manifestations, therefore serve as the constituents of the gameworld, in addition to functioning as visual clues for the physical and mental construction of its spatial layout (Massey, 2005:24; Melnic, 2018:25; Ryan, 2014). The functional meaning of spatial-architectural features can therefore be derived via analogies to real-world architectural styles and designs, in addition to gameplay-related factors such as the rules-based mechanics of play, and the player’s possible assumptions based on historical connotations with similar representations of elements in other areas (cf. Juul, 2005:173).

Moreover, in this sense, the gameworld of *Dark Souls* can be viewed as a construct of multivalent spatial-architecture since (i) a deeper understanding of the world and its history is not needed to appreciate its (more obvious) imagery; (ii) it encourages players to develop their own, subjective understanding of the world and its inhabitants; and (iii) metaphorical meanings are subtly coded in its gamespace via environments, architectural forms, and other related structures. This premise is based on the fact that meaning is derived from conventional and natural means. Still, the conventional meaning of architectural forms tends to dominate natural signification (Jencks, 1977:77-78). Furthermore, the interactive and performative spaces in video games are often designed with a particular function, role, or player goal in mind (Jacucci & Wagner, 2005:192; Lindley, 2005), which means that its metaphorical content is intrinsically linked to its represented spaces and how they simulate narrative events.

1.3. Methodology – a model for reading spatial-architectural features in video games

The present study seeks to refine extant approaches towards the interpretation of spatial-architectural features in multivalent gamespace and to explore how these can be used to explore additional, encoded meanings in the gameworlds of video games. This study therefore aims to find correlations and patterns in how spatial-architectural features in video games are encoded with metaphorical meaning that guides a player's understanding of spatial experiences in-game. In addition, it seeks to present a synthesis of how concepts related to the game's narrative and dystopian tropes are communicated via these features.

As discussed above, various means of analysing how space communicates or conveys meaning exist. Still, most of these theories and methods are specifically designed to investigate instances of real space. Gamespace may be seen as allegorical of real space, however, it still requires a means of categorising and exploring the meaning of spatial-architectural features (cf. Aarseth, 2007:44; Waltz, 2010:98). Metaphor is thus a key point of the representations of spatial-architectural in a gameworld, and allows for links to be made to other elements of physical spaces in the real world as well as other areas in the game (Alexander, 2002:13; Michael *et al.*, 2020:51; Jencks, 1977:58; Kurokawa, 1991). This marks a need to read spatial-architectural features regarding what the combined, recurring sequence of representations convey through their spatial relations and, also, the thematised links they establish to the narrative tropes of the dystopian genre.

This section hereby aims to establish a framework for analysing the storyworld that may be developed from playing a video game – hereafter referred to as a gameworld – situating it within an overlap of interdisciplinary concerns that argue the incidental functioning of spaces and their formal constituents may lie at the heart of their motive, but do not constitute their meaning alone. Utilising theories regarding space and architecture – mainly based on the points of departure as outlined above by Jencks and Lefebvre – as tools for the interpretation and analysis of a video game's spatial-architectural elements, five main categories of spatial-architectural features can guide the interpretation of the video game under study:

- i. **Sequential emic units** – the visual characteristics and features of architectural designs that are used to construct spatial-architectural forms (e.g., doors, paths, points of egress, and the like)
- ii. **Spatial markers** – elements that link others with regards to their spatial positioning in relation to one another

- iii. **Metaphors and metonymy** – elements that are encoded with a layer of deeper meaning associated with cultural, geographical, temporal, political, historical, or other similar categories and frameworks of reference
- iv. **Allegories** – extended metaphors that are consistently used throughout the ‘text’ of the game; relating, in the context of the present study, to their treatment of dystopian themes and concepts
- v. **Spatial patterns and their guiding leitmotifs** – these are repetitions and collections of elements that inform one of the kind of activities (spatial practices) take place in a specific spatial context

Once these components have been identified within specific instances of gamespace, links can be drawn between the functional and metaphoric roles of spatial-architectural objects in the context of the gamespace, highlighting values that express metaphorical meanings related to the overarching theme of the dystopian.

1.4. Problem statement

The overall aim of this study is to explore how dystopian tropes are communicated through the multivalent spatial-architecture in the video game *Dark Souls*. More specifically, this concerns the metaphorical meanings embedded in sections of gamespace that are evocative (either implicitly or more overtly) of dystopian qualities.

1.4.1 Research questions and objectives

Four research questions emanate from this statement, establishing the objectives of this study:

- i. What tropes are conceptualised in prominent dystopian literature, with special reference to visual and spatial corollaries? *The first objective of this study is to explore notions of the dystopian with emphasis on its thematic, visual, and narrativised characteristics in works of art. This aims to identify key characteristics of dystopian societies that can be linked to similarities in their lived spaces and setting.*
- ii. How can apposite spatial-architectural considerations guide the development of an appropriate methodological approach for exploring the gamespaces and gameworld associated with a video game? *The second objective is methodological, focusing on how a gameworld’s underlying layers of meaning are conveyed via their spatial-architectural*

features. This objective seeks to provide a coherent and sustainable means of analysing instances of gamespace and relating their spatial-architectural elements to analogous themes presented by their texts.

- iii. How is multivalent spatial-architecture conceptualised in extant literature? *The third objective of this study seeks to explore the interrogation of multivalent spatial-architecture by considering theoretical expositions of architectural and spatial meaning-making, with reference to how the representations of space in a video game can often be conceptualised as having a salient role in the unfolding of a narrative. This will be achieved by reviewing salient theories regarding the complex, multi-levelled natures of space and architecture, drawing corollaries between similar concepts and means of representation.*
- iv. How does the multivalent spatial-architecture of Lordran in the gameworld of *Dark Souls* convey its dystopian themes? *The final objective of this study is to interpret how leitmotifs of the dystopian are achieved in Dark Souls. Here, the proposed model is used to interpret specific instances of spatial-architectural features and their significations from the gamespace of Lordran, establishing how these elements work to construct a gameworld characterised by dystopian elements.*

1.5. Central theoretical statement

Gamespace is organised and enacted to facilitate gameplay events as they unfold, but it also organises where these events occur in the grand scheme of the game's 'narration'. Additionally, it is constituted, most saliently, of spatial-architectural features that contribute towards underlying thematic and metaphorical meanings. These meanings may be used in tandem with the act of playing a game to inform one's conception of an encapsulating gameworld.

As with architecture, the gameworld is constituted by composite spatial-architectural features that communicate meaning like a language, using codes, metaphors, patterns, and the like. These features make up the primary mode of communication between the system's processes and its user – the player. Such communication is predicated upon the player's engagement with gamespace and their subsequent ability to read, interpret, and reproduce spatial practices in accordance with their gameplay needs.

Furthermore, I argue that lacking a proper model to address these concerns systematically, the model I propose for reading spatial-architectural features allows for the interpretation of leitmotifs representing thematic concerns – such as those characteristic of the dystopian – and may find broader application in other ludic, or other spatially signifying contexts. In this vein, I argue that the gameworld and its constituent gamespaces in *Dark Souls* represent the dystopian in their organisation, structure, and consequent associative meanings. Its gamespace is therefore a multivalent spatial-architectural construct containing prominent spatial-architectural features that work subtly to guide one's comprehension of the gameworld as dystopian.

1.6. Research methodology

This research is qualitative, and the methodological framework is therefore divided into (i) a literature study of salient publications on the notions of the dystopian genre, multivalence, space, and spatial-architecture in a ludonarrative context. This is followed by (ii) an interpretation of the spatial-architecture in *Dark Souls* as representative of the dystopian.

Nexus and national ETD searches indicate that sufficient resources are available for this study, and that a similar study has not yet been undertaken.

1.6.1 Literature study

The central sources consulted in this research include various published books, journals, and internet articles. The most notable sources include: *The language of post-modern architecture* (1977) by Charles Jencks; *The production of space* (1991) by Henri Lefebvre; and *The age of dystopia: one genre, our fears and our future* (2016) edited by Louisa MacKay Demerjian.

Further sources include *Becoming Utopian: the culture and politics of radical transformation* (2021) by Thomas P. Moylan; *Narrating space / spatializing narrative: where narrative theory and geography meet* by Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu; and *Towards a theory of space in narrative* (1984) by Gabriel Zoran.

For ludological purposes, *Allegories of space: The question of spatiality in computer games* (2007) by Espen Aarseth is salient; as well as *Game design as narrative architecture* (2004) by Henry Jenkins; and *Situations of play: patterns of spatial use in videogames* (2007) by Georgia Leigh McGregor.

1.7. Work plan

This chapter has presented a formal introduction to the study; outlining the nature of my research and providing a brief overview of the theoretical points of departure, problem statement, research questions, objectives, methodology, and a brief literature review.

Chapter Two provides a literature study of utopian/dystopian discourse and briefly explores dystopian tropes as they appear in the wider genre.

Chapter Three contends with the outline of a 'dystopian storyworld', using a discussion of narrative elements to contextualise this cognitive domain within a foundation of theories regarding narrative space. Thus, it explores notions of multivalence, space, and spatial-architecture with specific reference to meaning-making processes in the subjective construction of a storyworld. It also presents the methodological approach towards the interpretation that follows in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Four then proceeds with an exploration of spatial signification regarding thematisation and more complex allegorical significations of the dystopian in *Dark Souls*, while Chapter Five engages with an interpretation and analysis of the gamespaces and select spatial-architectural features identified with dystopian characteristics in *Dark Souls*. These arguments are drawn back to the matters explored in Chapters Two and Three to demonstrate the interwovenness of multivalent values that signal to the dystopian in *Dark Souls*.

In closing, Chapter Six summarises the main concerns of the study, including concluding insights and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE DYSTOPIAN GENRE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

*There is no path.
Beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of Dark...
...what could possibly await us?
And yet, we seek it, insatiably...
Such is our fate.*

- Lord Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin (*Dark Souls II*)

2.1. Introduction

In the introduction, I mentioned that early dystopias emerged in literary fiction that deals with an antonymic form of the utopia – novels like Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and so on. However, the dystopian settings that originated in these works have since expanded beyond thematic set dressing to include topics more complex than a simple anti-utopian critique or near inhospitable conditions (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:414; Heuser, 2003:xxiv; Schmeink, 2016:197). In recent years, the dystopian has arguably become a self-standing genre that seeks to interrogate the extreme consequences of mankind's ambition when they go beyond mortal limitations; when they attempt to break the natural order of things and bring ruin to the whole world. The objective of this chapter is to further reflect on the defining notions of early dystopian fiction with emphasis on its thematic, visual, and narrative characteristics found in works of dystopian literature and art across the genre. This aims to identify key characteristics of dystopian societies that can be linked to their narrative spaces; to demonstrate the benefits of foregrounding space when analysing dystopian elements of *Dark Souls* in this study's interpretation chapters (four and five).

This chapter is structured to explore dystopian fiction – its roots, major themes, and narrative compositions – in such a way that accommodates more recent trends in the broader genre from the last twenty or so years. I begin with an overview of dystopian fiction – its nascent stages from a refusal of utopian treatises and social movements, thus referencing the early dystopian

rejections to utopian ideologies and philosophy. To acknowledge the contributions and influences of more well-known authors – novelists such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Margaret Atwood – references to several popular dystopian narratives are included where appropriate to illustrate arguments made. Narrative, and indeed artistic, representations of dystopian spaces are often portrayed as ironic commentary on the real world, using exaggerated, satirical portrayals of an ominous future as vehicles for commentary on immanent socio-political issues (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:413).

This overview is followed by a review of how the dystopian has changed since its inception as an anti-utopian critique, and its relevant association with other science and speculative fiction subgenres such as apocalyptic fiction and the cyberpunk¹⁵ movement that emerged after the publication of William Gibson's *Burning Chrome* short story collection (c.1976-1986) and award-winning *Sprawl* trilogy (1984-1988). Indeed, the growing popularity of science fiction post-1950 may have led to utopian/dystopian fiction being swallowed up into this broader category since they share overlapping concerns for futuristic social, scientific, and technological innovations. However, as I explore later, that does not mean that all dystopian works are contingent on scientific or technological prospects. Categorically speaking, they are no longer a form of science fiction because their focus remains on such developments' oppressive and destructive effects on humanity and not the innovations themselves (Claeys, 2017:285-286).

Indeed, the chosen artefact under investigation in this study, *Dark Souls*, displays many characteristics typical of dystopian narratives and is described as being set in a dark *fantasy* universe by its development team at FromSoftware¹⁶. The finer distinctions may also emerge from the belief that 'hard-science fiction' imagines purely speculative situations, while the dystopian contents with possible or alternative realities that are argued to be far more likely to occur in the near or distant future (cf. Amis, 1963:18; Paschalidis, 2000:43). Even so, despite the appearance of major themes and trends across the genre, dystopian literature poses a noteworthy resistance to set generic boundaries and definitions. This is likely the case because, as is especially

¹⁵ Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that features advanced technological and scientific achievements sometimes juxtaposed with 'dehumanised' dystopian elements of state surveillance, overcrowded cities, economic failure, and technophilia (Graham, 2012:85). Its focus is on anti-capitalist and anti-consumerism critique, typically in the style of a film noir, action film, or crime fiction – like *Blade Runner* (1982), for example. Although cyberpunk narratives often feature dystopian elements, they are not mutually exclusive categories of science/speculative fiction.

¹⁶ See link to the official product page on Bandai Namco Europe: <https://en.bandainamcoent.eu/dark-souls/dark-souls>

noticeable from the 1960s onwards, it is susceptible to genre-bending and the influence of other prominent literary trends – which has arguably been beneficial to its popularity in recent years since it is not restricted by the traits of generic conventions (cf. Claeys, 2017:270; Donawerth, 2003:29).

Nevertheless, despite defying a more conventional categorisation, the major themes and concerns of dystopian narratives seem to remain in alignment with a pronounced critique of human misbehaviour and harmful socio-cultural movements. This allows one to categorise dystopian narratives according to the themes shared across the genre, which are distinguishable through minor variations in the thematic patterns that emerge from them. According to Beecher (2000:90), there are three variations of the dystopian theme found in the genre: (i) the horrific realisation of utopian dreams; (ii) parodies that mock utopian movements, enterprises, and philosophy; and (iii) “dark pictures of the world” that explore the corruptible human condition. These variations appear to coincide with developmental periods of dystopian literature from the late nineteenth century onwards. The latter variation, in particular, seems to have become increasingly popular in recent years, with works that fall into this category displaying a tendency to reflect analogous fears, anxieties, and concerns surrounding prominent themes of dehumanisation, radical social and human transformation, and total ecological disaster.

Although not a trademark feature of the genre, most dystopian narratives present a debilitating fear of change that appears to stem from their fictional rulers of state, when these characters challenge what is implied to be the ‘natural order’ of things (Phillips, 2008:69; cf. Claeys, 2017:7). This fear is often reflected through their focus on anxieties surrounding the social, political, and cultural trends that arise within societal groups following some manner of a cataclysmic event horizon. Common occurrences include warfare, natural disasters, revolutions, pandemics, and invasions from alien beings; together with the anxieties associated with these. This condition surrounding fear has become a core tenet of the inspiration for dystopian literature – the cultural expression where the dystopian emerged as a trope.

Fear, in the dystopian context, thus serves as a powerful motivation for the actions taken by characters in these narratives, and similarly so for the authors and artists involved with its creation. According to MacLeod and Ward (2002:161), a sense of irrational fear is what inspires an excessive need for enforced security in the dystopian state – to protect what one values most in the world after it has fallen – and consequently leads to the division of people by means of segregation (MacLeod & Ward, 2002:161). Tensions emerge between the disparate groups of the oppressive and the oppressed as power struggles rise and public spaces become contested,

and the eventual conflicts that arise from these tensions constitute the events of the narrative. Additionally, it would seem that this structure offers readers, authors, and artists an emotionally cathartic narrative experience, allowing them to work through these fears and anxieties in a relatively 'safe' environment – i.e. through storytelling and similar creative pursuits (MacLeod & Ward, 2002:161; Phillips, 2008:73; Poladian, 2016:76-85).

A dystopian society – like the utopian – is by all accounts imaginary, yet it is made to *feel* real with analogous depictions of communities that often demonstrate an exaggerated concern over such issues as overpopulation, global warfare, unsustainable resource use, and widespread societal collapse. In this way, the dystopian trope – while fictional in literature, visual artworks, films, and games – seems to suggest an ominous possibility of becoming real. This concern provides a basis for the dystopian critique of current trends in popular socio-cultural movements and socio-political structures while simultaneously encouraging profound introspection of the salient matters addressed in these narratives and visions (Barton, 2016:7-13; Beecher, 2000:90). In this sense, a primary goal associated with dystopian narratives is to convey a message that 'things are getting worse' in a manner that the entirety of its audience can easily understand and thus, perhaps, hopes to inspire awareness of prominent issues that can affect public change for the better.

2.2. The rise of dystopian critique against utopianism

Dystopian narratives explore what may be regarded as a complete disjunction between idyllic expressions of utopian desires towards a better future and how the historical actions taken to 'secure' such futures were achieving the opposite (Levitas & Sargisson, 2003:14). This is perhaps best exemplified in the horrors of the World Wars (1914-1918; 1939-1945), where technological and scientific innovation was used for the wholesale destruction and alienation of humanity, often with a mindset of ensuring 'everyone does their part' to prevent the 'enemy' from winning. Such mindsets are often far more complex than a reduced dichotomy of an 'us' versus a 'them' categorisation could hope to describe adequately. It is evident that the dystopian, through allusion to considerable trends in human geopolitics and history, offers a nuanced critique on active social, cultural, and political issues prevalent in both localised and globalised societies since the advent of unprecedented twentieth-century events that have reshaped the known world.

Therefore, dystopian narratives are, in many senses, a direct critique of the visions and developmental goals derived from speculative works of utopian societies or imagined paradises.

Although the dreams and goals of utopianism – a general label for utopian socialist movements and theories – had led to the establishment of utopian literature and social movements, there have been no formal entreaties of dystopian ideologies to inform dystopian literature (Claeys, 2017:4-5). Renowned academics in the political and social sciences such as L.T. Sargent (1975:138) and Krishan Kumar (1987:224) have surmised the concept of dystopias as categorically “bad places” – the term often being synonymous with ‘anti-utopian’ or negative utopian critique – while simultaneously acknowledging a limitation and difficulty in defining the concept comprehensively (cf. Claeys, 2017:273). Using utopian ideologies as a foil for the theoretical underpinnings of dystopian literature may indeed illuminate differences between the two genres. Yet, dystopian notions are, as I argue in this section, more than simply one side of the metaphorical coin that embodies the utopian/dystopian discourse.

Historical utopian community projects – such as those inspired by the Fourier *phalanstère*¹⁷ (French: “phalanstery”) and Owenite experiments discussed briefly below – typically propose collective action towards radical social and human transformation. The selling point of such utopian communities usually markets a widely held view regarding an ‘impulse of hope’ for developing revolutionary socio-political frameworks and scientific innovations that are anticipated to give rise to an ideal human society in the near future (Kumar, 1987:285-286). According to Moylan (2021:4-5), to believe in the utopian is to break free from one’s ideological constraints of the past and “acknowledge that the existing world order is no longer sufficient” for a humanity that seeks to succeed in the future. Utopian ideals thus assert that there is room for public improvements, together with a sense of recognition that perfection (which is always vaguely defined with a subjective framing) can be achieved with radical social and political reforms implemented through architectural and urban solutions designed around close-knit communes (cf. Baridon, 2017:2).

Some of the earliest conceptions of a utopian society can be found in Plato’s philosophical dialogue entitled *Republic* (ca. 375 BCE) and Sir Thomas Moore’s ostensibly parodic rewrite of this dialogue entitled *Utopia* (1516). Both works are written in transitory periods of history and

¹⁷ This term was coined by Charles Fourier (see below) to describe a type of building he designed for a self-contained socialistic community. It is likely derived from *phalange* (French: “phalanx”) + *monastère* (French: “monastery”), and possibly used to evoke Plato’s idea of an ideal state that comprises of rulers, guardians, and producers (Baridon, 2017:3; Knapowski, 2023:10). Although the design was never standardised, it does appear to share similarities with Godin’s *Le Familistère* (French: “*The social palace*”) from the 1850s, a project designed to improve housing for working class citizens in the Guise, France.

noteworthy socio-political reform that caused a sudden, if expected, upheaval of the *status quo* in the writers' respective societies – Plato's in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian war and Moore's around the beginning of the Protestant Reformation movement in Europe. These treatises detail imaginary societies that are built upon the principal foundations of rational thought, human decency, and equity. Although Plato and Moore are often cited as the progenitors of utopian thought, their early conceptions of utopias are implied to be *impossible* to realise in the near or even distant future. Both Plato and Moore use ambiguity consistently throughout their texts to reinforce the fundamental quality of utopias as non-existent.



Figure 2.1: Woodcut from the 1518 edition of Moore's *Utopia* by Ambrosius Holbein, depicting the island of Utopia.

Furthermore, according to Moore's definition and related notions in his essay, utopias are literally "no-places" (Greek: *ou* + *tópos*) intended to be conceived only in literature and the mind. Arguments are decisively made that any means of trying to recreate such visions as described in these treatises would surely result in a perversion of the true utopian object, alongside snippets of satirical commentary hinting at the ridicule of any utopian projects seeking to do so (Levitas & Sargisson, 2003:13; Rouillard, 2008:10). For example, Moore's naming of the narrator as 'Raphael Hythloday' (derived from *hythlodæus*; Latin: "dispenser of nonsense") and the river that provides water to the isle of Utopia as "Anhydra" – which can be interpreted from the Latin forms as meaning 'without water' – certainly indicates as much to Baridon (2017:2). Yet, despite such interpretations of Moore's text as satire, the visions of perfectly realised, self-governed states described in these utopian treatises appears to have remained desirable to some Western writers well into the seventeenth century. The later publications of Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623) expanded on the ideas in these texts, along with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and aspects of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), assuredly bringing utopian thinking to the foreground of Western theories regarding social organisation for centuries after that (Dalley, 2015).

Regardless, it was not until the interjection of European socialists and philanthropists such as Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837), and Robert Owen (1771-1858) that a genuine utopian philosophy arguably started to emerge. Fourier especially held staunch public opinions on civilisation, labour laws, and women's rights, and is credited as being one of the pioneers of utopian socialism despite a lack of emphasis regarding conflicts surrounding economic inequality (Brustein & Roberts, 2015:33). Many of his theories, along with some of Owen's earlier writings¹⁸, became remarkably popular during decolonisation efforts of the Americas and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, inspiring new divisions of budding socialist movements that pursued a 'new utopian horizon' through the establishment of harmonious, cooperative, and altruistic collectives and welfare schemes (Newman, 2005:7).

According to Knapowski (2023:2-12), followers of Fourier's theories – who called themselves 'Phalansterians' in Europe and 'Associationists' in America – were widespread throughout France near his death in 1837. They became increasingly active during the 1848 Revolutions, later

¹⁸ Despite the widespread popularity of emerging utilitarianist movements at the time, Owen's philanthropic projects and ideas lost considerable support after 1817. This was likely incited when Owen made clear his opposition to the corporal punishment methods common in factories at the time and then began to violently denounce all forms of organised religion, including the Church of England (Wilson, 1964:101-102).

following Fourier's own migration into North America during the late American Renaissance movement circa 1850. These secular groups of utopian socialism sought to accomplish the visions and outlines of an actual utopian society – often seeking to garner support and recruit new members through the dissemination of publications that advocated radical social transformation by criticising faltering Enlightenment principles and politics (Newman, 2005:14; Harrison, 1969:4-6; Van Gheluwe, 2015:6). The basis of their utopian socialism and its philosophical theories is therefore contingent on a fleeting dream that humanity could achieve a better future despite any speculative or, indeed, historical evidence that ought to suggest otherwise, as dystopian critique would later highlight.

Although initially promising, none of the associations that set out to establish utopian communities lasted more than a few years. To be frank, some of the only evidence hinting at 'successful' executions of utopian societies may be found in the publications of Albert Brisbane, and the numerous abandoned ghost towns and failed phalanstery community experiments that Fourier and Owen inspired during the early to mid-1800s (Knapowski, 2023:9). This includes communities such as the North American Phalanx in Red Bank, NJ and *La Réunion* in Dallas County, TX. Several other phalansteries were attempted between 1830 and 1860, ranging from the colony of *Condé-sur-Vesgre* in north-central France to Brook Farm in West Roxbury, MA and even the Oneida Community near Oneida, NY. However, despite generous funding from external investors and substantial planning, none of their trial periods could reach financial stability and all eventually ended in failure (Baridon, 2017:9-11; Woodcock, 1956:82).

Ultimately, utopian socialist models became far more complex in practice than perhaps initially understood. Phalanstery experiments were unable to provide a reasonable framework towards achieving more equitable socio-political conditions where the benefit and well-being of *all* residents are acknowledged and upheld by the estate's governance (Moylan, 2021:6). Many founders seem to have had the intention of primarily trying to rectify the economic issues faced by previous experiments, and thus ignored the realistic needs unique to the site itself or those of the community members who tried to make use of its facilities (Knapowski, 2023:1). Yet despite numerous failures, fleeting visions of a functional utopia remained desirable to many Western thinkers and writers well into the turn of the twentieth century¹⁹. It inspired a revitalised effort to

¹⁹ This continued well into the 1960s as well, with technocratic avant-garde groups like Archigram in Britain, and Radical Design firms like Superstudio in Florence. These architectural groups are best known for designed highly conceptual and inventive projects that sought create 'new realities' using the revolutionary

develop new ground-breaking utopian literature, as seen in speculative fiction novels such as Étienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* (1840), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) and its sequel *Equality* (1897), and H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905).

Just the same, these new utopian narratives became more deranged and satirical as time went by. Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century, the already perverted image of the utopian society had become further corrupted. As proven by the failures of so many experimental utopian communities and trials, and soon coupled with the unforeseen costs of industrialisation to nature and human life, the societal conditions of a utopia are exceedingly difficult to achieve and barely capable of sustaining themselves for more than a few years under the best of circumstances. With the rising trends of free-market liberalism, rampant consumerism, and materialistic values, the utopian impulse of hope soon became commodified to the point of devaluing its original premise, testifying to the impossibility of achieving 'perfection' (Baccolini, 2004:518-519).

Where the feasibly premature notions of Moore's utopia had sought to provoke acceptance in the belief that one's pursuit of the ideal society would only ever lead to dissatisfaction – even one of perfection *for* humanity, and not *of* humanity itself – later attempts at establishing a utopian commune were either too obtuse in their rhetoric or unnecessarily complex in their design to prove otherwise. Similarly, the facsimiles described in utopian literature were borderline absurd in their assumptions regarding social ordering and forecasts. For these reasons, it became irrevocably apparent that a realisation of the utopian dream offered nothing more than baseless pretence in the wake of its tireless pursuit (Barton, 2016:7-8).

2.3. The development of dystopian literature

Ironically, it seems that the efforts of utopian proponents themselves undermine the possibility of utopian societies earnestly succeeding in the real world. Most, if not all, utopian narratives present the countenance of a perfectly imagined society without a concrete place or time, which

technologies of the time. Their members are the original minds behind technological utopian megastructures like the hypothetical Walking City and Plug-in-City.

necessitates a ruthless suppression of any form of deviation or resistance²⁰ to its policies. As the rapid industrialisation and modernisation of European cities and colonies began to expand during the late nineteenth century, it became harder for one to imagine scenarios where the terrifying threats of revolutionism, eugenic programmes, and the dehumanising mechanisation of socio-economic orders would not soon intermingle to bring about the wholesale destruction of human identity and free will (Claeys, 2017:271).

Further concerns were raised that socio-political leaders would eventually succumb to the allure of scientific and technological domination, thus seeking to exploit the pioneering advancements of a Second Industrial Revolution to the benefit of their own gain. This period of history is marked by a growing realisation of the full extent of negligent human ingenuity and progress that, at the start of the Great War, had turned bleaker than ever before in the face of the horrors emerging from scientific and technological developments (Barton, 2016:7; Claeys, 2017:15). Yet, even as the allure of utopian prospects slowly deteriorated, the pervasive impulse of hope that it inspired for the betterment of humanity prevailed -- if in a different light (Stupple, 1974:30; Kumar, 1987:286).

I am, of course, here referring to the growing efforts of science fiction and other speculative writers that brought the early dystopias to bear in the build-up to the Great War of 1914 to 1918. These authors were among the first to take note of the uncanny ruin and rampant destruction that seemed to present itself globally in the wake of an obsession with 'human progress' (Claeys, 2017:271). Seeking to expand upon a rising critique of the severe issues inherent in utopian pursuits, they challenged the normative justification²¹ of idealising science and technology in light of its substantiative costs to human welfare and sustainability.

Works of science fiction express an increasing desire to spread warnings surrounding a rather profane fear of early modernity and despotic collectivism – a fear that tends to regard the loss of identity, free will, and destruction of the natural world (Barton, 2016:8; Claeys, 2017:271). Some of these best-known novels – such as Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909), and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) – present speculative accounts, likewise situated in some near or distant future as utopian ones, that detail a fundamental breakdown of known social orders and governance. Most of these writers were of a British or

²⁰ Regardless of whether this is real or imagined, as Claeys (2017:6) points out, since the utopia is an imperial power structure that necessitates an excessive regulation and surveillance of its members.

²¹ Such notions echo Modernist, and especially Futurist, ideals of achieving human and socio-political perfection through advancements in science, engineering, and technology.

American background, and they exhibited a remarkable shift in perspective from the original utopian satirists²² that had flaunted in Western European circles between 1870 and 1910. By taking horrific concepts of a decaying humanity to the extreme, dystopian narratives began to speculate how the future of humanity might more accurately be portrayed if current trends were to continue (Claeys, 2017:270-271; cf. Pfaelzer, 1984:78).

The period from circa 1917 onwards marks the official beginning of dystopian discourse – an early wave of literary critique against the ideals of utopian socialism that sought to reflect human proclivities more aptly (Sargent, 1992:188; Claeys, 2017:271). I hereby classify dystopian literature broadly as a critique of social, cultural, and political thought framed within narrative structures, unlike its utopian counterpart, which is notably more politically driven (cf. Claeys, 2017:273). The typical utopian narrative does not seem to account for growth or difference, perhaps because it is solely focused on the radical existence of an ideal community that is assumed to have reached the end of its development. Dystopian literature (and the genre by extension) may have become characterised by its critique of this – to highlight how unprepared humanity was for sudden unrelenting and rapid changes to their social and political orders on a global scale by focusing narrative matters on the establishment of an insecure community and its surroundings (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:414; Heuser, 2003:xxiv; Schmeink, 2016:197).

Critical theorists such as Kumar (1987:viii), Jameson (2005:198), and Moylan (2000:198-199) believe that the primary purpose of dystopian fiction is to exemplify what needs to be avoided at all costs if humanity hopes to endure the recent advancements made to secure visions of an ideal society. Imposing literary works of authors such as Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932), Ayn Rand (*Anthem*, 1937), George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949), Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953), and Pat Frank (*Alas, Babylon*, 1959), spoke out against the harmful qualities of phenomena such as aggressive industrialisation, Radical Design movements, widespread poverty, morally impermissible eugenic programs, as well as early and perhaps too hopeful celebrations of similar scientific and technological advancements. Gradually, a new kind of imagined society began to emerge through their writing – one that demonstrates ‘first-hand’ how *awful* these imagined places and societies of utopian idealists would become for the future of humanity, holistically, if human ambition were left untempered.

²² See: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) and its sequel *Equality* (1897), as well as Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), and H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905).

Thus, a salient space for early dystopian fiction emerged and quickly garnered popularity amongst authors and artists²³ alike. Unlike the philosophical musings of utopian literature, dystopian narratives could demonstrate the consequences of human action and progression dreadfully and, perhaps, more realistically affect socio-political change. The dystopian is critical of the utopian political imagination because it places focus upon human nature – in tandem with an obsession over human-centred progress and power – which provides creatives with the tools and strategies necessary to address shared fears and anxious concerns emanating from rapidly changing social realities (cf. Baccolini & Moylan, 2003:2-3). It, therefore, serves as an “expression of struggle and resistance” against the apparent acceptance, or at least (at the time of its inception) a liberal willingness, for the wide-spread co-opting of modern utopian sentiments for a better world (Baccolini, 2004:520-521).

The dystopian genre thus entails tropes exhibiting a critical exploration of the corruptible nature of humanity through the medium of storytelling, offering a critique of prominent social, cultural, and political trends that may bring about more harm than initially expected. The early forms of dystopian literature acknowledge that there may be faults with the current *status quo*. Although it cannot provide effective solutions to these issues, it does demonstrate how such situations could potentially become much worse via simulations of these social, cultural, and political trends taken to the extreme (cf. Negley & Patrick, 1952:298). As such, the notions and themes introduced through dystopian literature are often interpreted as anti-utopian in nature. However, I argue that they are more nuanced and expansive than a simple foil to the utopian.

More recently – over the last twenty years – rather than solely offering a critique of utopian ideals, new dystopian narratives have emerged from a growing collection of critical assessments surrounding problematic trends in globalised societies. Trends similarly associated with unfettered greed and the sickening desire for absolute power. This has resulted in the conception of a dystopian genre that is more of an artistic phenomenon in the broader sense²⁴ than a literary movement that only rejects or criticises utopian socialism in all its forms.

²³ This includes filmmakers who slowly inspired cultural shifts away from a technophilic or a ‘progress over all else’ paradigm as well. Most notably Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927) and Charlie Chaplin (*Modern Times*, 1936).

²⁴ I use the term ‘artistic phenomenon’ in the broadest sense here to encompass dystopian narratives found in hypertext structures ranging from prose to video games and the visual arts. Such narratives often include a broader range of fictitious accounts which are not based in responsive studies to failed utopias, but rather in reflective ones that explore themes of dehumanisation and breakdowns in social cohesion in a more complex way.

These ‘contemporary dystopian’ texts, as Barton (2016:7) coins them, deal not only with how unrealistic ideal homogeneous societies are to achieve or how harmful the establishment of such utopias would be to the mass populace. Instead, the contemporary dystopian hinges on the interrogation and exploration of the corruptibility of human nature and concomitant issues of intense misery, suffering, desperate attempts at survival, and a generally experienced loss of humanity. In this sense, almost ironically, dystopian tropes can be said to offer some semblance of hope towards an anticipated perfection *for* humanity, not *of* humanity, through the elimination of possible routes forward. It displays an awareness of humanity’s disposition towards greed and corruption. It reflects the flaws inherent in human progress as demonstrated by history and argued by its author – something that anti-utopian literature never engages with seriously²⁵.

Moreover, themes and allegories emerging in more recent works of dystopian fiction – such as steadfast defiance against extreme socio-economic inequalities, dictatorial limitations on personal freedoms and free will, anticipated environmental collapse, and the disproportionate allocation of food and resources (Claeys, 2017:274) – offer a newfound reflection on human nature and societal issues as understood in contemporaneous, globalised societies of the twenty-first century (Barton, 2016:13-14). These narratives highlight prevailing fears of dehumanisation that are all too often masked by the propagandistic promises of progress – drawing on existing socio-political issues related to well-known metanarratives concerning re-emerging Cold War anxieties, natural and man-made global disasters, harsh threats regarding one’s personal freedoms, the restriction of artistic creativeness, and one’s sense of individuality. The latter, especially, is a trait that has characterised dystopian literature since its inception (Claeys, 2017:274).

As I explore below, while the contemporary dystopian does continue the tradition of offering critique against the pursuit of utopian ideals because of the cost of losing one’s sense of humanity, it does not seem to discourage the initial impulse of hope that spurred utopian idealisms. The dystopian in a contemporary sense seeks to ground these desires in what is felt to be a more nuanced realm of critical analysis; one that cannot only be reduced to the prescription of anti-utopian critique or the satirising of an ideal society. Instead, these narratives seem to present additional scrutiny of harmful trends in human ‘development’ and the disastrous consequences that arise from ambitions of achieving absolute power and control.

²⁵ Discussions surrounding the classification of fiction as anti-utopian literature are often focused on aspects of alienation or technophobia, and elicit a noticeable lack of consensus regarding what a prototypical utopian state can functionally be described as being, as highlighted by Stupple (1974:24-27).

Therefore, I consider key features of how this scrutiny of human nature has been constructed in dystopian narratives from its development over the last century – from written prose and poetry to post-classical narrative texts like film and video games, including similar visual media and hypertexts²⁶ – to establish several characteristics regarding its portrayal that are shared among multiple and diverse forms of the genre. Although this discussion is primarily led by an exploration of literary dystopian fiction, it also considers other forms of dystopian narratives and allegories introduced in films, paintings, and video games. To this end, the following discussion references the chosen video game/artefact of study (FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*) as well as other well-known dystopian narratives in extant texts of film, visual art, video gaming, and literature where appropriate.

2.4. A timeline of change: the evolution of dystopian fiction

Early dystopian novels eponymously describe hostile societal hierarchies, usually under the totalitarian rule of a singular, oppressive systemic entity²⁷ (e.g. the Ingsoc Party in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). Their societies are often driven forward by means of considerable scientific and technological advancements that have allowed them to achieve wondrous feats. In the light of such achievements, however, progress is often implied to have been made in lieu of any consideration towards the preservation of diverse cultural bodies, preferring to enforce absolute obedience and conformity at the cost of individuality.

Although Huxley, Orwell, and their contemporaries may have laid the foundations for proverbial dystopian structures, their visions of a daunting, unforgiving regime are not necessarily prescriptive to the genre. Indeed, dystopian fiction only truly began to establish itself as a self-standing genre of literary and artistic expression in the West around the mid-1950s (cf. Abrams & Harpham, 2015:414; Heuser, 2003; Moylan, 2000; Schmeink, 2016; Claeys, 2017:355). This is by no means to say that early dystopian literature published before this period should, therefore, be disregarded, but rather that later publications after this period are where characterising dystopian tropes came into their own. Moreover, this demonstrates that dystopian conventions

²⁶ Hypertexts are designated by a network of interconnected fragments accessible through links (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:49). Narratives using these structures may unfold when readers/users interact with these links to access its corresponding material.

²⁷ This phenomenon is widely referred to today using buzzwords like 'Orwellian' or 'dystopic', and also as rather synonymic terms – which they arguably are not.

have gradually changed over time to better suit the audiences for which they are ostensibly being written.

Indeed, Barton (2016:7-17) outlines three significant periods of development that dystopian literature has undergone according to two primary factors. Firstly, each period more or less aligns with the artistic and intellectual movement at its time of publication. There are noticeable shifts in focus that appear to have resulted from influential reactions between modernist and postmodernist schools of thought in the latter half of the twentieth century, and more recent shifts away from postmodern²⁸ endeavours in the twenty-first century – hereafter referred to as the contemporary dystopia.

Secondly, there are identifiable differences in how each period tends to use the unique perspectives of its leading (and focalising) characters to incite a deep introspection of the subject matter explored. This is comparable to the narrative act of focalisation²⁹, as one explores and contemplates the dystopian society through the descriptions and visuals elicited by reading the text (this concept will be explored further in the chapters to come). Thus, the dystopian genre can be categorised into a modern, postmodern, and contemporary form (cf. Claeys, 2017:273-280).

2.4.1. The modern dystopia

The modern dystopia contends with the loss of individual identity and an existential dilemma that the leading characters may encounter as they uncover the history of their society. Precisely, the truth of how its ruling factions came to power and their systemic dismantling of self-identity to establish a unified workforce of mindless drones (Barton, 2016:9). These practices may also have

²⁸ To clarify, I use the term 'postmodern' in this section according to Barton's (2016:10) understanding that it relates to the philosophy of Lyotard (*The postmodern condition*, 1984 [1979]) and so describes: (i) the reactionary period following an intellectual shift away from modernism in the mid-twentieth century, and (ii) the relevant emergence of critical, strategic, and rhetorical practices employing his theories.

²⁹ Focalisation is a term coined by Genette (1980) to denote the selection of narrative information inscribed in someone's consciousness (usually a character or narrator) 'who perceives' a scene, suggesting that what is seen is thus related to the perceiver's own knowledge and experiences. Focalisation hereby differs from the notions of point-of-view or perspective, which refer only to the spatial positioning from which a scene is observed and does not usually consider an impressionable source of perception (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:20). In video games, this feature also primes players into conceptualising the spatial and temporal conditions of gameplay (Nitsche, 2007:146).

been orchestrated by a collective dystopian state's need to fill the power vacuums present after a prominent breakdown of known social order, effectively marking an authoritative re-establishment of the *status quo* following radical social reforms (Claeys, 2017:290).

When faced with an alternative ontology that opposes what they have been indoctrinated into believing, characters in these novels struggle to adapt as they soon question everything they had previously thought to be irrefutably true. These early dystopian narratives considered totalitarian-coded governments to be the source of widespread misery, disdain, and unstable economic and political conditions that led to total societal collapse or a desire to control the operations of an individual's mental faculties. Facets mirror the paranoia and persistent global tensions experienced before, during, and after the Great Depression, as well as both World Wars (Stein, 2016:47; Claeys, 2017:277).

Modern dystopias thus express an inherent concern for the dark possibilities of human trajectories that felt likely to occur in the distant future if utopian attitudes succeeded on a large scale, the realisation of progress to become indomitable forces of systemic oppression and restraint. This concern is most often shown through a pervasive "fear of industrialization and its co-option of identity" amidst fast-paced technophilic societies (Barton, 2016:9). Early dystopian novels addressing this fear include Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1937). Later examples began to prophesy what consequences might befall a version of humanity in the distant future should these socio-political tendencies go unaddressed. Such speculations include, amongst other things, a fear of unjust literary and artistic censorship and the destruction of diverse cultural or even personal bodies (seen in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949 and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, 1953); the harms of mechanisation/automation (seen in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, 1952); a fear of global nuclear war (seen in Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, 1959); the anticipated guilt of nuclear fallout (seen in L.P. Hartley's *Facial Justice*, 1960); and fear of eliminating one's free will (seen in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, 1962).

2.4.2. The postmodern dystopia

Building on these notions regarding an uncertain future, the postmodern dystopia³⁰ explores a discernible loss of general reference for its leading characters. This entails that, along with an

³⁰ Barton (2016:10) sets the year range for postmodern dystopias somewhat between 1965 and 1995 (see the footnote 28 above re: Lyotard, p. 34), which is also within the time frame that Claeys (2017:290) asserts

anticipated exploration of a society burgeoning in the aftermath of a breakdown in order, the character's distinctions between what is real and what is surreal in these narratives seem blurred. Barton (2016:11-12) stresses that nothing should be taken at face value in the postmodern dystopian narrative, claiming that the destruction of self-identity from the efforts of totalitarian governance (established in the modern dystopia) is reasonably implied here. The focus of these narratives had thus shifted onto the internal conflict and personal struggles that characters experience in dystopian societies as 'other'³¹ when they come to accept this truth of their existence.

Furthermore, an interesting observation that seems characteristic of postmodern dystopias is that they are frequently quick to establish the token societal faults of the dystopian societies and events they present. Yet, there remain some discrepancies in how the conflict arising from these societal issues and an underlying mistrust of fascist authority is later resolved in their narratives. With the lines between reality and uncertainty laid bare, the 'critical dystopias' that emerged during this period gave birth to a new strain of 'alternative' dystopian tropes that continued to reject utopian ideology while still preserving its dreamful longing of 'hope' for the future (Claeys, 2017:281-282). Thus, the reading/film audience is often left with the possibility of change arising from the resolution of events, but no lasting solution is explicitly offered to end the misery and suffering that the general populace must contend with in a dystopian reality.

This tendency to leave narratives open-ended is likely because differing critical perspectives on concomitant cultural interests and narrative styles were being brought into the fold post-1965 – blurring the genre beyond a set limitation of generic conventions (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003:7). It could also be that authors could inspire a deeper exploration of emerging themes and socio-cultural spaces on the part of the reader that could take place in these narrative settings. Yet despite the variation of outcomes presented by dystopian narratives written, most seem to acquiesce that the strife people face in dystopian conditions *can* be worthwhile – making it appear as a necessary step towards overcoming dystopian conditions (Moylan, 1986:12). Two notable 'critical dystopian' novels exhibiting postmodern dystopias are William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

is the period of 'critical dystopias'. These are sometimes considered a sub-genre of dystopian fiction that began to suggest the possibility of more hopeful dystopian alternatives (Moylan, 1986:8-12).

³¹ The use of the term 'other' here implies a sense of leading characters being anti-thetical to the state's proposed logic when they start to question their own reality. This creates the foundation for a climactic confrontation between them and the dystopian society at large, since they may then be designated as a 'threat to the unified collective' by those in power (Barton, 2016:11-13; Claeys, 2017:267).

(1984) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which feature references to the broader cultural impact of dangerous technology and religious reformation movements – Rastafari and Puritanism, respectively – that were already under scrutiny at the time of writing.

There are also instances of postmodern dystopian elements in narrative works published outside the proposed time range that deal with similar questions regarding simulacra or hyperrealities. A few notable examples can be found in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898), T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922)³², Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997), and the Wachowskis' cinematographic *The Matrix* franchise (1999-2021). Additionally, the release of Ridley Scott's movies *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) during this period – both of which feature megacorporations and a significant degradation to the Earth's environment as a result of heavy industrialisation – made the speculative issue of global overpopulation popular in the subgenres of horror science fiction and cyberpunk.

According to the theoretical specifications discussed above, these last two science fiction films are not full-fledged postmodern dystopias, but they do include dystopian elements with *Blade Runner*, of course, inspired by Philip K. Dick's dystopian novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). There are, however, significant stylistic and narrative differences between the two that arguably arose from the desire to make Dick's story more appealing to a film audience that was likely more familiar with dystopian trends. Most notably, the film's screenwriters are said to have reworked the characters of Deckard, Rachel, and the android ('replicants' in the film) refugees to better suit an adapted narrative focusing on human identity. This was done with the notable exclusion of Dick's satirical commentary on urban decay, commercialism, pseudo-religion, and a loss of humanity anticipated in a post-apocalyptic society (cf. Tsatsaki, 2021). As a result, the film also features a more hopeful ending (departing from the dark, neo-noir style of the dystopian novel) where Deckard empathises with the replicants he has to 'retire' and forms a genuine connection with the replicant Rachel, seeking to spare her life instead of completing his mission.

Alongside the literary authors of postmodern dystopias, visual artists such as Zdzisław Beksiński (1929-2005) and H.R. Giger (1940-2014) began to depict grim, unnerving scenes of decaying humanity in dark and often macabre landscapes. Both artists have experimented with sculpture,

³² Specifically, the parts describing the 'Unreal City' in Section I: The Burial of the Dead that imagines a modernised version of London with intertextual references to Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1321) between lines 60-76 (Eliot, 1963:65).

photography, and architecture, but they are perhaps best known for their stylised paintings of desolate wastelands and surrealistic portraits of eerily humanoid figures. Giger, who preferred airbrush techniques and canvas, had also formed part of the award-winning special effects team for Scott's *Alien* film. His unique bio-mechanical style (depicted in figure 2.2 below) inspired the final design of the titular creature. Both artists' works establish a visceral connection between dystopian themes of human suffering and dissolution reminiscent of the inhumane, futuristic settings imagined in the storyworlds of modern and postmodern dystopias, as displayed in figures 2.2 to 2.9 below.



Figure 2.2 (above): H.R. Giger, *Necronom IV*, 1976. Acrylic on paper and wood, 150 x 100 cm, H.R. Giger Museum, Gruyères, Switzerland.

Figure 2.3 (left): H.R. Giger, *Lifetime Crosswatch*, 1993. Patinated bronze, 41.5 x 28 cm, Private collection.

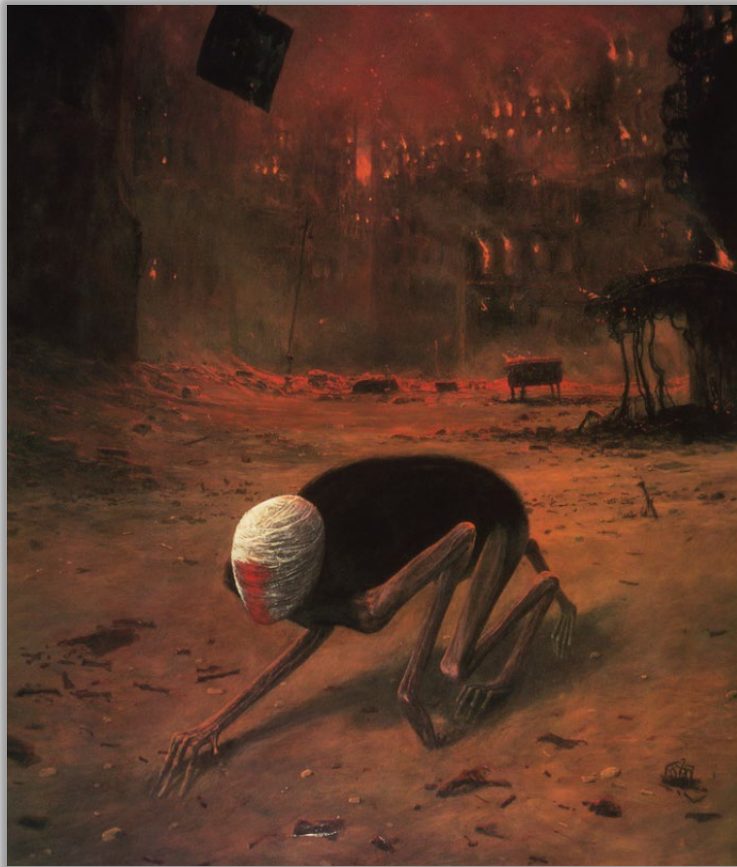


Figure 2.4: Zdzisław Beksiński, *Untitled (AE73)*, 1973. Oil on hardboard, 87 x 73 cm, The Historical Museum in Sanok, Poland.



Figure 2.5: Zdzisław Beksiński, *Untitled (AB84)*, 1984. Oil on hardboard, 132 x 98 cm, The Historical Museum in Sanok, Poland.

Figure 2.6: Zdzisław Beksiński, *Untitled (AA78)*, 1978. Oil on hardboard, 87 x 87 cm, The Historical Museum in Sanok, Poland.



Figure 2.7: Zdzisław Beksiński, *Untitled (Red Tower)*, c.1980. Oil on hardboard, 97 x 73 cm, The Historical Museum in Sanok, Poland.



Figure 2.8: H.R. Giger, *Rote biomechanoide landschaft*, 1981-83. Acrylic on cardboard laid on wood, 70 x 100 cm, Private collection.



Figure 2.9: H.R. Giger, *Katarakt*, 2004. Lithography, 100 x 70 cm, Private collection.

By the late twentieth century, the dystopian genre had arguably become characterised by its implied associations with the notion of *tópos* (ancient Greek: τόπος; “place”). As mentioned earlier, the word “dystopia” is derived from the Greek forms of *dus-* + *tópos*, distinguishing a location (quite literally) somewhere as a “bad place”. Although already part of the term’s etymology, *tópos* refers to a defined, settled place with significant meaning and value to the people who *willingly chose* to live there. This implies a strong connection between the dystopian society and its surrounding environs. This association seems to extend beyond the typical requirements of a setting in novels and films, expressing a distinct level of intimacy between the dystopian landscapes of these narratives and the characters exploring them. Furthermore, this reasonably marks the appearance of lived-in dystopian spaces as an overarching motif across the genre since their existence is also catalytic to the plot – a point that I explore further in the chapter to follow on narrative elements.

Parenthetically, the term ‘topos’ in English (without an acute accent over the first “o”) interestingly refers to common literary conventions and thematic motifs accompanying certain notable events in literature. A well-known example of this is the *nostos* in Classical texts – the hero’s return journey home after their quest is completed, usually taken by sea. In dystopian fiction, characteristic *topoi* may typically include such things as a ‘golden age’ in human history that idealises a *locus amoenus* (English: “pleasant place”) and the subsequent age following its downfall where the aftermath of a cataclysmic or similar world-ending event is often surveyed (cf. Claeys, 2017:270; Bal, 2017:130). I believe an exemplary portrayal of utopian/dystopian *topoi* can be studied in a series of landscape paintings by Thomas Cole, depicting the lifespan of an imaginary city from its establishment to zenith, and finally ruin.

Entitled *The Course of Empire*, this series of five paintings was completed by Cole for his patron and close friend, Luman Reed, between 1833 and 1836. Cole sought to create a pensive series reflecting on man’s abiding relationship with the natural world, which develops with his changing environment over time. Cole, as cited in a personal letter to Daniel Wadsworth, believed that an artist’s work “ought not to be a dead imitation of things without the power to impress a sentiment, or enforce a truth” (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1967:19). This series therefore serves as an allegory for Cole’s understanding of human history and the ‘Epitome of Man’, originally intended to have been exhibited in the third-floor gallery of Reed’s mansion in New York (Foshay, 1990:130). It features details of illustrious Classical buildings and temples that rapidly emerge from a pastoral landscape, eventually ending in ruin following their destruction in a civil war. Unfortunately, Reed passed mid-way through the series’ completion, and it was ultimately acquired by the New-York Historical Society in 1858, a decade after Cole’s passing.



Figure 2.10: Thomas Cole, *The savage state*, 1834. Oil on canvas, 100 x 161 cm, New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2.11: Thomas Cole, *The arcadian or pastoral state*, 1834. Oil on canvas, 100 x 161 cm, New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2.12: Thomas Cole, *The consummation of empire*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 130 x 193 cm, New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2.13: Thomas Cole, *Destruction*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 100 x 161 cm, New-York Historical Society.



Figure 2.14: Thomas Cole, *Desolation*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 100 x 161 cm, New-York Historical Society.

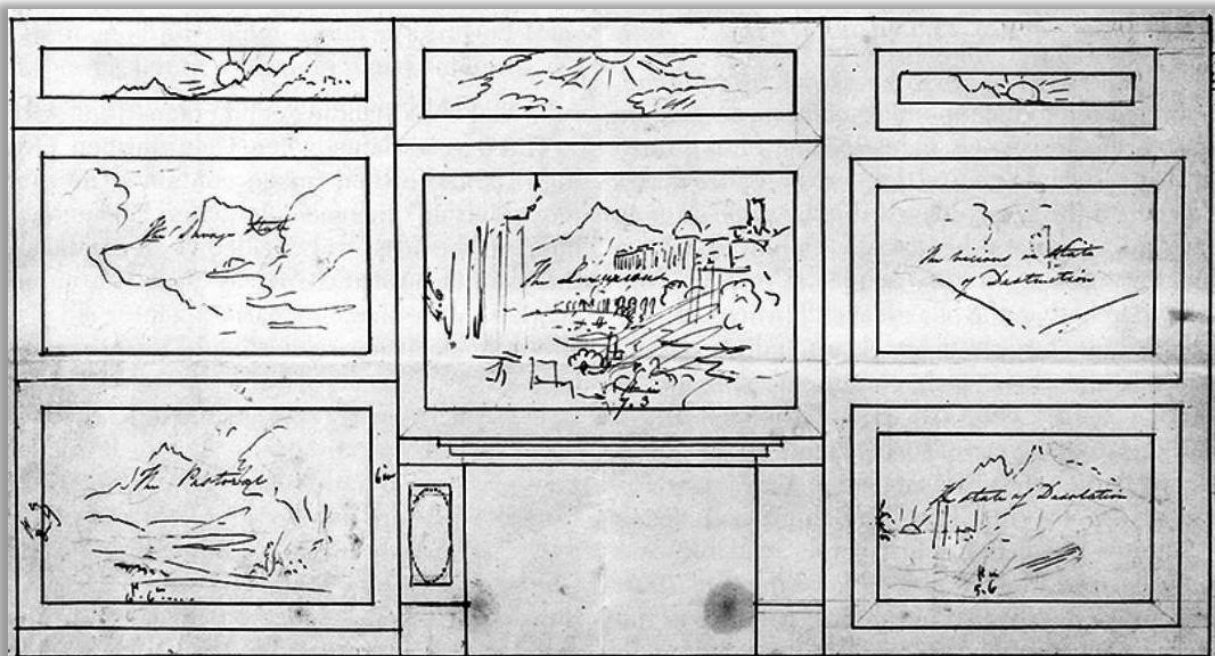


Figure 2.15: Thomas Cole, *Installation diagram for The Course of Empire*, 1833. Pen and brown ink over graphite pencil on paper, 25 x 33 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts.

As shown in the installation diagram above (figure 2.15), Cole's series follows the transient stages of a man-made empire in a clockwise arrangement analogous to the cyclical stages of the rising, zenith, and setting sun. This arrangement, in contrast with an immutable crag landmark in the background of every panel, signals the cyclical fate of civilisations: to rise and fall amidst an otherwise uncaring environment – a sentiment shared by the appearance and waning of 'Fire' in *Dark Souls*, and the steady decay of Lordran. Returning to the matter at hand, however, the introduction of paintings and other visual artworks included here is to demonstrate a quality of dystopian ideas and conceptions that may have been overlooked during other analyses more focused on the literature of early 'classical' dystopian narratives – that dystopias are reasonably constructed, and therefore defined, by their author from the personal visions and nightmares of their imagination (cf. Thiess, 2013:19).

Indeed, this explains why the genre has such significant variance despite its ability to share common themes and tropes across different media. For example, both *Blade Runner* and its inspiration *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* deal with a similar narrative and morals – as discussed above – but their execution and wider reception differ considerably, perhaps to the detriment of their original edification in literature (cf. Claeys, 2017:491-494). Likewise, both Orwell and Bradbury write about dystopias that are concerned with the suppression of great literature, but from different positions – with Bradbury's arising from a fear of socio-political structures restricting one's ability to read freely, and Orwell's from the fear of a society that no longer has the desire to read at all.

2.4.3. The contemporary dystopia

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, dystopian fiction began to display an understanding of socio-political concerns that was quickly coming to terms with the changing social reality experienced globally. The harsh realities of a dystopian future were becoming increasingly likely with reports of rising homelessness and unemployment, climate change projections, irreparable ecological damage, and continuous acts of targeted violence against social groups based on religious, racial, gender, and sexual prejudices (Van Gheluwe, 2015:8). This is the setting from which the contemporary dystopia has emerged, within a period of human history where one may assume that its audiences are reasonably familiar with the genre and its relation to a desolate, and often post-apocalyptic world.

During this time, authors and other creatives continued experimenting with dystopian tropes as the genre broadened into new realms of inquiry. Fears of hyperinflation inspired Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* (1992), which subsequently led to the first conception of a 'metaverse' – a fully immersive virtual world populated by user-controlled avatars (much in the same way online gameworlds function today). Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) considers a society that has eradicated emotional depth and variance, stressing the importance of intimate human connection with others and the world. And, despite its stylistic lack of appropriate punctuation and confusing run-on sentences, the racial commentary and satire José Saramago offers in *Blindness* (1995) and its sequel *Seeing* (2004) remain insightful, provoked when residents of an unnamed city inexplicably begin to lose their sight and total societal collapse ensues.

The rising reports of rampant social, economic, political, and – worse still – ecological degradation and destabilisation were, to many people, a sign of the end-times in the early 2000s, and they coincided with rising awareness regarding the shared challenges now faced globally in the new millennium. These challenges are, perhaps, not caused by the failure to achieve utopian visions but rather by the selfish decisions, actions, and lack of accountability taken from leadership in the past. These have now led to a set of permeating fears surrounding a future that remains uncertain, yet certainly worse than the degrading conditions of the present day (Stein, 2016:48). In the contemporary dystopia, the critique aimed at authoritarian states has been extended to include a wider body politic (or often a multinational corporate body) that holds influence, powers, and liabilities distinct from those of its home nation's governance and members (Van Gheluwe, 2015:9). Indeed, the target of focus in many contemporary dystopias appears to be against the commodification and exploitation of everyday life by corporations or institutions that actively invade the cultural and social spheres of their 'expendable' user bases (Claeys, 2017:495).

Irrespective of its exact form, the threat of a reified dystopian future is thus becoming ever more daunting as time passes. In response, emerging arguments are sparked by an increasing sense of urgency that one should therefore accept this prospect of a doomed humanity and instead turn their focus on developing solutions that might impede, or at the least abate, its coming into existence (Stein, 2016:48). Dystopian authors could not offer solutions to prevent the dystopian future from arriving. Still, at the very least, they could use the simulation of such scenarios through narrative to determine why this fate is seemingly inevitable for humanity. From this new standpoint, an intriguing line of inquiry is on the rise: one that seeks to understand where these impending threats to social liberty and prosperity might reasonably stem from, if the dystopian future is assuredly inevitable.

Ergo, the contemporary dystopian seems to have provoked a meaningful shift in perspective away from the intricacies of despotic and oppressive socio-political structures and instead turned to what has created them – the actions of human nature itself (cf. Stein, 2016:48; Van Gheluwe, 2015:8). Part of this perspective shift continues to explore the questions about authentic experiences of reality that were raised in postmodern dystopias, assessing the philosophical quandaries of what may be considered true indications of the human condition, beyond a reasonable doubt. Most narrative approaches seem to align their philosophical assumptions with the Kantian³³ assertion that mankind is – in a rational sense – what it can freely make of itself (Cohen, 2008:514). The contemporary dystopian thus hinges on the interrogation and exploration of the corruptibility of human nature, and all that this entails when one considers this corruptibility to be the result of greed that wilfully harms others.

In contemporary dystopias, critique against human nature is presented on the consequences of the intentional actions (or inaction) taken by the governing members of a dystopian state to preserve and further their own interests; or rather, the consequences of systemic injustices as a result of human nature being self-serving and greedy (Stein, 2016:47-48). An astute assessment of human nature from this critical position is offered in the prudent literary collections of Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (2000) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), where these authors have arrived at a tentative answer – an innate human propensity for self-destruction. These interpretations of human nature posit that the qualities that inspire resistance to dystopian ruin are arguably the same ones that will inevitably create the conditions necessary for it to occur – the dystopian future is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy. If true, it would stand to reason that the utopia and the dystopia are (simultaneously) one and the same *and* complete polar opposites, since the actions taken to achieve a utopia are decidedly fruitless while the actions taken to prevent a dystopia are believed to be futile. One cannot materialise, while the other cannot be avoided.

To reiterate, the implications that human nature will inevitably bring about its own destruction circles back to Cole's allusions to civilisation trends in *The Course of Empire*. Settlement will lead to growth, which will lead to conflict, and finally end in desolation. However, I would also note here the issues highlighted in contemporary dystopian explorations of the affair are far more complex than a supposed proposal that 'man is inherently evil'. The downfall of a speculative (or even

³³ According to Kant (1996:238-239): "Man is markedly different from all other creatures, because of his technical gift for manipulating things ... his pragmatic gift [or capability of acting prudentially] ... and his moral gift of character."

historical) empire is not assumed to be the result of active self-sabotage, but arguably the likeliest possible outcome of whatever actions are taken to secure its future success. Actions like radical socio-political reformations were made under the despotic impression of solving social, political, and economic problems. This is especially the case when these solutions are implemented without considering the full extent of the consequences such actions will provoke – as the actions of utopian socialist movements have arguably proved.

Despite the seeming hopelessness that should take hold in light of these revelations, something fascinating began to take shape in the settings that house dystopian societies in contemporary dystopias. With these shifts in perspective, utopian beliefs slowly started to re-emerge in a new context. If the current *status quo* was not to the benefit of improving humanity, it needed to be challenged. If the state and its failures are a result of *human* governance, which is transient, then they are not absolute and can therefore be overcome. Also, because the contemporary dystopia continues to combine elements from other writing styles and genres of the late twentieth century, it has now developed for itself an adaptable and self-reflexive framework that could address this tenet more effectively than before (Van Gheluwe, 2015:8). The implication that dystopias bring out the ugliest aspects of human nature indeed suggests that the opposite is also true, for what is a realm of darkness if not the display of light's absence. Or, to borrow from the analogies of *Dark Souls*, this happens when the powers of Disparity challenge the insurmountable void of existence, and *being* begins to develop through apposite forms of life and death.

Additionally, as seen in a majority of popular films, television series, and video games published or released since the early 2000s, the contemporary dystopia seeks to manifest an urgent call of action to address the immanent disasters present in a dystopian future through the introduction of protagonist character (Stein, 2016:49). These characters are identified as a rallying 'symbol of defiance' who embody a semblance of hope for the salvation of mankind, suggesting that humanity is capable of as much radical good as they are harm – continuing the utopian impulse for self-determination and the fight for a promising future (Barton, 2016:14; Baccolini & Moylan, 2003:7; Kumar, 1987:286).

There are two important (if brief) remarks I wish to discuss here regarding the concept of a protagonist figure in dystopian fiction. Firstly, the contemporary dystopian narrative seems to feature a protagonist 'hero' who stands in direct confrontation with an antagonistic, 'villainous' state. More often than not, these characters are being set up to dismantle the oppressive and inhumane regimes by the end of their narratives – leading to them becoming responsible for a rebellion that moves to restore a sense of natural order to a chaotic dystopian world in the

aftermath of its sudden upheaval (Rosenfeld, 2005:45; Laakso, 2022:452). Secondly, these characters are predominantly adolescent and feminine, contrasting with the primarily adult, masculine leading characters in earlier dystopian narratives.

Barton (2016:13-14) notes this second phenomenon as the emergence of an 'Artemesian champion' in dystopian fiction – a capable fighter characterised by the goddess' virtues of virginity³⁴ and defence of the innocent and vulnerable youth. The election of Artemis as a patron of the dystopian 'champion' seems appropriate considering her likeness in the design of characters such as Katniss Everdeen (in Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series, 2008-2010), Aloy (in Guerrilla Games' *Horizon* series, 2017–), Ellie (in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* franchise, 2013-2024), and Caitlyn Kiramman (in Fortiche & Riot Game's *Arcane: League of Legends* timeline, 2021-2024) – all of whom are skilled with a bow (or similar ranged hunting weapon) and take vengeance against the perpetrators of systemic injustices in their respective quests to protect those under their care. Additionally, the adjoining virtues of the hunt and nature's wrath could be reflected in these characters' single-minded focus towards achieving their goals. They also seem to exhibit a unique insight into elements of the natural order (or logic) of their storyworld, and are thus able to intuitively recognise the unnatural presence of false order in dystopian societies.

Barton (2016:14) further argues that these champions are ostensibly more in tune with archetypal feminine qualities of virginity and purity in the face of an oppressive patriarchal state. However, I do not believe these qualities must be gendered to define their characters. More recently, the contemporary dystopian protagonist's role tends to embody genderless notions of heroism and self-sacrifice in the face of persistent hostilities – their motivation and goal is to do what no-one else can: challenge the dystopian state directly and eventually overthrow their oppressive and inhumane systemic practices. Thus, the import of their character should not necessarily surround their personal features or characteristics but rather their role in the narrative; as distinguished by their ability to rise above the extreme suffering and misery experienced in dystopian societies, and ultimately succeed in spite of it (Rosenfeld, 2005:45).

I highlight this point because there are certainly instances of Young Adult (YA) fiction in recent years where this role feels unsuitably forced upon adolescent, feminine protagonists, especially

³⁴ The virginal in this sense refers to a mastery over oneself, an inability to be manipulated by those in power (since a married individual is believed to be subservient to their spouse). The virgin here is thus a symbol of personal freedom and fierce independence in contrast with societal norms of obedience to the dystopian state.

in works that attempt to mimic the success of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series³⁵. Such characters are arguably becoming monotonous and overdone in the genre – meek, shy girls who are introduced as a bland 'everyman' only to suddenly become a 'Chosen One'³⁶, almost leaving them no choice but to spark the revolution against a convoluted system of a pseudo-patriarchal ideologies that has somehow gone unchallenged by the mass public until now. My primary issue with this trend is that, although these works may echo or adapt tropes related to dystopian themes and settings, they arguably cannot be classified as 'true' dystopian fiction when the narrative focus is dramatically placed on the protagonist's romantic prospects and the marketing of what can only be described as misery porn. Furthermore, these stories often create a stark narrative dissonance that is well-nigh impossible to overlook by their dénouement, because it is extremely difficult to believe that such seemingly unassuming, innocuous characters who emerge reluctantly from a background subject to mild oppression or exploitation could reasonably become responsible for overthrowing an entire regime in a relatively short time frame. Especially when this is achieved without a substantial support system aiding them in performing what is essentially socio-political subterfuge at a state level.

2.5. Closing points

Contemporary dystopian narratives encourage societal change, but they do not seek to achieve such change by glorifying an isolated or rebellious martyr figure. There is a reasonable justification for the suffering that a contemporary dystopian protagonist endures due to their state's governance: to inspire hope, and they rise to meet it with consideration for and service towards liberating others – a justifiably heroic display of kindness and compassion. They do not appear to kill because they take pleasure in acts of violence but only out of necessity or retribution. They, therefore, seem to have some moral standing or code as protectors and defenders of the subjugated masses, bearing a sense of duty towards becoming a guardian of the oppressed from systemic acts of violence and injustice. Because of this, they may also seek to restore balance

³⁵ See, for example, Jessica Lauren's *Liberation* (2019); Nadine Brande's *Out of Time Series* (2014-2016); Joelle Charbonneau's *The Testing* series (2013-2014); Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011); and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011-2018).

³⁶ Taking inspiration from the mythos of Chosen Ones in classical literature, the contemporary dystopian champion is often a martyred figure who comes to symbolise resilience against the extreme suffering experienced in dystopian societies.

by re-instating what is believed to be the 'natural' order to the world, thus representing a continuation of utopian hope for humanity in the face of dark, hostile times (Barton, 2016:15-16).

Despite seemingly defying a more 'traditional' definition of a genre, the dystopian has entered into contemporary culture as an artistic concept that covers all narrative arts (Laakso, 2022:450). It allows artists, writers, and designers of various disciplines to explore speculative futures of humanity in relation to a particular set of social and environmental conditions enacted within a designated spatial boundary. The creative potential is near limitless, yet it must be (somewhat) grounded in historical records and anchored in the real world – to remain believable, beyond a reasonable doubt – since the dystopian fundamentally draws upon existing social, historical, and political fears or concerns. Otherwise, it runs the risk of undermining the seriousness of the various themes, ideas, characters, and social commentaries discussed above. The dystopian is thus similar to treatises derived from the conceptions of utopian ideologies in that it too stimulates wishful thinking for a better way of life in the future. However, the dystopian differentiates itself by reconciling the utopian impulse with a discerning understanding of human nature. It can ground the pursuit towards perfection in an allegorical form of reality, using the medium of storytelling to represent its abstract ideas.

Moreover, the central focus on lived spaces (akin to notions of *tópos*) in dystopian stories marks the places and environments that characters find themselves in worthy of serious consideration, too. I discuss the notions of space regarding narrative elements, human culture, and sociology in greater detail in the following chapters. Yet, the dynamic social relationship between people and space should be highlighted here. Dystopian spaces seem to characterise their occupants as much as dystopian characters do their surroundings to better suit their own needs. In *Dark Souls* one can note how Hollows (as a threat to Lord Gwyn's rule) are corralled far away from Lordran in an attempt to prevent possible revolts against his rule. Similar instances can be noted in *Blade Runner*, where rogue Replicants are considered a threat to Los Angeles and are hunted down when discovered, as well as in Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series where the residents of each district display qualities typically associated with the level of social injustices experienced there.

Indeed, this facet of characterising representations of space and place seems common across all cases of the dystopian, reflected in the effects of the environment and society on the development of character arcs and narrative unfolding. It seems that a dystopian protagonist's character growth occurs by way of their awakening to the dystopian reality and a newfound desire to change things for the better – once again echoing the pursuit of utopian hope. The utopian impulse thus survives

in the dystopian genre through the belief that no matter how terrible the circumstances become, or how broken the world may seem, there will always be a group of people who contest that fact. There will always be someone amidst the heartbreak and destruction who is devoutly willing to put a little bit of the world back together again. One may contend that the dystopian reflects a projection of a fallen humanity but, as I argue in the discussion above and the sections to follow, what it seems to reflect in truth is rather a speculative image of humanity that refuses to fall.

As I have shown, the over-arching aim of dystopian fiction is to use the concept of humanity's inevitable end – of its destruction at the hands of the few whose actions harm the many – to warn its audiences against realistic predictions of the worst-case scenario. Amidst the bleak speculations of anticipative despotism, automation, collapse, and despair, an impulse of hope flourishes. Like dandelions in concrete, a dystopian form of humanity continues to grow towards the light despite an overbearing and oppressive darkness. In the best sense of stubbornness, a dystopian form of humanity is thus representative of the hope found in places where one might never think to look for it.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DYSTOPIAN STORYWORLD: NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS EMERGING THROUGH SPATIAL STRUCTURES

*All the things yet to come are the things that have passed
Like the holding of hands, like the breaking of glass
Like the bonfire that burns
At all worth in the fight fell too*



*Wasteland, baby
I'm in love, I'm in love with you*

- Hozier (*Wasteland, Baby!* - 00:59)

3.1. Introduction

The dystopian varies greatly in its narrative form across film, literature, and other creative disciplines; however, many distinctive narrative features are common throughout the genre. Naturally, each dystopian narrative will have its unique form of actualising these features. Still, most, if not all, of the ones discussed below will be present in the work to some degree or another. Dystopian fiction is mostly a speculative artform that may deal with apocalyptic or anti-utopian themes, but these are not the core focus of its narrative drive. Instead, the dystopian narrative seeks to reflect on humanity's insatiable need to strive beyond the mortal limitations affirmed by philosophers, prophets, and scholars for centuries of human history. It proposes an exploration of imagined scenarios more closely aligned with instances of societies that may be found globally today. These imagined scenarios are, of course, situated within storyworlds that depict the absolute worst of humanity.

This chapter aims to develop a methodological approach for interpreting the storyworld of a dystopian narrative, specifically the gameworld of a dystopian video game. While the focus of the dystopian genre may have changed since the early twentieth century, there remains a set of

commonly recurring tropes, motifs, and themes shared between its modern, postmodern, and contemporary iterations. A secondary aim of this chapter, therefore, seeks to divulge these key features using the four elements of narrative – as defined by Mieke Bal in her publication of *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen* (1985 [1978]) – to inform a framework for identifying those that are common across dystopian narratives. This framework includes such elements as character, event, time, and space – all of which are influenced by the overarching thematic organisation often determined by generic conventions and how they may be interpreted by readers or wider audiences (Bal, 2017:130).

The apprehensive feelings associated with dystopian narratives are often projected onto their narrative spaces through the *narrativisation of spatial structures* and demonstrations of how spatial relationships affect major stakeholders in their sphere of influence (i.e., the socio-political state and the masses in dystopian societies). The significance of a dystopian society's history and internal processes is thus highlighted through its narrative spatial designs, topographic relations, and focalised³⁷ experiences – like actual architectural structures and built environments (Bertetti, 2017:51; Claeys, 2017:5; Montfort, 2007:178). This idea is explored further in the methodological section regarding architecture, urban development, and the (social) production of space, but first requires familiarity with the concepts of narrative space and storyworlds³⁸ – introduced below and discussed in greater detail under section 3.3.4. that deals with space as a narrative element.

The sections following a conception of the dystopian storyworld then introduce the narrative elements of character, event, time, and – most important to this study – space to explore how narrative compositions of the dystopian are typically characterised. Each element is discussed in a way that seeks to identify common trends in prominent depictions of dystopian worlds and images across literature, film, paintings, and video games. Again, to acknowledge more well-known dystopian narratives, I include references to popular novels, films, and video games where appropriate. I also include a synopsis of *Dark Souls* as a preamble to the discussion on elements of narrative, to both provide a starting point from which the particular narrative elements that

³⁷ Refer to the footnote on focalisation under section 2.3. in Chapter Two (page 34).

³⁸ Pavel (1986) coined the term 'storyworld' in 1975 to refer to models of the analogous worlds that are created during the act of storytelling. These worlds are constituted by narrative elements that are linked spatial-temporally to one another, with each element framing and influencing the others. The term has gained significant traction in postclassical narratology to refer to the 'images' that narrative texts create in the mind of an implied reader (Ryan & Bell, 2019:8).

characterise dystopian tropes can be explored, and to introduce the storyworld and logic of the wider *Dark Souls* narrative universe.

As I outline below, dystopian narratives tend to involve a measure of genre-bending that adapts features and tropes from other speculative and science fiction genres dealing with similar themes to embolden their core critique of (utopian) socio-political trends and human nature. The common intention appearing, as previously mentioned, is to use storytelling to urge audiences to think critically about the faults present in their own social, cultural, and political structures (cf. Barton, 2016:7-13; Van Gheluwe, 2015:7). These narratives thus present a speculative exploration of intense human experiences that are often projected onto imaginary cityscapes and landscapes, using narrative as the vehicle through which satire and commentary can be enacted.

Dystopian storyworlds are, therefore, integral to one's reading response to dystopian narratives because they reasonably constitute the conditions and imaginary surroundings of such titular "bad places" needed for this speculation to occur. To this end, many narrative and artistic representations of dystopian spaces often use strong visuals and harsh environments to model their dystopian critique. This critique includes reflections on the declining 'grand narratives' of modernity that have influenced social relations, cultural memories, and public interpretations of such conjecture from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Lyotard, 1984:37-39; Claeys, 2017:57).

Although I would have preferred to focus solely on the element of space, as I foreground it in the analysis of *Dark Souls* and its dystopian themes in chapters four and five to follow, I came to realise that it could not be discussed in a vacuum without the other three elements of character, event, and time (cf. Bal, 2017:130). As will be made clear in section 3.3., each narrative element holds a degree of influence over the appearances of the rest, and narrative space is effectively hollow without considering active inhabitants (characters) who can affect change (events) within its boundaries over time (cf. Wolf, 2012). Also, each narrative element is somewhat complex and worthy of further study concerning the dystopian genre, so for brevity, I am choosing to focus on aspects that are most relevant to the present study. Furthermore, concepts regarding the structure of narrative space are introduced in sections 3.1. and 3.3.4., leading into a more expansive discussion of spatial theories and spatiality that follows in section 3.4. regarding the methodological approach used in this study.

3.2. The dystopian storyworld

Because texts often imply space through descriptive language rather than exhibiting a tangible reality, their spatial qualities have shown a tendency to fall to the wayside in analytical studies (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:16; Buchholz & Jahn, 2005:551). Space has traditionally served mostly as background and setting here, not always having a significant impact over how well-received a novel, poem, or play is unless the font or layout is otherwise unnatural or illegible in its presentation. This changed in the twentieth century when filmmaking and photography became popular forms of unconventional storytelling, and again with the advent of computer-generated graphics and interactive media formats (Cubitt, 2002:27; Bal, 2005:250).

In 2016, Marie-Laure Ryan collaborated with geographers Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu to highlight areas of overlap in spatiality between narratology and geography³⁹. Part of their theoretical expansion produced a refined typology regarding multimodal representations of narrative space across multiple narrative media formats and platforms. This typology builds upon Ryan's earlier concepts, on what Ruth Ronen (1986) first distinguished as different laminations of space, outlining and refining five basic levels that constitute a model of laminated narrative space (cf. Ryan, 2014:para. 5). These are listed, in order of concentric expansion, as follows:

(a) *Spatial frames* – these constitute the immediate surroundings of characters. These are dynamic scenes of action that flow from one event into another and are organised according to a spatial hierarchy by “relations of containment” (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24). In other words, these are the essential units that structure phenomenological worlds as the frames from which experience is referentially drawn (Mylov, 2002:66). Like rooms within a building, they are believed to be subservient to the larger edifice/environment they constitute. As a result, the boundaries between these sub-spaces may be outlined more or less clearly, depending on the details of their descriptions and how characters are shown to move between them. For example, moving between rooms inside of a house is a localised movement achieved by one's passage through doorways, and thus requires a familiarity with the layout of the building. However, a trip to a friend's home in another part of the city might not be described in as much spatial detail because the reader does not need to know the specifics when general details are adequate to keep the action moving forward.

(b) *Setting* – this is where Ryan and her colleagues differ significantly from more traditional definitions of the term by equating ‘setting’ to a binding force common across all spatial frames

³⁹ Cf. *Narrating space / spatializing narrative: where narrative theory and geography meet* (2016).

encountered throughout the text. Described as a “relatively stable socio-historico-geographic category”, ‘setting’ in this sense essentially delineates the particular cultural, historical, and geographical environments in which the narrative action takes place and embellishes them with tonal moods (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24). These are exemplified as categories such as ‘twenty-first century, futuristic Los Angeles’ or ‘dark fantasy medieval kingdom’. They inform the reader of the narrative’s physical, social, and temporal contexts, and thus include all of the spatial frames readers experience according to characters throughout the plot.

(c) *Story space* – this level includes those spaces that do not appear in the text per se, but which are referred to or mentioned by name only (Ryan, *et al.*, 2016:24). Most notably, expanding on the concept of setting described above, story space includes *all* the additional spaces that are actualised in the text. Those spaces that do not form part of the spatial frames encapsulating the events that occur but are still referenced by characters during narration. Therefore, this level of narrative space consists of the scenes directly mapped by the character’s thoughts and actions, the setting, in addition to the other mentioned locations relevant to the plot.

(d) *Storyworld* – this includes all previous levels and any nebulous, plausible locations assumed to exist in relation to the story space – unless ontological differences are present and assert otherwise. For instance, the reader of a historical fiction set in Paris during the fifteenth century can reasonably assume that England lies to the north-west of the city and the Mediterranean Sea to the south, even if these locations are not mentioned by name at any point in the text. Storyworlds are thus said to be conceived by the reader’s imagination as coherent and unified geographical entities that mimic an ontologically full, material existence (at least to an extent) similar to those of the real world (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24). Simply put, readers may assume there is continuous space between the locations named in the text, regardless of whether these gaps are explicitly filled in by the text or left to their imagination. This notion relates to Iser’s (1972:280) formulation of reception theory⁴⁰ and maintains that the readers or users of a text hereby become active participants in the manifestation of storyworlds (Ryan, 2018:246).

(e) *Narrative universe* – this is the outermost level of narrative space and includes the remainder of any diegetic spaces (referring to the story as told) activated by the text. The narrative universe

⁴⁰ Reception theory is broadly concerned with a theoretical recontextualisation of narrative meaning produced from a dialectical text-reader relationship – a continuous reading experience developing from one’s response to authorial intent. Although he shares some methodological approaches with his colleague Hans Robert Jauss, Iser’s theory is heavily influenced by phenomenology and marks a decisive shift in literary theory with the conception of an ‘implied reader’ (Shi, 2013:982-983).

includes the storyworld and any counterfactual (possible) worlds constructed by the characters within this world – springing from their beliefs, fears, dreams, wishes, hypothetical speculations, and the like (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:25). Here, one is reminded of Pavel's (1986:175) argument that a text imposes its autonomy and logic on the audience by declaring what is and what is not possible in the realm of the story. Transmedial narratives that are connected intertextually may thus form part of the same narrative universe, even if they occur in different types of media, while others may include variations of the storyworld actualised by the particular text in question – other possible worlds where historical events are altered, or leading characters made different choices (Ryan & Thon, 2014:1-3). In the case of a potential multiplicity of fictional levels, or where this logic is contrarily questionable (like in dreams or hallucinations), characters may migrate between diegetic levels through the narrative operation of 'metalepsis': the embedding of narratives within one another where the boundaries between them are paradoxically transgressed (Pier, 2005:303-304; Bal, 2017:52).

All five of these levels are believed to be conceived from mostly static perspectives that are disclosed to the reader through storytelling. Fixed frames offer a steady sense of space, whereas movement and explosive action benefit from more dynamic presentations of rapidly changing spatial information. To emphasise the stability of specific frames, spatial details may be regularly repeated or featured (Bal, 2017:131). Bonfires in *Dark Souls*, for instance, are among the few constants between the various areas and locations constituting its story space. Their consistent use as places of rest and respite in otherwise hostile and dangerous environments makes them a welcome sight to players looking for a moment of safety between combat engagements.

Moreover, according to Ryan (cf. 1991), storyworlds may be seen as the 'complete' interpretation of story space because readers are arguably able to fill in the blanks using the principle of minimal departure – a principle urging readers to formulate their understanding of fictional worlds based on their own life experiences and intimate knowledge of the world. Again, this interpretation is implied to account for any evidence that may be provided in the text to suggest discrepancies from this ontology, such as the supernatural ability to read the thoughts of a populace or the introduction of magical powers (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:20). Therefore, as readers work to comprehend a narrative, they may use the storyworld as a guiding mental model for constructing narrative meaning, and thus as a basis for their subjective interpretation of the narrative elements of character, event, time, and space (cf. Iser, 1972:280).

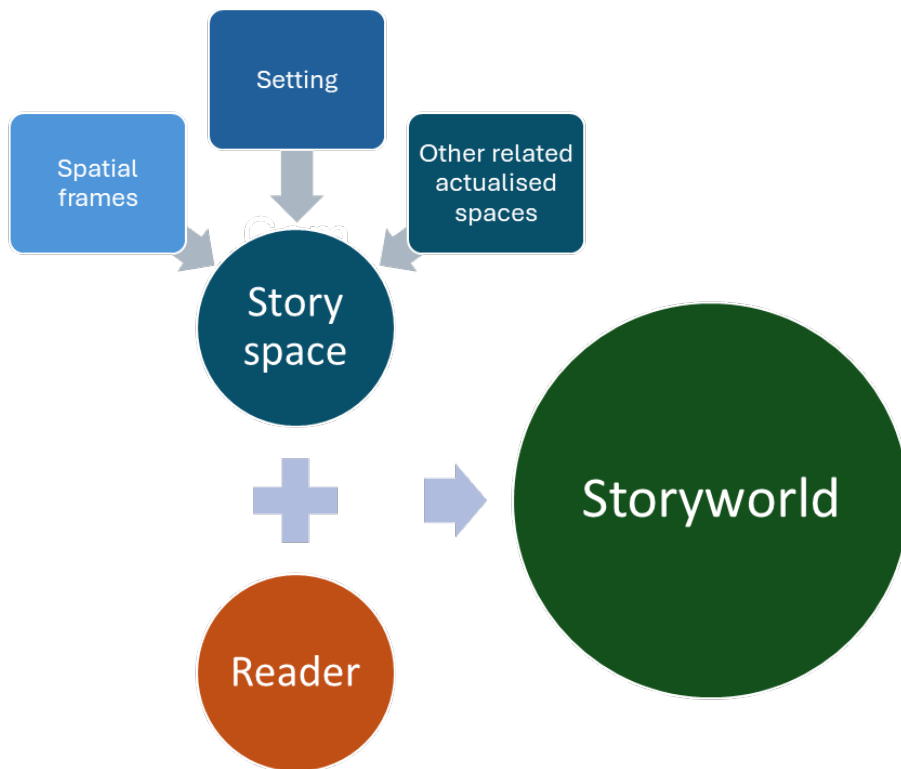


Figure 3.1: Diagram showing the production of a storyworld according to the macrostructure of Ryan *et al.*'s (2016) typology.

From this position, Ryan and Bell (2019:18) further argue that one should think of a storyworld in terms of its true ontological structure – proposing that the storyworld is itself an entire modal⁴¹ universe comprised of a plurality of possible worlds made manifest through storytelling. This requires a variable but willing suspension of disbelief to first buy into the logic established through worldbuilding and exposition, to comprehend the story being told in full. This is why story space (and setting and spatial frames by association) are intricately linked to the organisation of narrative content. Space and spatial descriptions facilitate the subconscious communication of this knowledge to the audience without unnecessary repetitions of spatial referents that could interrupt the procession of story events as they are actualised.

⁴¹ The term 'modal' is used by Ryan and Bell here to express a link to modal logic, i.e., the representation of necessity and possibility similar to other narrative phenomenon like generic conventions and a reader's expectancy. For example, a storyworld set in a science fiction setting will likely feature things like a means of human survival in outer space, terraformed planetary conditions, or other alien lifestyles.

Like a procedural flowchart, a storyworld thus branches out from and is influenced by the succession of actualised events occurring before the scene currently being narrated. The storyworld that ‘exists’ to the reader can then be ‘mapped’ in relation to the choices and actions taken over the course of the narration, like nodes in a conjoined network. In interactive texts, like the ‘choose-your-own adventure’ model gamebooks made popular in the 1970s, readers become active agents in this process, and this is especially true of digital hypertexts that allow access to their narratives through code that is executed via the use of visual displays and user interfaces (Iser, 1972:280; Ryan, 2022:6). The specific details of a storyworld are thus unique to the individual, which they form based on their continuous interactions with the narrative text and the spatial details divulged to them during narration.

In much the same way as Pavel’s possible worlds theories have been applied to thought experiments regarding empirical existence, this introduction of a narrative semantics theory⁴² derived from Ryan and Bell’s (2019:18-20) theories postulates that each member of a reading audience will recentre⁴³ themselves into a new actual storyworld each time they engage with a narrative text. This recentring means that on each subsequent engagement with the text, one will further develop their understanding of its storyworld to include newly discovered knowledge regarding its narrative elements that was previously either uncertain or unknown. As more descriptions or visuals are encountered, Ryan (2016:100) believes readers can adjust and rework their tentative mental models of narrative space to suit these new details. Irrespective of the medium of the narrative text, the storyworld space is thus regarded as a mutable model, composed of a materiality that is performative and dynamic – responsive to and provoking action from the reader who is generating it (Drucker, 2013: para. 8; Hones, 2014:73).

Indeed, the only condition of a storyworld that seems dependent on the medium it is supported by, is how its experience of space is initially conveyed. Literary texts mostly use detailed descriptions of the character’s surroundings that may either present spatial information as it becomes relevant or sketch the entire setting at once to prepare a reader for the events to follow (Ryan, 2003:219). And, while literature and other linguistic texts (including poetry and oration)

⁴² This notion of semantics acknowledges concerns raised by Lubomír Doležal (2019:50) that affirm theories conceptualised by the semiotician Charles Morris. Morris’ (1955) description of semantics relates to the relations between signs and their ‘designata’ – i.e. storyworlds emerge from allegory, often using the actual world as a standard of comparison.

⁴³ Ryan (as cited by Herman, 2005:570) describes this phenomenon as the basic condition for an immersive reading of a text, not dissimilar to the notion of spatial framing presented by Ronen (1986:423).

offer such descriptions for readers to reassemble⁴⁴ the layout of these spaces in their minds, visual media like paintings, films, drama, and installation artworks can present physical objects in the arrangement of set dressing or vignettes to imply spaces that are lived in and look or feel realistic (Ryan, 2022:14). Further still, digital media is uniquely able to combine an amalgamation of mutable points-of-view or dynamic camera movements and cuts within simulated environments to create a stronger sense of spatial presence in the narrative experiences they produce (Thon, 2014:84-86; Dennerlein, 2019:4).

The phenomena discussed above explain how storyworlds are dynamic entities that serve as spatial referents of the texts they are produced from and how they are made believable in the minds of their readers (Ryan & Bell, 2019:34). Worldbuilding thus forms part of storytelling. There is a salient relationship between a space's representation and what it says about the people who choose to live there. By tapping into facets of memory and emotion, narrative space on the storyworld level – including all the spatial frames, setting, and story space – therefore has the potential to create a robust sense of place for the reader that seems realistic, despite it only mimicking reality (Ryan, 2022:11; Attademo, 2023:39). Furthermore, Ryan and Bell (2019:16) affirm that when one engages with a fictional story, its status as 'unreality' recedes into the background of one's consciousness almost as soon as it has been acknowledged. Thus, fictional storyworlds – whether based on textual, visual, or digital narratives – can compel the audience to buy into an idea of make-believe and keep them immersed through an assertion of narrative space that blurs the ontological boundaries between reality and fiction.

This immersive engagement is especially vital to the success of dystopian narratives. As ironic as it may seem, the storyworlds created from dystopian fiction appear to require a willing suspension of disbelief to be taken seriously. One might argue that this is inherently true of all science fiction and science fiction adjacent genres, but the ability of an audience to buy into the possibility of dystopian worlds is arguably what makes their critique substantial (Parrinder, 2000:23; Barton, 2016:7). The dystopian storyworld is thus not measured based on the aesthetic appearances of its designs, but is instead based on how those designs work together to emphasise a sense of eerily real, familiar spaces to the audience that usually reflect an uncertain, terrifying future.

⁴⁴ This process is known as 'cognitive mapping' and is not exclusive to written or oral narration. I discuss it in greater detail under section 3.3.4.1. below.

According to Wolf (2012), a storyworld is constructed of a setting (space), actions (events and time), and existents (characters). These are the three categories one might use to define the typical dystopian storyworld: its location, history, and agents. Based on the appearances of those found in dystopian literature and art, dystopian societies are often set within an urban landscape. The specifics of these communities depend on the particular themes and style of the narrative, but what is common throughout their appearances is the presence (or remnants) of an established, almost halcyon civilisation. Perhaps as a result of its later hybridisation with cyberpunk and other science fiction sub-genres, a majority of the buzz surrounding postmodern dystopian settings often draws comparisons to overcrowded cityscapes constructed of tall and unembellished brutalist-styled buildings that are littered with large-scale forms of political propaganda or advertising. These images may have become synonymous with broader conceptions of the genre, but are not the standard setting for dystopian narratives.

I believe this association may have developed for two reasons. Firstly, early dystopian fiction coincided with reactionary movements against the outburst of modernist architecture that rapidly cemented itself into Western countries during the aftermath of World War II – notably displayed in Orwell's London from the popular novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ridley's Los Angeles in *Blade Runner*. These two cities are among the first that come to mind when one recalls iconic dystopian storyworlds, with decrepit wastelands like George Miller's Australian outback in the *Mad Max* film series (1979-1985) forming an opposing spectral point in comparison. Many scholars, including Charles Jencks (cf. 1977), critique modern architecture for its bland and univalent forms that restrict creativity and personality – an ideal setting to reflect cold, oppressive, and uncaring dystopian socio-political structures – while near-barren wastelands highlight how an absence of built environments are linked to a sense of uncivilised humanity⁴⁵.

Secondly, specific social tensions and issues may be exasperated when cultural melting pots are speculated to result in a uniform society. For example, Joss Whedon's *Firefly* franchise is primarily categorised as a space western drama. Yet, it also explores themes regarding a futuristic version of pioneer culture that stems from the colonisation efforts of space-faring humans who have destroyed Earth completely. In this narrative universe, several central world colonies that survivors of humanity's collapse established came to form what is known as the Alliance – an

⁴⁵ Farming and agriculture are believed to be among the strongest reasons for early humans establishing civilised settlements, and thus made the modification of natural environments an integral part of human culture. These collective practices, from an anthropological standpoint, arguably define what it is to be human – built around the concepts of community and social development (Lynch, 1960:123).

authoritarian supergovernment combining prominent Western and Eastern cultures. Despite losing Earth, the Alliance continues to engage in power-grabbing campaigns dressed up as democratic assistance efforts and seeks to bring all known colonial planets under their rule.

Furthermore, it is soon revealed that people sent to colonise terraformed planets outside of the known solar system are given limited resources to make ends meet. Thus, their fringe societies are not shown as bustling metropolises but more functional, overcrowded settlements struggling to survive – a fact the Alliance uses to justify their aggressive domination over these worlds. Accordingly, *Firefly* critiques colonial ideologies set at a galactic scale, intertwining these within the story of a nomadic smuggling crew staunchly opposed to the Alliance's harsh and often violent policies. Here, a contrast is set between the welcoming (if limited) freedom offered by the crew's transport ship, *Serenity*, and its alternatives: a life of indentured servitude under the Alliance, or a life of hardship and struggle amidst the cold blackness of space.

Therefore, I would argue here that the use of human settlements in dystopian settings and narratives is not necessarily absorbed in the particular style of civilisation or architecture used per se, but rather in the sense of place – of community – that a city or similar commune affords. Certainly, if humans have memories and cultural practices that tie them to certain types of buildings, neighbourhoods, or urban environments, then it stands to reason that the use of such communal, lived places renders them well-suited to capturing the feelings of an eerie familiarity when faced with dystopian realities (Ryan, 2022:11). After all, as shown in Cole's *The Course of Empire* series (figures 2.10 to 2.14 above), the settled city forms part of a continually evolving landscape and tends to end in ruin and desolation, thus making it apt for locative narratives such as the dystopian.

Moreover, the existence of the dystopian city already highlights a social and cultural history tied to its inhabitants and society. Dystopias typically emerge from a sudden upheaval of the *status quo* in their reality – things like natural disasters, global epidemics, civil warfare, or similar extinction-level events. Sometime after this, a dominating power structure (often malevolent) establishes itself as the only authority capable of ensuring humanity's continued survival. To that end, dystopian governments employ regular displays of force, organised subterfuge, militant propaganda, fanatical ideology and/or the systemic erasure or censorship of historical documents and forms of creative expression to ensure that their governance goes unquestioned. Survival in a dystopian world thus comes at the great expense of one's individuality and personhood. This is significant in allowing the dystopian to take root for three reasons. Firstly, if humanity splinters into factions, it becomes more believable that a ruling state can exert their control and power over

a smaller group, eventually growing into a larger, uniform society. Secondly, these conditions construct a means by which the narrative can critique the processes of industrialisation, late-stage capitalism, unbridled technophilia, and mechanisation by exploring the anticipated outcomes of continuing such processes without sustainability stopgaps in place. And finally, it places the dystopian world in a position of strife against humanity.

This last point leads to the identity of characters or agents in the dystopian storyworld. In a scenario where the natural, known world has been destroyed, humanity is likely facing a newfound existential dread as they attempt to find their place in this new world order or, perhaps, even a lack thereof. Dystopias thus offer a reflection of what happens when humanity strives to achieve absolute power and then seems to become stuck in the aftermath of calamitous change following the abuse of alienating developments in science and technology – unable to transcend the loss of what came before, or otherwise incapable of accomplishing the next natural stage of progression (Sisk, 1997:11). These feelings of loss experienced here could be understood in the physical sense of deprivation or suffering, or on a deeper, spiritual level regarding inhuman conditions. Regardless, it is reflected in the state's inability and unwillingness to relinquish its totalitarian control for fear of further calamitous change, and more recently in the dystopian protagonist's awareness of the truth behind their state's governance and community, as they start to question their relationship to these structures. Often, the more they become aware of the verisimilitude fed to them from their governing members of state, the more they begin to feel like they have lost out on authentic experiences and may strive to remedy this.

Therefore, the dystopian storyworld itself becomes an object of reflection through narrative. It proposes an exploration of imagined scenarios more closely aligned with instances of totalitarian societies that may be found worldwide today. Schuknecht (2019:236-237) uses the term 'reference world' in his discussions, suggesting that dystopian storyworlds (and, indeed, utopian ones as well) are generically inclined to be read in comparison to the actual world. There appears to be a measured expectation of reality within the dystopian genre – it must reflect scrutiny of the worst parts of human nature while concurrently offering a critique of highly fashionable social, political, and cultural proclivities that exasperate these traits (Laakso, 2022:452-453). Thus, to be dystopian means to be *critical of what is happening* and manifest the possibility for wide-scale transformation. Not merely to situate some futuristic or fantastic version of misbegotten humanity in distress or misery to wallow in self-pity. It is thus optimised for stories regarding a world's state and development, and not the journey, dreams, or personal hopes of individual characters like other narratives are (cf. Claeys, 2017:269).

Because of this, one could argue that dystopian narrative spaces themselves may hold a degree of narrative agency in one's interpretation of the storyworld. In *Dark Souls*, the player's journey to victory is inherently tied up in their exploration and understanding of the gameworld of Lordran. The game opens with the player's character breaking out of a cell in the Undead Asylum – a prison where the undead have been corralled and locked away from Lordran to await a supposed eschatological event – and ends with them making a significant choice in the heart of the kingdom that will supposedly determine the future fate of the world itself. Contrasts are further drawn between individual areas like the opulent city centre of Anor Londo where the gods dwell, and the flooded ruins of the former human settlement of New Londo far beneath it. Environments are challenging to navigate and house an endless horde of hostile foes, traps, dead ends, and even poisonous swamps. Yet numerous vistas and sites of cultural importance retain a sense of place and intermittent serenity amongst the endless onslaught of anguish. To provide more background and context on Lordran, the following section briefly discusses the player's introduction to its storyworld while playing *Dark Souls*.

3.3. A brief synopsis and narrative/gameplay overview of *Dark Souls*

Dark Souls is a third-person action-adventure role-playing video game about human perseverance in the face of futility. Echoed in its game mechanics of the player character's death and rebirth, the game challenges players to explore a hostile dark fantasy world beset with a curse of 'undeath'⁴⁶. Major themes and plot points revolve around the cyclical nature of Fire, and how the power it once granted this kingdom's rulers has started to wane as its flames slowly fade into embers and ash. The game presents integration between online and offline play⁴⁷, provided that the player is connected to an online server, allowing players to interact with each other across gameworlds through written messages or as 'phantoms' that are dispelled when killed or an area's boss is defeated.

The player's character in *Dark Souls* embarks on a pilgrimage to find purpose by restoring order to the dark fantasy kingdom of Lordran – a medieval-inspired theocracy governed by divine Lords wielding incredible power. Their quest leads them to explore numerous areas within the kingdom

⁴⁶ This idea is explored in greater detail below, and throughout the discussions presented in Chapter Four.

⁴⁷ Typically, the game can host a maximum of four players per session (one host with up to three other players either helping each other co-operatively or fighting competitively against the host), but this does require the player to have collected and used specific items within the world to allow access to their session.

for important relics and items, eventually culminating in them succeeding these powerful beings as the new ruling 'Lord of Cinder'. Players thus assume the guise of a champion warrior whose appearances, attributes, and demeanour are all within the player's ability to customise under the purview of the game's mechanical systems. One thus has a measure of command over their character's sense of being, and their actions and choices determine the fate of a cursed humanity in the dawn of a new age.

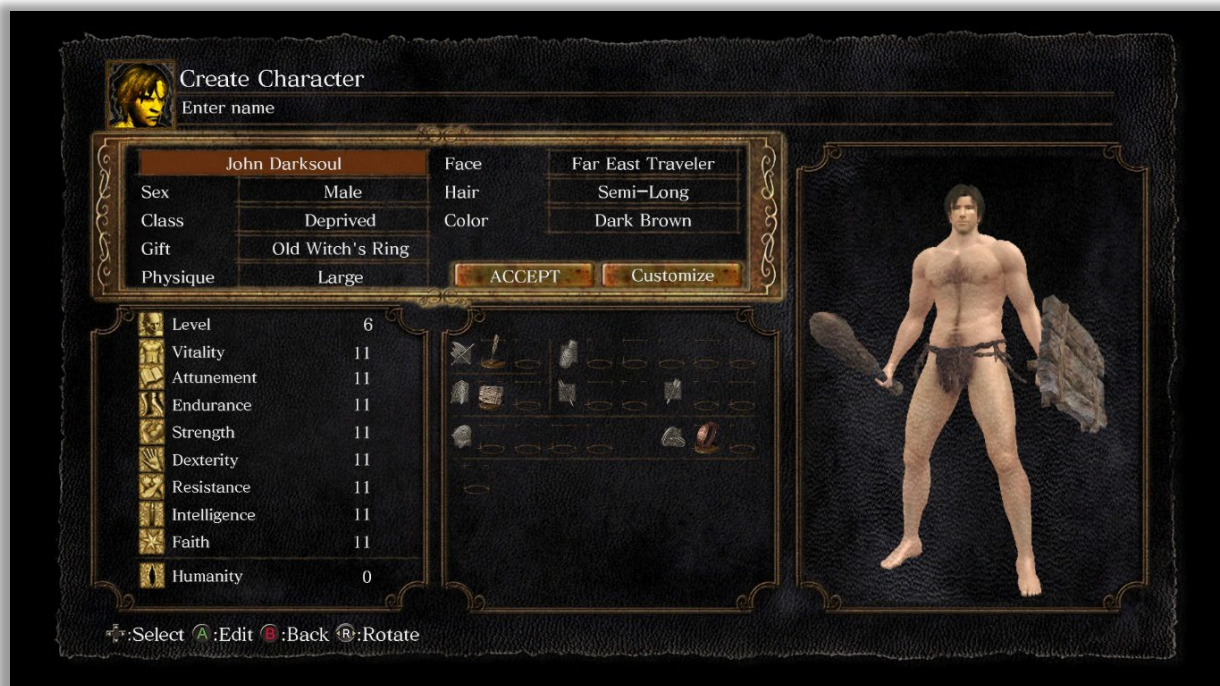


Figure 3.2: Screenshot showing the customisable character creation menu available to players at the start of the game.

The game opens with a cinematic prologue⁴⁸ entailing a pre-history of the world that informs the player of the aggregate series of events leading to the establishment of Lordran, as well as the metaphysical nature and logic of the storyworld of *Dark Souls*. This entails the disparate power inherent in Fire, the various forms of magic derived from its being, and its inevitability to one day fade away, leaving only darkness. The cinematic prologue details a narrated account of the Age of Ancients – a period set long before the “present day” where gameplay takes place – in a timeless grey wasteland, shrouded in fog and sporadically littered with massive pillar-like arboreal structures. These structures are home to a race of titanic immortals who rule over this domain insidiously. Known as the Everlasting Dragons, they are eternal beings with scales of stone that are

⁴⁸ See Appendix A (pg. 205) for a transcript and video link to this prologue on YouTube. This is important for background to the game.

believed to be impervious to all forms of damage. Their rule is, for the most part, almost utopian in that no manner of life or death is present here; nothing and no-one exists to challenge them. That is, until Fire mysteriously appears deep underground, bringing sudden disparity and change with the promise of untold power.



Figure 3.3: Screenshots from the game's prologue depicting the timeless grey expanse of archtrees during the Age of Ancients (above) and an Everlasting Dragon with its stone scales (below).

In the newfound light of this First Flame, three humanoid creatures emerge from a newly formed darkness to claim Fire's power by acquiring massive, concentrated motes known as 'Lord Souls⁴⁹'. With this power, they ascend to divine status and are named the Lords of Sunlight, Life, and Death, quickly proceeding to challenge the Everlasting Dragons and claim the overworld for themselves with the aid of their followers. The Lord of Sunlight, Gwyn, cements himself as their sovereign and uses his control over Light to fashion bolts of pure lightning that can pierce the otherwise unbreakable stone scales of the dragons. The Witch of Izalith and her students use pyromantic magic from the power of Life to weave great firestorms that incinerate the earth and destroy the dragons' tree-like homes. Then Lord Nito, First of the Dead, unleashes a miasma of death and disease to poison the dragons' now vulnerable flesh and homes. Ruin is wrought upon the ancient race of dragons, driving them to near extinction and in their wake, the Lords establish the kingdom of Lordran. Thus begins their golden Age of Fire.



Figure 3.4: Screenshot depicting an aerial view of Lordran at the height of its splendour from the game's prologue (FromSoftware, 2018).

⁴⁹ In the game, the term 'soul' is used to refer to material motes of a mystical, spiritual energy that contain the power of Disparity. They are the means through which Fire gradually affects change in the world, and typically fall into one of four main categories: Light, Dark, Life (which later includes Chaos), and Death.

Alas, this new epoch of the gods will not last forever. It is soon revealed to the player that while the armies of these three Lords fought against the dragons above, one other uncovered the true nature of Fire and Disparity and claimed a final Lord Soul in secret. This mysterious, unsuspecting being, known only as the furtive pygmy, sought to use this Dark Soul in a conspiracy against the plans of the other Lords. Nurturing its power, the pygmy split its soul into countless fragments believed to have birthed the race of humanity⁵⁰. His hope is thus expressed that one day, a successor to Gwyn would be born amongst his mortal progenies. A Dark Lord who could lay claim to Lordran once the time of the gods had ended and Fire's flames had begun to fade, leading the world into a new Age of Dark. The player's character is one of these progenies – the Chosen Undead, destined to herald the following age.

As Fire's power began to wane, Gwyn became fearful of his rule ending and desperately sought a means to link the Flame to a new force that could fuel it. He cast a curse that sealed the power of Dark away within humans and planned to use this seal in a Firelinking ritual that would preserve Fire unnaturally. These actions unknowingly set the game's events in motion, and within this twilight era of the unnaturally continued Age of Fire, the game's story begins. From Gwyn's seal, a brand in the form of a flaming circle later manifested randomly on cursed humans that slowly corrupted their sense of self. This curse forces humans to rise again after death, effectively rendering them undead, although each involuntary resurrection comes at the cost of their sanity. This process surrounding a loss of self is referred to as "Hollowing", and Gwyn has seemingly taken it upon himself to corral and banish these branded undead to an asylum prison far in the north before he mysteriously disappears. The player's character awakens in this asylum, seemingly locked away to await the end of days, until an enigmatic knight unexpectedly throws a corpse down into their cell containing the key to their cell – and thus their freedom.

From this introduction to the storyworld of *Dark Souls*, the player is presented with a series of scenes and imagery that create a morbid, threatening, and mystical tone – suggesting that the narrative elements in *Dark Souls* have a peculiar nature that is also, as I demonstrate, related to how these elements are often presented in dystopian narratives more broadly. Out of this amalgam of narrative and contextual information, enriched and growing in complexity as the game

⁵⁰ According to lore in the game, 'humanity' exists as small dark spirit fragments of the Dark Soul split by the Furtive Pygmy – indicative of the darkness within all humans. Each human has a fragment of Dark within them, which became shackled by Gwyn when he sought to preserve his rule and link the Flame. The term is thus used in reference to both these fragments of the Dark Soul and those beings who bear them.

unfolds during play⁵¹, the player must piece together their understanding of the world and its history. This is achieved through their own wilful and active interactions with other non-player characters recurring throughout the world and amended by amassing collectable items – various weapons, armour, spells, and relics – that they uncover through an exploration of interconnected areas and locales constituting the kingdom of Lordran.

Mechanically, each area effectively functions as a gameplay level integrated into the holistic world design of Lordran, each with its unique challenges and boss-type enemies that the player must overcome to progress the story (cf. Picard, 2023:170). Yet, due to the interconnectedness of the various areas in the gameworld, certain areas and bosses are not mandatory for the player to complete before ending the game. In fact, it is possible to finish the game after having only completed three boss fights total, while exploiting glitched mechanics and taking advantage of hidden pathways to effectively speedrun⁵² the game and finish it as quickly as possible. Thus, developing a rich understanding of the game's overarching narrative and themes depends entirely on the players themselves. Specifically, this understanding is dependent on the player's willingness to engage with the narrative elements embedded in the gameworld via latent environmental storytelling as they move throughout each area, allowing them to extrapolate more narrative meaning on their own, thus gaining a measure of narrative agency and 'completing' the story.

The narrative configuration of *Dark Souls* is thus multifaceted. Using categories originally conceived by Henry Jenkins (2004:123) and then revisited by Ryan *et al.* (2016:109-110), the narrative structure of the gameplay can be described as being structured on the journey of the player's character through Lordran. Each area corresponds to a type of progression along the storyline, with freedom of movement allowing the player to complete specific objectives in the order they wish. Supporting this are two sub-structures built into the game's explorable environment: narratives embedded in the collectable items the player discovers and earns and

⁵¹ Narrative exposition is made implicitly in *Dark Souls* – a feature that has since become a trademark of other FromSoftware games in the series and beyond. Narrative beats and vignettes are hidden throughout the world for the player to discover on their own, often in the form of brief or vague item descriptions, level designs, and secondary storylines (or side quests) with dialogue delivered by non-player characters.

⁵² At the time of submitting this dissertation, the current recognised world record for an Any% run of *Dark Souls: Remastered* is 19m20s. The run was completed by player known as 'tamatama' in Feb 2023 [a review of the full run is available at: <https://www.speedrun.com/darksoulsremastered/runs/mkvd535y>].

an emergent narrative that develops from the player's interaction with these objects and the gameworld overall.

Jenkins (2004:128-129) defines embedded narratives as an active examination of spatial clues to reconstruct events from the past. Embedded narratives function like vignettes, establishing events that transpired before the player entered an area by displaying contextual clues or descriptions in set design, item locations and descriptions, and so on. These elements are pre-generated by the game's developers and are thus designed to provide context and motivation for the events and actions during gameplay. Emergent narratives, in contrast, unfold from the interactions between the player and the gameworld – including any objects that afford manipulation and non-player characters with their own coded behaviours. They arise during play from the complex system of rules and mechanics, often resulting in unpredictable experiences. These narratives are unique to each sequence and the types of gameplay actions the player takes, making them native to digital media and its affordances (within limit) for interactivity and reactivity (Ryan, *et al.*, 2016:110).

The spatial design of Lordran reflects this unique configuration, with the majority of the gameworld being a mix of carefully designed obstacle courses and labyrinths that the player must navigate between boss fights. In addition, the game also hides items and checkpoints strategically dispersed across the 'map', making the navigation of space require careful planning and management of resources like the character's stamina, durability of equipment, healing items, and most importantly souls. When a player dies, they are reset back to the last checkpoint at which they saved – which takes the form of resting at a bonfire in the game – and they drop all of the souls they accrued from defeating enemies at the location where they died. The player has one life to collect these souls since the total number of souls and their retrieval location change upon each subsequent death of their character.

Moreover, this configuration leads to the consideration of *Dark Souls* employing environmental storytelling to create an *experiential* narrative focused on player-driven progression. Or, as Ryan (2001b) more aptly states, to 'generate' a degree of narrativity that is user centric. During play, the player's engagement oscillates between embedded and emergent narrative structures, following an overarching narrative thread that drives them towards completing their gameplay objectives. This phenomenon is illustrated in the diagram below. Although every player of *Dark Souls* will encounter the same broad narrative elements and gameworld assets, their experience is unique to their understanding and interpretation of the elements they find due to their choices to engage with them.

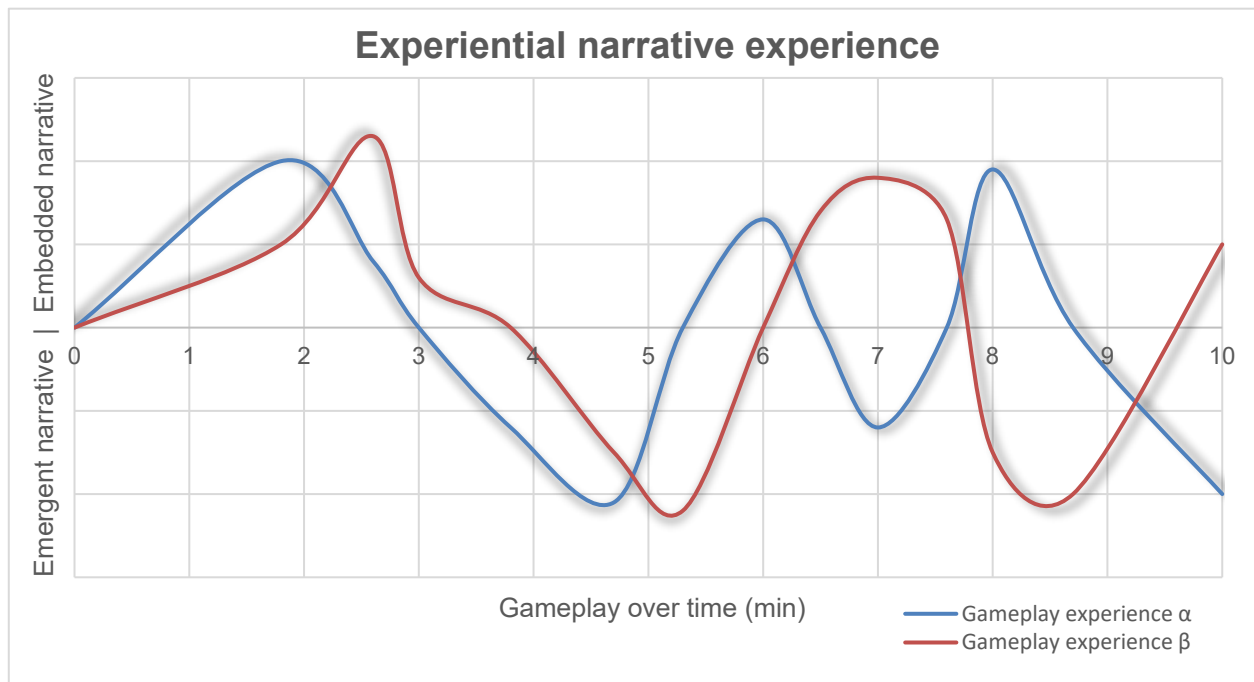


Figure 3.5: Graph depicting hypothetical paths of experiential narratives generated through player-driven progression and engagement with embedded and emergent narrative structures in gamespace.

3.4. Narrative elements of the dystopian genre

To better understand how the presentation of narrative elements can shape one's conception of a storyworld, the following section presents a discussion of character, event, time, and space as theorised by Mieke Bal. Bal originally published her theories in 1978, which were conceived as analytical tools to further one's interpretation of narrative texts, culture, and storytelling (Bal, 2017:xx-xxi). Therefore, I use Bal's concepts as a point of departure for describing how dystopian spaces are constructed.

Arguably, one of the reasons then why the dystopian has become so popular in contemporary media is because it does not seem to be restricted by the traits of its generic conventions (Donawerth, 2003:29). Where the utopian muses philosophically, the dystopian appears to demonstrate – as exemplified in *Dark Souls* – the reality or consequence of action in real-time simulations of a society experiencing the worst that humanity has to offer. Each of these simulations is unique in its presentation of characters, events, a sense of time, and spaces yet there seem to be overarching themes and motifs that tie them all together. Again, references are drawn to prolific examples of dystopian literature, films, and art where appropriate.

A few brief remarks about how the four narrative elements function in *Dark Souls* as components of a dystopian narrative are also pertinent here. I first define each element in broad terms, as entrenched within post-classical narratological theories, after which I relate some peculiarities of these elements in the context of contemporary dystopian narratives to set up a theoretical framework for using these terms in the present study. These elements are adaptable within a wide array of creative directions. While this discussion stems from Bal's conceptions of the four narrative elements, it also features other related and overlapping concepts pertinent to formulating a salient understanding of the dystopian genre.

3.4.1 Character

A character is a human or anthropomorphic participant in a storyworld whose value can be derived from the functional role they play during the events of a story (Margolin, 2007:66; Jannidis, 2013). Greimas and Courtés (1983:6-7) propose that characters manifest from the abstractions of people, animals, concepts, or collective groups that *act* within a story, focusing on a character's active participation over the need for human-like qualities in its presentation. In the study of postmodern texts, the typical definition of characters has expanded – as Fokkema (1991:32), Margolin (2007:66), and Bal (2017:157) attest – to include *any* agent capable of taking action or experiencing a change in the storyworld. In short, any self-determining entity that takes action in a story (including those under the influence of the state) and is motivated by their role in a storyworld may be regarded as a character in the dystopian narrative.

Under this purview, otherwise inanimate things like corporate entities, mundane objects, personified concepts, and artifices may be regarded as characters in a story, provided they are characterised⁵³ and designed with a clearly defined functional role in the narrative. Characterisation includes ascribing qualities to the character, typically through visual or narrated details regarding their appearance, dialogue, the usual manner of expressing themselves, and similar attributes. Thus, the argument I propose is that personified entities such as a landscape, a city, or the weather may indeed be studied as characters, provided that the role they enact in the narrative is suggestive of having a noticeable bearing on events associated with them (often justified through technological or mystical means). Examples include entities with a powerful

⁵³ Characterisation is the attribution of a specific property (or properties) to a character through the ascription of information, either implicitly or explicitly, as revealed during the unfolding of a narrative (Jannidis, 2013; Margolin, 2007:76-78).

presence in their story such as the mounted pig's head in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the Ring of Power in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), and Night City in CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).

Furthermore, salient to any discussion of character is E.M. Forster's (1927) canonical opposition between so-called 'flat' and 'round' characters, where characters may be distinguished from one another according to how much they develop throughout a narrative. Forster's criteria for defining character development are somewhat vague. Yet, this classification system continues to be held in high esteem also among post-classical narratologists because it remains one of the most comprehensible proposals for categorising characters (Jannidis, 2013: para. 6). Flat characters represent and embody a monistic idea and usually serve only as functionaries that appear in the background of the narrative. These characters are straightforward and can often be defined sufficiently in a single phrase or a few lines of description (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:48). Most importantly, they do not change over the course of the narrative.

In contrast, round characters are multi-faceted and display more intricate and multi-faceted complexities that are subtly hinted at through their richer appearances, actions, and dialogue in the narrative. Round characters are more active than their flat counterparts, demonstrating character development or growth as a radical change to their original presentation (state of being). Although this change may alter their temperament or motivations, it is not a requirement. Round characters may retain the same disposition and temperament that they held at the beginning of the story (Margolin, 2007:73). This feature makes round characters more compelling to the audience – but no more important than flat characters in a narrative – and thus, they are usually the main characters in a story.

The types of characters one might encounter in a narrative can be further categorised according to archetypal mannerisms, appearances, and functional roles shared across various literary works of fiction, film, and theatre. No two characters, however similar they may appear, are exactly the same. Thus, characters may also be classified according to how the roles they embody align with symbolic, thematic, or aesthetic elements of a narrative (Jannidis, 2013: para. 25). Carl Jung⁵⁴ is well-known for having identified a variety of 'archetypes' as components of the collective unconscious in human psychology. His ideas were later adopted into archetypal literary criticism spearheaded by Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934) and further developed in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). These theories form the basis for identifying and analysing

⁵⁴ Cf. Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1991 [1969]).

recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, themes, and motifs as quintessential attributes associated with particular kinds of characters across novels, poems, myths, and even social rituals that deal with similar themes (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:18).

An archetype, in this sense, thus represents the *possibility* for a certain type of action to occur when a particular kind of character is present in the narrative, and directly influences the expression of human-like behaviour and temperaments in discrete narratives. Archetypal or, indeed, stock characters⁵⁵ such as the hard-boiled detective, girl-next-door, or *femme fatale* also provide writers with prescriptive ‘modal roles’ that may be used to build unique characters from categorical sets of descriptive qualities and basic role fulfilment. While there is some overlap between character archetypes and stock characters, their distinction lies in how the characters enact conventional qualities.

Moreover, archetypal characters begin to form part of a particular genre’s conventions⁵⁶ the more frequently audiences encounter them (Abrams & Harpham, 2015:377; Margolin, 2007:70). It is therefore natural to assume that a level of familiarity with the kinds of characters present in a genre – such as the hacker in cyberpunk narratives – will help to guide the audience through understanding the plot and themes present within the text as the narrative develops (Roser *et al.*, 2007:548-552). In dystopian narratives, a few character types integral to successfully delivering their thematic content are frequently encountered, and may have even been adapted from other science fiction sub-genres. One character may, for example, represent the (oppressive) state or regime – such as Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which is always referred to as an omnipresent entity even though it is only a personification and symbol of the Party’s leadership and surveillance.

The state character establishes and affirms the thesis⁵⁷ of the dystopian society in the context of the storyworld and thus typically embodies the logic of the storyworld through violent displays of

⁵⁵ These are one-dimensional character types that are well-known within improvisation dramas like the Italian *commedia dell’arte* (Italian: “comedy of the profession”). Stock characters are often assigned to notable visual cues (usually masks or costume schemes) that allow the audience to identify the kind of characters present in a scene with minimal exposition necessary.

⁵⁶ When the generic conventions of these types of characters become overused, overly simplistic, or predictable and offensive to the audience, they may also develop into clichés and stereotypes.

⁵⁷ This is thought of in the sense of Hegelian dialectics, with the state representing a concept that is opposed by the resistance against its policies. Whether or not a synthesis is eventually achieved depends on the text, but it seems common for dystopian narratives to be left open-ended.

authoritative power. They symbolise the laws and socio-political systems held in place by the state's government and demonstrate to the audience how the dystopian society regularly functions in its day-to-day. In early dystopian narratives, the state is too powerful to overcome. It is thus often represented as an absolute and unyielding entity in confrontation with the other leading characters – creating the set of conditions and obstacles necessary for them to navigate in the story. The dystopian state is often obsessed with its enemies and is determined to justify its regime's power by identifying and eliminating anything or anyone resisting its restrictive rule (Claeys, 2017:9).

As discussed above under the section on contemporary dystopias (see: section 2.4.3.), this trope has since changed to achieve a rejection of the traditional subjugation characters faced at the end of earlier dystopian novels (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003:7). For example, where Winston is tortured back into submission by the Party in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Offred is arrested by the Eyes in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Katniss retires to the countryside with Peeta and their children at the end of Collins' *Mockingjay* (2010) and Nimona overcomes the Director of the Institute in the 2023 titular film of the same name (dir. by Nick Bruno and Troy Quane). As they have come to be considered, these dystopian protagonists are typically either travellers who are new arrivals to the dystopian society or inhabitants already familiar with that society's social norms, structures, and socio-historical conditions.

The latter type of dystopian protagonists is more common in modern and postmodern dystopian narratives since leading characters act primarily as focalising agents for the audience (encountering this particular instance of a dystopian society for the first time). Indeed, prototypical dystopian narratives begin *in medias res* with the society introduced to the audience through the focalisation of the protagonist (Laakso, 2022:450). These characters thus act as the means through which dystopian authors can express their cautionary tales and critique of extreme social policies by providing humane, introspective, critical reflections on socio-cultural practices and rules of governance in the society they encounter. When characters begin to question underlying societal structures, they challenge societal norms and confront social orders, thus becoming anti-thetical to the state.

The focus of conflict in dystopian stories is thus predicated on the dynamic social relationship between leading characters and the speculative society explored through the narrative. Dystopian characters are defined according to their relationship with the majority collective and their subsequent role as members in the dystopian society. If they do not fit in with this society, they are singled out by the state and identified as a threat to the collective that needs to be removed

to preserve the 'utopian order'. Moreover, this implies that individual characters are not as important in dystopian stories as other genres. What is important is the role they fulfil in the narrative, acting as the voice of reason that warns the reader or audience against following harmful socio-cultural trends like radical consumerism, technophilia, or intrusive surveillance. Instances of these characters in early dystopias – again, such as Winston in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Offred in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – are often set up for failure in their stories to express these harms clearly. They are not heroes for the audience to empathise with, but rather present a single point-of-view that provides the audience with insight into the dystopian society so that they are encouraged to draw their own conclusions as the narrative unfolds.

3.4.2. Event

In its simplest definition, an event refers to any notable change in the state of the storyworld, characters, or narrative represented in a story. These changes are directly linked to the characters' actions and can be outward, as in something that happened to other characters, or they can occur in a character's mind. They are thus related to the narrative content that is enacted in the course of a narrative account. These changes are also progressive in narrative unfolding, presented as occurring one after another (though this is dependent on temporal decisions made in the narration style), and exhibit influences from the actions and decisions taken by characters preceding their advent. The notion of event is thus closely linked to the idea of narrativity⁵⁸ and the temporal sequencing inherent in narrative unfolding. According to Bal (2017:164), the unfolding of an event may entail either an improvement or deterioration of the initial situation. Regardless of what happens, all events may (up to a point) culminate in the resolution of the confrontative challenges experienced by the characters at the end of the story's narration.

Furthermore, a distinction is made between two categories of events in narratives – as either a *type I* or *type II* event – with the distinction mainly arising from one's interpretation of how much the event itself describes the change it references (Hühn, 2013: para. 3). This interpretation is always made within the context of that event's particular narrative frame as it cannot be analysed independently of the rest of the story. Type I events often indicate a change sufficient enough to

⁵⁸ Narrativity can be thought of as a scalar, structural quality of the narrative media/text itself that governs the chronology of story events and thus implies temporality in a narrative work (Sturges, 1992:22; Ryan, 2001b; Prince, 2005:387). Fludernik (2003:244-247) argues that this attribute may also be imposed on the text by a reader who interprets it as narrative, equating narrativity to a mediated experientiality.

make them notable to the audience (usually inside the mind of a character). In contrast, type II events are concerned with more specific descriptions of narrative changes – something happens. Type II events relate directly to the actions taken by important characters in the story and the consequences that result from these actions – essentially comprising the major turning points in a narrative that construct its storyline (Bal, 2017:156-157). Thus, both types of events drive a story forward in various ways of action and inaction, including confrontation, conflict, resolution, and the like.

Nevertheless, the belief that events alone can sequentially constitute a storyline is a matter of academic pedantry. In his salient text *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E.M. Forster is credited with distinguishing between the notions of a ‘story’ and of a ‘plot’ – where a story refers to the sequence of events themselves while a plot is concerned with the major lines of conflict and action in a way that explains the overarching narrative structure of a story. One story can thus address multiple plotlines, with events shared across both narrative structures. Forster’s definitions have, however, been critiqued as an artificial distinction that audiences may entirely construe according to how connected they believe events are to one another across the narrative (Wenzel, 1998:175). The crux of these debates is that events occur in every story as a result of the actions and decisions taken by characters, and these events are likely influenced by those that precede them chronologically, regardless of the order in which they are told to the audience during the act of narration.

The dystopian genre is predicated upon the premise that greed and ongoing conflicts arising amongst humans will eventually lead to some event horizon that results in a near uninhabitable world. Central to this conjecture is a speculative exploration of humanity in the aftermath of such a world-ending event, where only a handful of ‘safe havens’ remain. This is not always the case, but the presence of an apocalypse is almost always felt near or far, imminent or long passed (Claeys, 2017:270). During this time, humanity continues to survive within secular communities, although this survival is typically characterised by great misery and suffering. The dystopian society thus ruminates on what might happen when humanity holds absolute power.

Within the context of dystopian narratives, humans are understood to be mortal by nature. They are often characterised by qualities of misfortune or hubris that manifest a sort of god complex and are thus entirely incapable of achieving true perfection. The constraints of mortality are assumed to be binding, regardless of how vehemently they might strive to bring about apotheosis in the narrative – either as creators of artificial life or harbingers of ruin. The dystopian narrative thus presents a fictional account of a futuristic version of humanity that suffers because its

predecessors could not accept this truth. An unmoderated ambition is insinuated to be the folly of the dystopian society – and by extension, dystopian authors suggest that similar societies could become a reality in the real world.

This quality of suffering (in the narrative overall) is important because it establishes the narrative cycle of most dystopian stories: the natural order of the world (logic) is lost, power struggles ensue, and one egregious coalition rises to power. During their rule, this coalition has established a new world order, and limitations were imposed on individuals by the state's authoritative power over the dystopian society. These limitations give the dystopian protagonist obstacles to overcome when they later challenge the *status quo*. Almost ironically, many events in early dystopian stories are intentionally left open-ended, and not all events in the broader plotline are necessarily resolved by their conclusion. This open-endedness is a feature of much postmodern and contemporary fiction, allowing the reader to 'fill in blanks' receptively. Still, it is typical for only the main confrontation between the protagonist and the state to be resolved by the end of the account.

This resolution is arguably based on the notion that the aim of dystopian narratives is not to provide a solution to humanity's woes for a 'better tomorrow', but instead to depict the absolute worst of humanity to inspire direct action in the audience towards positive change – or, at least, to be critical of vices such as authoritarianism. Ostensibly, the desire to leave the dystopian with an open-ended finale may help ground its narrative content in reality so that the audience can infer parallels between 'real life' events and those depicted in the dystopian narrative. Doing so echoes the rather complicated attitude towards the concept of hope in early utopian treatises – to drive home the point of encouraging its audience to reflect on the story's content.

Similarly, players of narrative-driven dystopian video games are often presented with a set of possible endings that hinge on diverging choices: to either lean into chaos and destroy the world or attempt to re-establish order and preserve it. The player's character in such games is usually tasked with one or more quests that bring them into direct confrontation with the dystopian state, and the events in the game revolve around this confrontation. In the aftermath of some form of cataclysmic occurrence or apocalyptic breakdown in order, players are granted the opportunity to decide a path forward. The notions of a 'good' or 'bad' ending are relative, with the full extent of the outcomes of the player's decisions frequently left open-ended.

In *Dark Souls*, the game's ending is determined by the player's decision to either relink the First Flame or walk away from it. Indeed, it seems that this decision does not matter in the grand scheme of things because the choice to link the flame is assumed to be the canonical ending

referenced in later instalments of the series. If the player's character chooses not to do this, it is implied that another undead character rose to challenge them and eventually succeeded in linking the Flame again.

3.4.3. Time

Time is one of the constituent elements of a storyworld that works alongside/within space to position and frame the elements of character and event into a narrative sequence (Wei *et al.* 2010:2). Salient narratological theorists such as Forster (1927) and Prince (1982) believe that stories are fundamentally defined as temporal sequences of events. Time is bound in a narrative in three main ways – three 'temporalities' of narrative – that are widely understood in the field of Genettean narratology as (i) *story*, (ii) *discourse*, and (iii) *narrating* time (cf. Genette, 1980). These terms are used to posit a distinction between what are: (i) the essential sequence of story events (often associated with the other narrative elements) that can be extrapolated from the process of narration, (ii) the unique presentation of these events in a readable form (such as a text or film), and (iii) the time frame associated with the act of narrating (cf. Bridgeman, 2007:53; Genette, 1980). In short, the basic sequence of events narrated and how they are told or depicted throughout the narration.

This essentially means that the term *story* refers to an abstraction of the narrative into a linear chronological sequence, whilst *discourse* refers to the sequencing of events as they are ordered during the act of storytelling – either as presented in the text or as told by the narrator in verbalised accounts (Shen, 2005:566). These terms mainly correspond with the distinction between the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet* (used by, among others, the Russian Formalists⁵⁹) where the former is the narrative 'what' reconstituted linearly in the mind of the audience after engaging with the text, and the latter refers to the narrative 'how' or way in which events are temporally presented in a text, often non-chronologically (Shen, 2005:566; Bal, 2017:5). The interaction between these two temporal planes produces narrative meaning when a reader engages with the text (Aghaei, 2014:198). Furthermore, it is then assumed that the narrator also exists within a spatial-temporal position that has some relation to the events being narrated – the time and act of narration – either

⁵⁹ This school of literary theory includes influential scholars in Russia between the 1910s to 1930s, such as Vladimir Propp, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Grigory Gukovsky, and Osip Brik – to name a few.

as a character in the story themselves or some external omnipotent being that relays the account via storytelling (Nitsche, 2007:148).

In this manner, the sequence of narrative events being arranged temporally through storytelling is crucial towards how much or how little the audience knows about other narrative elements at specific points during narration. Some narrations may intentionally sequence events out of their chronological order of occurrence. These can include flashbacks (*analepsis*) or flashforwards (*prolepsis*); these are usually implemented to heighten the audience's sense of anticipation, provide them with background knowledge as it becomes important, or for other dramatic effects (Bridgeman, 2007:54).

Therefore, all narratives unfold temporally (not necessarily linearly) – progressing as time does in the storyworld. The linear unfolding of time in a storyworld (the *fabula* or story, as it were) is thus likened to cosmological time – a consensual phenomenon that underlies one's understanding of how time is collectively experienced and measured by humanity as a linear chronology. Although this chronology cannot be observed as such, it is typified and conventionally ordered by units of measurement like seconds, minutes, days, months, and years, and thus is said to be a universal invariant with a measurable path of progression; one that is believed to extend from the birth of the universe unto the expected heat death of all living things. It refers to the Aristotelian understanding that time has no clearly defined beginning or end, notwithstanding a desire to imagine these points as definitive temporal references (cf. Bostock, 1980:148). This position further asserts that cosmological time advances independently of any human observation or intervention yet may be objectively measured and observed by humans as having a change in state (cf. Rynasiewicz, 2022).

However, unlike cosmological time, which one cannot control, the progression of time in a narrative is considered a more malleable phenomenon. Narrative texts have a definitive beginning and ending in terms of how narrative events are presented, regardless of chronological sequence, and the way that time is represented in a storyworld thus highlights an existential aspect inherent to theoretical assumptions of cosmological time – one that emerges regarding the Einsteinian argument that humans do not perceive the passage of time consistently, but rather relative to their own subjective frameworks of reference (Tsao *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, temporal experience is subjective to the individual and cosmological time is thus arguably experienced differently by each person according to one's means of observation and measurement. This phenomenon is made evident in fictional novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) where, for example, the character of Crusoe marks the number of days passed since his

shipwreck with careful notches on a wooden cross. Although Crusoe (as the narrator) claims to continue to do so diligently for the twenty-seven years he spends stranded on the island, the recorded calendar presented in the text is uncertain of the exact date at several points throughout his narration.

Moreover, according to Bridgeman (2007:56), modernist and postmodernist fiction challenges earlier scientific conceptions of cosmological time with narrative displays of events that are complex and unorthodox. Time becomes fuzzy, sticky, and subjective in these works, with events sequenced almost entirely in a manner subjective to a character's experiences, perceptions, and memories. Authors such as Virginia Woolf, whom Stevenson (2005:318) remarks in the novel *Orlando* (1928), noted the distinction between existential and cosmological time by referencing a 'time in the mind' in contrast to a 'time on the clock' (Woolf, 1975:69).

The audience's understanding of *how* time passes in a story is thus not necessary for most dystopian narratives' recounting, as long as they can understand that time *is* passing – even if its unfolding is confusing and non-linear, repetitive, stretched out or compressed. What is necessary for the reader of a text to understand is the various temporal relationships observed between events (and the other narrative elements) in a story. To this end, Genette (1980) refers to three overlapping areas of correlation between narrative events (diegetic storyworld time) and the time of narration, which he denotes as categories of *order*, *frequency*, and *duration*. Succinctly, *order* refers to the succession of events as they appear during storytelling, while *frequency* and *duration* refer to how often and how long these events occur respectively. *Frequency* also denotes how often an event is referenced by characters in the story, often for dramatic or similar effects. Ergo, an author or narrator can manipulate the structure of time in a story to emphasise, detail, or clarify events and characters during the procedural act of storytelling.

Far more noticeable in utopian/dystopian discourse than in other science fiction sub-genres, is that one often encounters a tangible sense of the narrative time that is represented. The dystopian society is typically situated in a futuristic present-day scenario, resulting from some bygone (or more recent) cataclysm and/or the emergence of unfettered chaos. Dystopian narratives differ from their utopian counterparts on this salient point, since utopian societies are usually predicated on an exaggerated sense of timelessness and idyllic permanence. In contrast, dystopian societies give the impression of a place situated 'outside of time' – not (yet) tangible, but still relatable. The audience is hereby exposed to a heavy-handed emphasis placed upon the idea of *now* in the narrative frame of the story, since this temporal frame of reference is all that the characters and audience are certain of in a dystopian storyworld (Van Gheluwe, 2015:13). Both the past and the

future are uncertain, and influenced by events in the present, but the temporality of the narrative is often intentionally left open-ended (Laakso, 2022:453).

Those in control often fabricate the dystopian society's past – or otherwise claim this lost to the annals of history – and thus enshroud themselves in mystery and secrecy. Similarly, the future of dystopian states become uncertain when the absolute nature of the ruling state's authority is challenged – foregrounding an unnerving sense of anticipation, usually with a socially formulated dread, of an impending disastrous future (Claeys, 2017:16-17). In this regard, the dystopian is analogous to the 'real' world in terms of echoes of socio-political anxieties and uncertain, bleak future visions. Prominent examples of this include visions of a futuristic, technophobic Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (1982), a city-state under constant invasive surveillance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and more recently the overgrown metropolitan ruins of a power-hungry human civilisation in Guerilla Games' *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and its sequel *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022).

Time in *Dark Souls* is described by non-player characters as 'convoluted', according to the storyworld's logic of the First Flame dying. With the power of Fire waning in Lordran, the flow of time stagnates, allowing the spirits of players and non-player characters to cross over between the boundaries of other worlds magically. Mechanically, as an intended feature of gameplay, this allows players to use unique items that will allow them to engage in player-versus-player combat, or as a means of coming to the aid of players struggling to defeat an area's boss on their own. They may briefly interact with one another throughout the gameworld provided they are connected to an online server. The players thus enact this form of multiplayer as either an additional level of hindrance to other players in the form of a hostile invasion or as potential allies that may help them defeat an area's boss.

3.4.4. Space

As narrative aspects, space and time often exist more in parallel with each other than opposed, especially in the (re)construction of storyworlds (Wei *et al.*, 2010:2). Although, time may indeed remain a dominating factor in the structuring of a narrative text, perhaps due in part to Lessing's (cf. 1962:4-6) canonical characterisation of storytelling as temporal art⁶⁰. Theoretical discussions

⁶⁰ Hereby distinguishing literature, prose, and poetry from 'spatial arts' which are more constrained to the capturing of a single moment, such as painting, sculpture, architecture (Lessing, 1962:19). Lessing

regarding space and spatiality have thus often been neglected in comparison to those regarding time and temporal connections (cf. Alexander, 1996:64; Bal, 2001:214; Dennerlein, 2019:1; Kuijers, 1983:9; Nitsche, 2007:149; Ryan *et al.*, 2016:16-17). This is also, perhaps, due to the complex nature of narrative space, its multifunctionality in narrative compositions, and a distinct lack of clearly defined and consistent terminology to describe narrative space and spatial representations in narrative texts – aspects that scholars like Chatman, Nitsche, and Zoran have sought to address with varying degrees of success (Wei *et al.*, 2010:4).

To clarify, the foregrounding of space over time does not imply the absence of temporality as salient (Zoran, 1984:312). Rather, this position acknowledges that space and time act as complementary elements, with narrative space serving as the principal domain in which spatial-temporal concerns of narrative are grounded. Most often, this happens through diegetic expressions that relay functional roles and layouts of space, but also via metaphoric correspondences to deeper phenomenological conceptions and experiences (Mylov, 2002:66). Through their working together, regardless of their independency or interdependency, space and time fundamentally structure the empirical existence of all narrative storyworlds. This structuring can also be found in the experiential design of gameworlds (cf. Jenkins, 2014:124).

Moreover, spatial comprehension is believed to have a strong influence over one's understanding of time (in the sense of both narrative and real-world experiences), as has been made evident in the widespread usage of spatially descriptive metaphors⁶¹ to describe time and temporalities across varying natural languages (Mylov, 2002:47; Nitsche, 2007:146). This section therefore ascribes to the view that narrative space – through means of eliciting one's involvement via cognitive and emotional associations – is arguably implicit in *every* motion and event performed by the characters (and users) in interactive digital media, therefore making it integral to the presentation, organisation, structuring, and functioning of a video game's narrative aspects and its corresponding [game]world (Nitsche, 2008:6-8; Ryan, 2014: para. 1; Bal, 2017:131).

Indeed, those more comprehensive studies of narrative space that seek to classify and structure spatial information and its description can be vital to postclassic narratological enquiry. This is

(1962:78) has famously referred to this phenomenon as the capture of a 'pregnant moment' – where visual compositions of intense static imagery may imply an entire sequence of events to a viewer.

⁶¹ Some example phrases taken from English include statements that place temporalities in 'ego-moving' or 'moving-ego' relations to the speaker's spatial position, such as: "we *arrived* at December quicker than anticipated" and "the past is now *behind* us, the future lies *ahead*" (Mylov, 2002:61). Similar cases exist in the natural emergence of popular adages like: "summer has *come* and *passed*" or "turn *back* the clock".

especially true where the measured progression of chronological time is no longer concrete in a story, or where differing temporalities merge, and thus become unreliable⁶². Here, markers and similar spatial forms become vital to limit any potential sense of narrative dissonance by allowing one to develop and strengthen their own narrative comprehension through the mental construction of a self-referential spatial framework. I argue that this framework serves as the basis from which a storyworld emerges – and, thus, a gameworld too – utilising the structural levels of narrative space to provide a solid foundation from which one's subjective interpretations can be formed.

However, there remain issues with the fact that some conceptions of narrative space, even those discussed in more recent publications, have remained fairly detached and vague in their definitions of the nature of narrative space and its structure – asserting that once established, narrative space rarely changes or requires further attention from the reader of a text (Buchholz & Jahn, 2005:554; Bal, 2017:124). While this may be true of narratives written for literature and film, these theories are lacking or, better yet, incapable of addressing those for more interactive media formats that are fundamentally built upon dynamic representations of narrative space (cf. Attademo, 2023:39). Video games, in particular, often establish flexible narrative conditions that can lead to ongoing (re)constructions of a corresponding storyworld, with narrative information conveyed to an audience implicitly through the use of visual, haptic, and even auditory cues (Wei *et al.*, 2010:4; Ryan, 2014: para. 14).

Older perspectives of narrative space may place it in a subordinate position to time, and also the other two elements of character and event, but from a postclassical narratological view the relations between narratives and their spatial referents are vital to the procedural unfolding of stories told through interactive digital media and hypertexts. Thus, as both a metaphysical staging ground for narrative action and an underlying referential network for spatial relations between the other narrative elements, narrative space may be considered as an 'object of (narrative) presentation' serving other (narrative) roles beyond being the backdrop to plot (Bal, 1985:96-97; Zoran, 1984:313; Hones, 2014:74; Dennerlein, 2019:1). I argue that space can be foregrounded in narrative analyses to the benefit of one's subjective comprehension; that it can hold

⁶² Some theories derived from Genettean narratology assert that a notion of syllepsis may offer an alternative means of assistance in following along with the narration. This term is named in reference to prolepsis (flashforwards) and analepsis (flashbacks), as mentioned in the previous discussion regarding narrative time. Syllepsis situates narrative devices according to thematic, spatial, or associational means rather than a chronologically-dominated placement (Ireland, 2005:592).

metaphorical meaning and be emotionally charged, in addition to serving as the principle means of structuring and organising the other narrative elements and thematic content of narrative (hyper)texts.

3.4.4.1. The functionality of narrative space

Narration may be conceptualised as the rendering of dynamic characters and objects that move, encounter, and interact with each other in a story space (Dennerlein, 2019:10). In a functional sense, narrative space thus relates to the scenic environments in which characters move and exist, and establishes where narrative action may take place during narration. This implies a general functionality of narrative space as providing the virtual setting for spatial framing (see: section 3.1. above) and visual representation in a story. However, the physical representations of these spaces provided in the narrative text are not inherently narrative structures themselves (Ryan, 2014: para. 1). Ostensibly, narrative space can be thought of as a ‘container’ for the other three narrative elements that, when combined, becomes the foundational base from which narrative is enacted and narration emerges. Narrative agents and their scripted (or unscripted) actions thus operate from, around, and within narrative space as their *modus vivendi* (Wei *et al.*, 2010:5).

In agreement with this argument, Bal (2017:124) positions narrative space in discussions between the concepts of focalisation and place, arguing that it is an “important aspect of visuality in narrative”. Narrative space is hereby expressed to be constituted by the representations of space perceived by a focalising agent, and thus binds characters in an intimate way to their surroundings. In this manner, space frames the relationship between characters (people) and events (their actions) as syntagmatic units of perception that may also be observed as constituent objects of narration, although they are rarely delineated as such (Dennerlein, 2019:2-9). Furthermore, Ryan (as cited by Herman, 2005:570) highlights the importance of spatial framing when readers and audiences engage with narrative works to comprehend their content – using mental conceptions of the storyworld as a guiding model for reconstructing narrative meaning and themes – and thus as a consistent, contextual frame of reference for their subjective interpretation of characters, events, and time.

For the most part, narrative space is thus believed to be re-created as mental images in the mind of one engaging with a narrative. These images may be predicated on their textual presentation of dialogue or similar descriptions (with references of a diegetic and/or non-diegetic nature) that

suggest an imaginary spatial-temporal realm wherein the story occurs. Ryan *et al.* (2016:24) refer to this realm broadly as the storyworld level of their typology of narrative space and assert that the construction of mental models or, more precisely, cognitive maps that resemble narrative space accompany every reading of a narrative text – yet only so far as is needed for one to achieve narrative comprehension. This process is believed to be ongoing and, thus, arguably constitutes a mode of active participation from the reader with the storyworld as they engage with a narrative (Ryan, 2018:246; Dennerlein, 2019:3). With digital media, similar processes occur, but with the additional layer of real-time interaction and reaction between the hypertext and the user – for example, a video game and a player (Wei *et al.*, 2010:2).

Ryan (2003:215) defines a cognitive map as a “mental model of *spatial* relations” (emphasis in the original). Cognitive maps allow one to achieve greater narrative comprehension by assigning spatial-temporal positions and movement trajectories to dynamic entities during narration via a comprehensive and detailed visualisation of their setting. These maps may be emulated from the procedural reading of a text or the embodied experience of moving through real or imaginary spaces (like in film and dreamscapes), where the presentation of narrative space is typically conceived in one of two corresponding methods. The first is perspectivism, which entails highly immersive representations described by a focalising agent in the scene (Stanzel, 1984:120-123). Its counterpart is aperspectivism, which is far less cohesive and typically offers incomplete depictions of spatial surroundings.

In the case of aperspectivism, the presentation of narrative space cannot be attributed to the embodied experience of any singular entity in the scene. It is analogous to that of a mental image being progressively built from one’s imagination going off another’s account or the recollection of memories – as if they were trying to recall events witnessed second-hand (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:26). Conversely, perspectivist descriptions are more cohesive, and also tend to be used more often in strategic outlines regarding the mappable configurations of narrative space. Perspectivism is thus better suited to environmental storytelling pursuits in video games, likely since this will limit the potential range of actions that can occur in these spaces and, therefore, impacts how a game’s plot(s) may unfold (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:27).

Moreover, there are two cognitive strategies that perspectivist descriptions commonly utilise to describe spatial configurations in greater detail: the ‘tour’ and the ‘map’ strategies. The former follows the descriptions an embodied speaker provides as they move through a space, and the latter provides a complete outline of the space from a distanced, elevated perspective before any action occurs (Linde & Labov, 1975:926-929). Both have their merits and benefits, depending on

the need for a more dynamic or static frame in the scene at the time. As Bal (2017:127) argues, space can thus be considered an “acting place rather than a place of action” since it may become heavily involved in the visual rendering of events and characters. Cognitive maps are thus mutable concepts unique to the individual and their level of comprehension, composed of a quasi-permeable materiality that is both performative and dynamic. Ergo, storyworlds are responsive to *and* provocative of action from their mental cartographer as they become furnished with more details and clearer imagery over time (Drucker, 2013: para. 8; Ryan *et al.*, 2016:99; Wake, 2022:72-73).

In addition to these cognitive strategies, Bal (1985:94-97) conceives of two kinds of spatial forms⁶³ in narrative that help serve as an early refinement of the story space in a text. Bal argues that these spatial forms function primarily as referential units of perception for audiences to orient themselves during narrative comprehension. There are (i) frames that express the surroundings of the focalising character, and (ii) thematised spaces which are used more broadly to refer to space as an object of narration. The notion of a ‘spatial form’ seems to be interchangeable with the term ‘schemata’, which has also been used to refer to scenic representations of static objects and spatial relations that may guide the audience’s comprehension of a story during narration. According to Stein and Kissel (2005:569), these schemata are acquired through a reader’s engagement with narration but may also be developed by one’s understanding of intentional actions that are enacted in day-to-day social interactions and activities. In Ryan *et al.*’s (2016) typology, these forms all fall under the level of story space – all of the surroundings, setting, and named locations actualised in the narrative.

Therefore, when defining the narrative space as *expressed* in a text, one can identify two constituent components of its being that work together to manifest its existence. Firstly, there is the spatial information as described and detailed by the text in question, which can broadly be referred to as the textual space or story space (Dennerlein, 2019:15; Ryan, 2014: para. 12). This information is derived from such referents as words and pictures in literature, visual compositions in art, camera movements and edits in film and photography, and the gamespace of video games. Secondly, there is the reconstruction of these spatial details and descriptions in one’s mind. This

⁶³ The concept of spatial forms relates to Joseph Frank’s analysis of modernist poetry, where he argues that spatial forms are structural metaphors that foreground thematic analogies in a story (Mickelsen, 2005:555). Frank (1991) argues that these forms comprise an underlying sense of order that the audience must inevitably comprehend on their own, but still allows them to develop their own sense of an underlying structure regarding narrative concerns.

could be the reader, an onlooker, or a user of the (hyper)text; anyone who engages with the narrative via its textual presentation of space.

This secondary component is unique to the individual, who infers additional spatial meaning from an interplay between the spatial information currently being presented and what they are already aware of. These mental images may then be further supplemented by their personal experiences and knowledge (Wake, 2022:72-73; Drucker, 2013: para. 8). Both these factors inform their mental reconstructions of narrative space as cognitive maps, which in turn lead to the construction of an encompassing storyworld and wider narrative universe.

Additionally, where I discuss the ‘textual space’ of a narrative I am not as interested in analysing the form of its phenotext⁶⁴ or the particular material spatiality of its medium (i.e. the book, screen, orator, or the like). I do not refute that these qualities may certainly have a bearing on how one interprets the narrative space of a (hyper)text. Still, I see no reason to consider the variable efficacies of such media in terms of their communicative functioning or concrete appearances in the context of the present study. Perhaps something is yet to be gleaned from an investigation into this matter. For now, however, I am more interested in analysing narrative space as *conceived* by one engaging with that narrative content, not how those processes involved can be improved.

Indeed, it seems that the greater the level of detail or realism involved in presenting detailed, realistic environments, the more time and effort one needs to commit first towards deciphering the minutiae of each scene – none of which is necessarily required for a base-level comprehension of the narrative (Caracciolo, 2024:28-33). Metaphorical meanings and associations certainly add to the meanings of space, but they are not essential to its functional role. Therefore, assuming there are no errors in communication or comprehension, one needs not to consider all the minutiae of narrative space as *conceived* beyond what is needed for their requirements of narrative comprehension.

Simply put, I do not believe that the finer details or relative efficacy of a storytelling medium have as significant a bearing on one’s interpretation of the narrative space beyond one’s needs regarding narrative comprehension. How the medium presents story space is not as valuable to

⁶⁴ Taken from Kristeva’s (1984:86) literary theories regarding a merger of semiology and psychoanalysis. In comparison to the genotext (the production of significance), the term ‘phenotext’ designates the physical text that is expressed in or by its medium. A phenotext is thus the linguistic level of communication, presenting symbols that may be deciphered by the reader.

me as the fact that it is presented, and any metaphorical meaning derived after this is purely subjective and based on one's personal interests and experiences. Choosing to believe otherwise is fundamentally opposed to an open-ended interpretation of the narrative's spatial presentation and thematic content and, thus, of no use or interest for present purposes.

3.4.4.2. The structure of narrative space

Moving on, most narrative theorists seem to agree with philosophical beliefs that space, in a literal sense, fundamentally structures human experience and is consequently used analogously in the narrative to establish the unique surroundings for the representation of story events and characters as they are narrated (Jenkins, 2004:121; Ryan, 2014: para. 1; Dennerlein, 2019:1). These surroundings present what Ryan *et al.* (2016:24) have defined as 'spatial frames', and they are used along with the concepts of setting and story space to help one orient themselves and characters within the storyworld; all according to how events are articulated in narrative space (Ireland, 2005:591; Zoran, 1984:309). Moreover, Bal's (2017:124) discussions regarding spatial frames as 'units' of perception equate representations of narrative space and their components to a 'grammar' of storytelling that may determine how comprehensible and well-formed narrative content is received.

Indeed, this internal structuring of narrative content on a syntactic level can work to establish a measure of consistency through space. Images surrounding certain domains of familiar spatial experiences are likely to be structured in similar ways during a particular moment or stage of narration. These recall images in one's mind regarding past experiences and genre expectations. In particular, how spatial frames may tie back into conventions and tropes. For example, overviews of an area or town are typically used in establishing shots, named locations may become more important later in the story, Gothic structures are often associated with horror and the sublime, and so forth. Consistency through space establishes congruence between one and the text as one engages with spatial content.

To try and explain how spatial units function, Dennerlein (2019:9-10) introduces the concept of "event regions", adapting the ideas of object regions from cognitive psychology. However, in keeping with the potential 'grammar' of storytelling, I find it more apt to define spatial units using linguistic theories and concepts. A few literary semioticians like Barthes, Propp, Levi-Strauss, and Greimas have already considered approaches that offer a promising start. Their discussions favour a syntactical structure of narrative that allows one to critically examine the minimal, emic

units of narrative (Aghaei, 2014:200). These ‘narremes’ are to narratology what morphemes are to morphology, and phonemes to phonology, although the finer details of their structural domain remain vague and inconsistent (Bonheim, 2000:11; Ryan, 2007:24).

Conceptualising narrative space as a kind of syntax for narrative grammar could be highly beneficial in establishing helpful theoretical terminology, especially if one thinks of it as a system of operations interfacing across multiple levels of representation (Wittmann, 1995:205; Wei *et al.*, 2010:8). One might, therefore, assume a set of universal principles that are involved in its governance, and idiosyncrasies that are regulated according to parameters inherent to these principles. Or rather, a macrostructure that is essentially invariant and common across all ‘spatial languages’ and communicative bodies – a macrostructure like Ryan *et al.*’s (2016:24-26) typology.

Additionally, there is likely a microstructure that governs narrative space’s grammatical relations and constituency. In articulating spatial information, narrative units presuppose a subject (agent) and an action. Ergo, in frames or scenes where the setting and environment form the focus of narrative rendering, narrative space arguably becomes both *agent and action* – narrative entities that have agency over other elements of character and event.

In support of this argument, I would like to assimilate this premise with William Stokoe’s seminal ideas regarding semantic phonology in sign languages. Stokoe (2001:434) argues for this concept to define a sign – referring to “a word of a primary sign language” – as an agent-verb construction. In essence, any sign is thus a spatially oriented reference to something conceptual via a visual form that acts together with that thing’s action. Stokoe’s theories were revolutionary in stressing the grammatical similarities of signed languages to spoken ones, leading to the development of more concrete sign phonology, even if their wider use today has fallen into disregard (cf. Bross, 2015; Fenlon, Cormier & Brentari, 2018). I hope a similar feat can be achieved here regarding narrative space, especially considering that spatial relations and features dominate visual signs and cues outside of full-fledged sign languages too (Chandler, 2007:110).

Based on the understanding that agent-verb constructions can take visual forms, one could reasonably refer to an emic unit in narrative space as that which contains *and* shapes its (narrative) content, perhaps more easily referred to by what I designate as a ‘locseme’ (IPA: /ˈləʊksi:m/). This term derives from the Latin *locus*, meaning: “a place, especially a centre of activity”, thus relating it to the Greek concept of *tópos* discussed above and how the experience of space may potentially be represented topographically. I elect this term to reference how space

influences its inhabitants and because of its similarities to the terms 'lexeme' (referring to an abstract unit of lexical meaning) and 'ludeme' (referring to an element of play).

Like the parameters of a sign in signed languages, the features of an individual locseme appear to combine to form a fundamental unit of its narrative spatial lexicon (cf. Fenlon *et al.*, 2018:7-8). Their significance may therefore be derived from their relationship between humans (as readers and users of narrative space) and their (socially) constructed form as the constituent parts of storyworlds. This also means that their composite features are meaningless and near impossible to decipher in isolation, like finding a lone cypress tree in an otherwise barren landscape or the carving of an acanthus leaf without the remainder of its Corinthian capital, nor the supporting shaft and base of its column.

To identify locsemes, one must look for contrasting patterns amidst the consistency of narrative components that govern the manifestation of narrative space. These may be the constituents of story space that inform spatial information and relations through similarities and oppositions (cf. Wittmann, 1995:210; Wei *et al.*, 2010:9). This requires further refinement of the notions of a spatial frame and the forms presented in it, as a focalising agent's surroundings, to focus on what is currently being perceived (by the focalising agent) in a scene.

Spatial units are, by definition and (re-)production (as I elaborate in the sections below), expansive and dynamic concepts. They derive meaning through comparison to each other within and across communicative systems. Therefore, they could appear as small as a single room or as large as a regional biome, rarely larger because these forms begin to lose their distinctive shapes at higher levels (cf. Lynch, 1960). Their meanings are therefore derived from their association with and contrast from other features composing the current scene, to be further refined and informed by one's knowledge and experiences. Narrative spaces are thus functionally operative on a twofold structure akin to double articulation, with meaningless elements combining to form larger ones endowed with deeper levels of meaning related to emotional responses, narrative conventions, and contextual metaphors. Another third level is involved in the *enaction* of narrative space, which determines which patterns of articulation become conventional – as I explore below.

Moreover, the presence of double articulation features – which are assumed to be common to all natural languages and could thus also form part of spatial-linguistic [semiotic] systems (Eco, 1995a:20-24) – would imply that locsemes consist of a given set of meaningless sub-lexical units that are discernible according to contextual clues (Bross, 2015). The forms that these lexical units might take are, therefore, varied in appearance and dependent on the medium or context of use, like words and images in literature, visual compositions and sculptural details in art, structures

and embellishments in architecture, and pixels, voxels, polygons, or vector graphics in video games and CGI. These units are thus ‘rendered’ from a continuum of concepts during one’s engagement with a text, and settle into patterns of expressive forms that inform one’s conception of the narrative world through mental reconstructions – a storyworld that acts as a reader’s internal field of reference for spatial information and, thus, narrative comprehension (Zoran, 1984:315; Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24-26).

Narrative space is therefore generated by an interplay between the locsemes presented by the text and one’s cognitive processes of compiling and restructuring the information derived from their unique makeup into a storyworld (Dennerlein, 2019:3). As a mental model arising from this engagement with a narrative text, these theories also account for both the underlying textual structures and then the inferences of the storyworld derived by the reader from a combination of textual spatial information and their knowledge and experiences of real-world spaces (Dennerlein, 2019:18). I refine this idea further in the following methodological section, to include the dynamic aspects of movement (referring to both characters and objects) and sociality in interactive hypertext structures, as well as to expand on how spatial units themselves can then organise thematic narrative content in such a text.

Regarding dystopian fiction, one might best conceptualise the narrative space as an overwhelming sense of regimented persecution, deprivation, dejection, misery and/or intense suffering. Claeys (2017:84-89) argues that religious notions of Hell provide the prototypical paradigm⁶⁵ for dystopian settings. Some early dystopian elements, like those found in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), certainly deal with similar themes echoing the nine circles from the ‘Inferno’ of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1308-1321). However, these allusions are not typically characterised as spiritual domains of the deceased or meant to be interpreted as an eternal punishment by some divine power. Although dystopias may seem to arise as a sort of punishment for humanity’s hubris, I am hesitant to support this line of thinking⁶⁶ further than the implication that dystopias may be characterised by ‘hellish’ (unpleasant) conditions (cf. Claeys, 2017:108).

⁶⁵ Some of the best-known artworks illustrating such imagined places are those by the fifteenth and sixteenth century Northern Renaissance painters like Hieronymus Bosch, Jan van Eyck, and Pieter Brugel.

⁶⁶ My hesitation here should not be read as a limitation of possible readings or interpretations of dystopian fiction. There are certainly examples of more recent – and even older dystopian stories, such as Robert Hugh Benson’s *Lord of the World* (1907) – that contend with overtly Christian themes and notions of righteousness. Rather, it stems from a desire to prevent one from equating notions of the dystopian with an apocalypse, or a divine judgement day. As I argue throughout this dissertation, dystopian settings are far

Moreover, the dystopian genre seems to prefer using its narrative space overwhelmingly as an intermediary that communicates allegorical messages related to its narrative themes (cf. Paschalidis, 2000:46). What predominates dystopian story space is, therefore, a sense of fear that emanates from its artistic creator(s), usually regarding current events or dark futures they hope may never come to pass (Claeys, 2017:58). Locsemes and visual descriptions are hereby used to create spatial realms that can elicit intense emotional responses in the audience, while additional narrative information and metaphorical meaning may be deciphered from these visuals only if one should voluntarily opt to explore those channels further.

An example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Orwell (2008:3) in the opening paragraphs of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

Therefore, in addition to providing the backdrop and setting for dystopian narratives, dystopian storyworlds are often characterised by distinctive atmospheres that are usually in alignment with the thematic actions and narrative events taking place within their boundaries (Whistance-Smith, 2022:55). They thus reflect the intricacies and depth of human nature through a mimetic design that resembles symbolic imagery and familiar forms in the representation of ‘realistic’ dark-future landscapes and cities. The storyworld is vital to the success of dystopian narratives, indeed holding a degree of narrative agency in their presentation and subsequent interpretations by those engaging with the text.

3.5. Methodological procedure for reading narrative space in a video game

As mentioned, this research seeks to refine extant approaches towards interpreting spatial-architectural elements in multivalent narrative space. Additionally, I explore how these are used to encode functional and metaphorical meanings related to dystopian tropes in the gamespace of *Dark Souls*. The methodology set out below thus applies to the ‘grammatical’ components on various levels of narrative space, pertaining to their application in the following interpretation

more complex than the mere idea of an imagined place that is “bad” – it is a self-standing genre, like apocalyptic literature, that contains multitudes and nuance beyond overlapping similarities.

chapters (Four and Five). What follows is thus my attempt to formulate a consolidated framework for theorising one's procedural conception of narrative space according to (i) the functions it serves during the process of constructing interactive narratives and also (ii) its structural units of meaning that extend beyond that which is immediately apparent in the presentation of narrative texts and digital media, like video games.

Analysing the narrative space in a video game arguably requires a conception of its underlying structural modalities. Space is foregrounded in my analysis because I focus on its structuring and organisation of other narrative elements – the understanding of which is arguably developed through one's conceptions of narrative space. Thus, I use the narrative construct of a gameworld that *emerges* with gameplay, alongside the metaphorical 'expressions' of dystopian tropes communicated by spatial-architectural features of the gamespace, to identify their constituent units and how these are synthesised to embody a communicative system between the player and the game-as-hypertext.

3.5.1. Towards a theoretical modelling of gamespace

According to Lefebvre (1991:26), spatial constituents may be comprehended through a reading and examination of various overlapping and intersecting levels of mental, physical, and social space – the latter of which forms the focus of his theory that “(social) space is a (social) product”. Lefebvre (1991:15-17) asserts that the ability of humans to read and understand spaces they perceive is seemingly universal and necessarily dictates an ability to *construct* them as well. By this, Lefebvre (1991:7-9) argues that space involves an accessible and constructed ‘code’ of visual communication. One that is subject to growth and change over time, and is comprised of intersecting components that entail (i) a collection of spatial practices in *perceived space*, (ii) representations of functional space in *conceived space*, and (iii) representational spaces in *lived space*. The social space produced from this ‘dialectics of triplicety’ might then be useful as a tool for analysing its cognate users – namely, the society enacted in these spaces and their conventional spatial codes (Lefebvre, 1991:34-38).

Therefore, space is not an autonomous progression of changes (like time) but rather an observable phenomenon that is defined – and therefore existing – on the basis of consensus and human involvement. This position quickly spurred urban theorists like Edward Soja (1996:2) to argue for more open interpretations of spatial meaning that could “encompass a multiplicity of perspectives”. Soja uses his interpretation of Lefebvre's conceptual triad to propound the

trialectics and notions of 'Thirdspace', which was instrumental in linking the previous theory gaps between physical and abstract space⁶⁷. With this conceptual link, Soja highlights the value of one's personal experiences to *dynamic* spatial meanings that may be embedded within architecture and thus encoded into built environments⁶⁸. It also provides insight into how (prevalent) societal influences and related emergent phenomena involved with the consistent reproduction of social spaces tend to align with practices favouring particular values, morals, and belief systems.

Moreover, when used purposefully to support narrative experiences, this understanding of the production of space allows one to work towards categorising elements of narrativised space as the subjective representations of perceptual (or quasi-perceptual) aspects of a focalising agent's 'consciousness' – mimicking phenomenological understandings of embodiment (Mylov, 2002:47; Shi, 2013:984; Thon, 2014:68-69). In other words, spatial meaning is determined by its user according to assumptions/observations based on their experiences. Phenomenological accounts from the likes of Hegel, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Bachelard suggest that one's experience of the physical world gives rise to a series of knowledge categories in one's mind – categories that are concerned with the subjective structure of consciousness, arising from the experiential phenomena known as *espace vécu* (French: "lived space"), that were later adapted into Lefebvre's theory of social space (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Hoffman, 1978). However, these theories explore more subject-oriented frameworks of existential thought regarding one's empirical existence, acknowledging that human conceptions of space must likely include topographical descriptions of a (focalising) subject's⁶⁹ surroundings, namely, the person who is affected by and may affect the space perceived around them (Buchholz & Jahn, 2005:553).

In a similar sense, architecture has been formally defined as an artistic practice employing functional design solutions that are seen as the principal means by which humans may construct

⁶⁷ See: Lefebvre's (1991:7) *The Production of Space* where he contends that it is impossible to be entirely certain of what a standardised concept of abstract space is, but accepting this truth does not refute one's ability to acknowledge the multitude of its existence through the relations between physical subjects and objects. Abstract space, as a whole, may be considered an 'object semiotic' (rather than an object language) with its phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic components transferred onto overlapping spatial levels and codes (cf. Rauch, 1999:75).

⁶⁸ Soja's theories are also an extension of Foucault's notion of a 'heterotopia' or 'other space' in dialogue with Lefebvre. Heterotopias are typically characterised by a noticeable unnerving quality or weirdness, but always exist in relation to the 'real' world – these are not speculative places and, thus, are excluded from the scope of this study.

⁶⁹ A notable link to the concept of spatial frames in Ryan *et al.*'s (2016:24) typology.

and organise humanity's existential space (Eco, 1980a:12; Jencks, 1980b:72; Janson & Janson, 1992:24; Fernie, 1999). Moreover, architecture may also hereby be considered as the principal means through which people communicate 'concretised' spatial experiences, and has likewise been used for centuries to articulate communal ways of life, social values, and cultural identities through expressive and, often, creative means (Alexander *et al.*, 1977:x; Jencks, 1980b:72; Eco, 1980b:216; Fourie, 2018:292). Like a formal "society of spaces" that distinguishes between focal structures (like kitchens, bedrooms, and communal areas in buildings) and the composite series of spatial-architectural features that serve them, such as staircases, hallways, and storage spaces (McCarter, 2016:9). Adapting these approaches to a modelling of gamespace could therefore, arguably, allow for a means of delineating between the functional components of its design and execution – that is, the elements supporting the act of playing the game purely by serving a ludic purpose – and those that express more profound meanings associated with the player's subjective response to what they see and navigate (as embodied through their avatar).

3.5.2. Introduction to the methodological approach

This section outlines the methodological approach for this study that aims to cohesively detail a spatial trialectics framework for reading and interpreting narrative space in a video game. That is, space comprised of three structuring levels (or strata) superimposed and designed to be read over a period of time through one's association to known architectural forms and spatial experiences but only fully understood through the comprehension of narrative meaning (cf. Nitsche, 2007:147; Phillips, 2008:73). These spaces may thus be considered as phrasal structures 'expressing' more than one meaning, and comprised of elemental objects of a spatial-architectural presentation that (i) architecturally delimit a set of permitted functions within their boundaries, and can be said to (ii) hold metaphoric or emotionally charged meanings above such designated purposes or intentions (see: section 3.3.4. above). These 'expressions' then arguably convey functional and allegorical meanings beyond their structural and organisation modes, as inferred subjectively by the one reading its forms.

The most important concept that one needs to understand here is that spatial information can be communicated via a multitude of perceived codes simultaneously. Thus, the meaning of architecture – which, in agreement with Eco (1980b:216), is likely the essence of space rendered for one to see and comprehend – *fluctuates*. Architectural meaning is thus a mix between widely circulated, denotative, functional intentions and a more personal connotative, metaphoric

expression that *changes over time*. When this feature of multivalence⁷⁰ has been acknowledged, one assumes that the content from a multitude of channels can exist simultaneously while still being distinguishable as needs see fit. Architecture is hereby an art of building into, around, and with space. The spatial-architectural objects it contains thus evoke formal and metaphoric expressions – broadcasted and narrowcasted – through their unique yet familiar characteristics, which can be used to either reinforce or contradict the (socio-cultural) actions that are selectively permitted to take place within their domain.

Furthermore, the ability to ‘read’ space via its composite spatial-architectural features arguably dictates the presence of formal and metaphoric elements that allow meaning to be generated through an illative-type process – a linguistic process that would imply the existence of some visual communication system. A veritable ‘language’ of architecture, as it were. Similar cognitive processes are involved in language use, and the conceptual relationship between spatial and temporal lexical overlaps, but whether this constitutes the existence of an entire, natural language of architecture remains unclear (Mylov, 2002:59-60).

Over the last fifty or so years, many scholars have attempted to refine conceptions of what such a language entails (or even if such a thing were to exist) and how such elements might be articulated based on short-lived contextual codes or modules (cf. Alexander *et al.*, 1977; Eco, 1980a:38-39; Zoran, 1984:310; Lefebvre, 1991:7; Tschumi, 1994:8-9; Soja, 1996:5; Bronner, 2014:2). Most notably, Charles Jencks has published theories that seek to explore how architecture communicates hermeneutically using an array of spatial markers, existing architectural and also external (localised) codes, mixed metaphors, and the like -- all of which are theorised to have become conventional through the repeated use of familiar architectural components over time; components that implicitly display evidence of “double-coding” (Jencks, 1977:39-43).

Jencks’ proposal of double-coding is presented around the same time when semiotic theorists like Lange-Seidl (1977:42) argued that the theorisation of non-verbal signs required new methodologies yet should not abandon those of language theory⁷¹ entirely. Jencks has thus

⁷⁰ This term has been used to denote architectural instances that are believed to hold multiple values (meanings) that emerge as a result from interactions between its functional and coded meanings interpreted from visual cues (Jencks, 1977:46; Guerhazi, 2014; Michael *et al.*, 2020:53).

⁷¹ Of particular benefit, as Rauch (1999:92-93) highlights, are those regarding linguistic action theories, pragmatics, and narrativity relative to non-literary narratives. Rauch (1999:94) uses term “non-literary

sought to ground his conceptions mostly in an overlap of semiological and linguistic practices, assuming that common features of architectural and spatial design are present throughout varying architectural typologies and historical styles across the globe. However, there remain some disputes (which Jencks has acknowledged) between his views of semiotic concepts and those developed by more established semioticians like Umberto Eco (Jencks, 1980a:9). I will be using a nexus of semiotic and linguistic concepts⁷² related to architecture here because I believe that, while neither field of study holds dominance over one's interpretation of architectural forms, there are compelling insights to be gleaned from both – mimicking recent engagements with the 'ludology versus narratology' debate⁷³ in game studies. Architecture, like video games, is a collection of phenomenological cultural artefacts that can support open-ended analyses from a

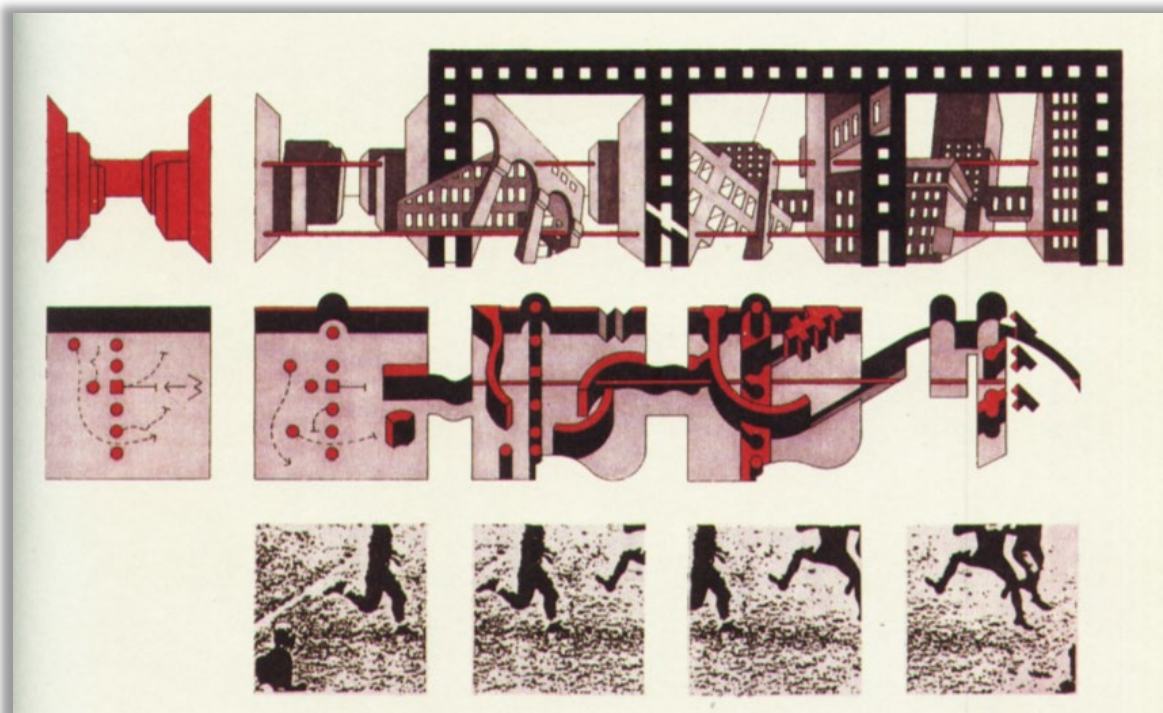


Figure 3.6: Colour plate from 'The Block' in part four of Tschumi's *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1981), illustrating one manner of representing the multivalency of architecture.

narratives" in reference to older narratological distinctions between texts based on their functionality in interactive linguistic processes (cf. Van Dijk, 1972:310).

⁷² Within the context of this study, I am defining a sign to be the basic *meaningful unit* of a language or communicative system, in addition to a *form* that *acts* (see: section 3.3.4.2. above).

⁷³ I recommend reading Gonzalo Frasca's *Ludology meets narratology* (1999), Jannet Murray's *Hamlet on the holodeck* (1997), and the article *At the nexus of ludology and narratology: advances in reality-based story-driven games* (2023) by Chen, Dowling, and Goetz (doi: 10.12688/f1000research.129113.1) for a broader understanding of this topic.

variety of methodological approaches, and any methodology seeking to study this should reflect an acknowledgement of this fact (cf. Aarseth, 2007:45; Nitsche, 2008:6).

Furthermore, given more recent understandings of space as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that structures and shapes subjective human experiences in academe (cf. Sack, 2019; Austin, 2020b:1-2), I believe it is prudent to acknowledge that the inherent meaning of any potential 'spatial unit' is likely 'motivated' by means of metaphor, analogy, or symbolism. Most narratologists and semioticians can agree on the idea that architecture (and, by extension, space) is likely constrained by 'instructional' repertoires of set rhetorical constructions and ready-made solutions (Eco, 1980a:40; Jencks, 1980b:80). Its constituents, therefore, hold the ability to carry and produce *limited* meaning potentials according to one's understanding, associations with, and knowledge regarding values derived from the context and variations of the conventional forms perceived (Tschumi, 1994:10-12; Bronner, 2014:3-4; Fuglestad, 2018:96; Austin, 2020b:2-3; Stöckl, 2023:474). Spatial-architectural features thus have *potential* meanings which are derived from a complex set of conventions internalised according to one's knowledge and experiences.

To this end, the discussion below explores notions of narrative space in relation to the fields of architecture, philosophy, game design, and sociology under the assumption that there is no definitive meaning of a spatial-architectural object – or, indeed, space for that matter – imposed upon their compositions. Regardless of its signifying forms or measurable dimensions, spatial meanings are ultimately contingent upon whatever one ascribes to a physical (or imagined) location based on one's perceptions, expectations, emotional resonance, and experiences. Likewise, social spaces are certainly designed with the intent that people will use them for a particular purpose. Yet, if one is to contemplate the spaces and architecture presented in digital media and hypertext narratives – like those found in the video game *Dark Souls* – they must necessarily do so without forgoing the emotional impact⁷⁴ that their associated, metaphoric meanings may evoke within observers.

⁷⁴ This is especially vital to develop one's understanding of the potential authorial commentary, dominant histories, cultural identities, and societal practices that dystopian spaces can inspire in their inhabitants, whether focalised by characters who are permanent residents of the society or only travelling through temporarily (Austin, 2020b:2). In video games, non-player characters are often tied to specific locales in gamespace for narrative and/or mechanical reasons, as enemies or allies to the player. These characters can thus highlight the spatial practices associated with that space which, in turn, informs the player of the intended use(s) of a subspace partition in the gamespace as they navigate and interact with these agents

3.5.3. Methodological approach for modelling a gameworld

To generate a framework that can be used to analyse the fictional realms of dystopian gameworlds in light of their spatial components, one must first acknowledge that multiple layers of meaning comprise any space. Specifically, one perceives three major strata simultaneously, each overlapping the others and encoded with a particular aspect of spatial meaning. These layers align with three regions of referential matter corresponding to what I am hereafter calling the ‘perceptible’, ‘cognitive’, and ‘enacted’ strata of spatial extents in actualised spaces – regardless of whether they are real (like built environments) or imaginary (like story space and gamespace). These three strata have been assimilated from a collection of existing spatial triadic models and theories (as surmised in figures 3.7 and 3.8 below) that broadly correspond to the presumed structural aspects of ‘known’ space⁷⁵ and narrative space, each one seeking to represent and map specific spatial points of view or more dynamic sequences of ‘phenomenological statements’ that acknowledge a degree of embodiment related to spatial functionality and production (cf. Zoran, 1984:311-315; Wei *et al.*, 2010:4).

One influential model in this regard is Gabriel Zoran’s (1984:311-315) conception of the narrative space in literary texts as a multi-layered ‘reconstructed world’, constituting temporal arrangements of spatial objects into a continuous extent of patterns. In this reconstruction, Zoran (1984:316) argues that one may distinguish between the three levels of story space expressed simultaneously through units of spatial information, according to the needs of the subject in space, as (i) a topographic world of objects, (ii) a chronotopic world of movements, and (iii) a textual world of events. Zoran’s model outlines an organisation of narrative space onto various structuring levels that underly a narrative text and are applied/derived according to conventional usage, i.e. information that is read as literary expressions, which are typically arranged along temporal continuums of narrative (Zoran, 1984:310).

Additionally, Caracciolo (2014:233-234) has adopted Ryan’s principle of minimal departure to expand upon basic modes of embodied consciousness (in narrative), including one’s culturally

and their corresponding mechanics – all of which help the player co-construct their cognitive maps and broader understanding of the gameworld (Wei *et al.*, 2010:10).

⁷⁵ Lefebvre (1991:7) argues that there will never be a fully conceptualised knowledge of abstract space save for that which relates to what one can perceive and experience.

personal and linguistically shared mediated experiences⁷⁶. Accordingly, he argues that personal experiences likely inform the development of one's 'experiential background' – a complex set of non-representational mental capacities continuously informed by one's bodily awareness, higher-order cognitive functions⁷⁷, perceptual and emotional experiences, and social interaction via socio-cultural practices. Caracciolo (2014:230-231) thus also implies that the emotional impact of experientiality may become significant when narrative experiences are attributed to a character (or group of focalising agents) within a specific spatial-temporal setting.

	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Form</i>	<i>Action</i>
Spatial frame	Perceptible strata	Provided by the medium used	Neutral expressions and spatial practices separated from the temporal reference	Establishes the scenes and frames of focalising agents and events
	Cognitive strata	Inferred from the level above	Mental reconstructions and cognitive mapping of inferential structures	Establishes the spatial relations between entities and their metaphoric connotations
	Enacted strata	Permitted movements and social practices	Demarcation of spatial practices communicated via stylistic markers with temporal reference	Facilitates the movement and dynamic features of related entities (lived space)

Figure 3.7: Table delineating the three overlapping strata that comprise spatial frames.

⁷⁶ These are thought to include cognitive phenomena of sensations, memories, knowledge structures, conceptual thought, and imagination; all centred in oneself as part of a 'spatial framework' applicable to the analysis of characters and objects in narrative scenes (Mylov, 2002:48-49).

⁷⁷ Caracciolo (2014:234-236) contends that higher-order cognitive functions include abilities such as long-term and short-term memory, imagination, conceptual thought, cultural beliefs, and language.

Needless to say, representations of spatially-focused experiences through narrative – whether fictional or not – often solicit tense, personal reactions to the various characters, situations, and events expressed. Indeed, Ryan *et al.* (2016:160-161) have studied how elements like text positioned on signs, plaques, and other similar paratexts can be configured and used in an almost manipulative way to convey stories at historical and heritage sites. These can be ‘mapped’ onto real-life environments to curate and sustain what is coined as “landscape narratives” over a far-reaching area, which weaves complex stories from personal and historical accounts into the very being of their spaces (Ryan *et al.*, 2016:161). Yet, one should remember that although landscapes and spaces can be *narrativised* through such methods, they are not inherently narrative. Thus, one should also be mindful of a measure of the emotional and cognitive impact (albeit from a temporarily adopted perspective from the focalising agent) on their reaction to and interpretation of the spatial-architectural content that is read through narrative presentations but understood through personal associations – a feature that dystopian spaces seem to exploit.

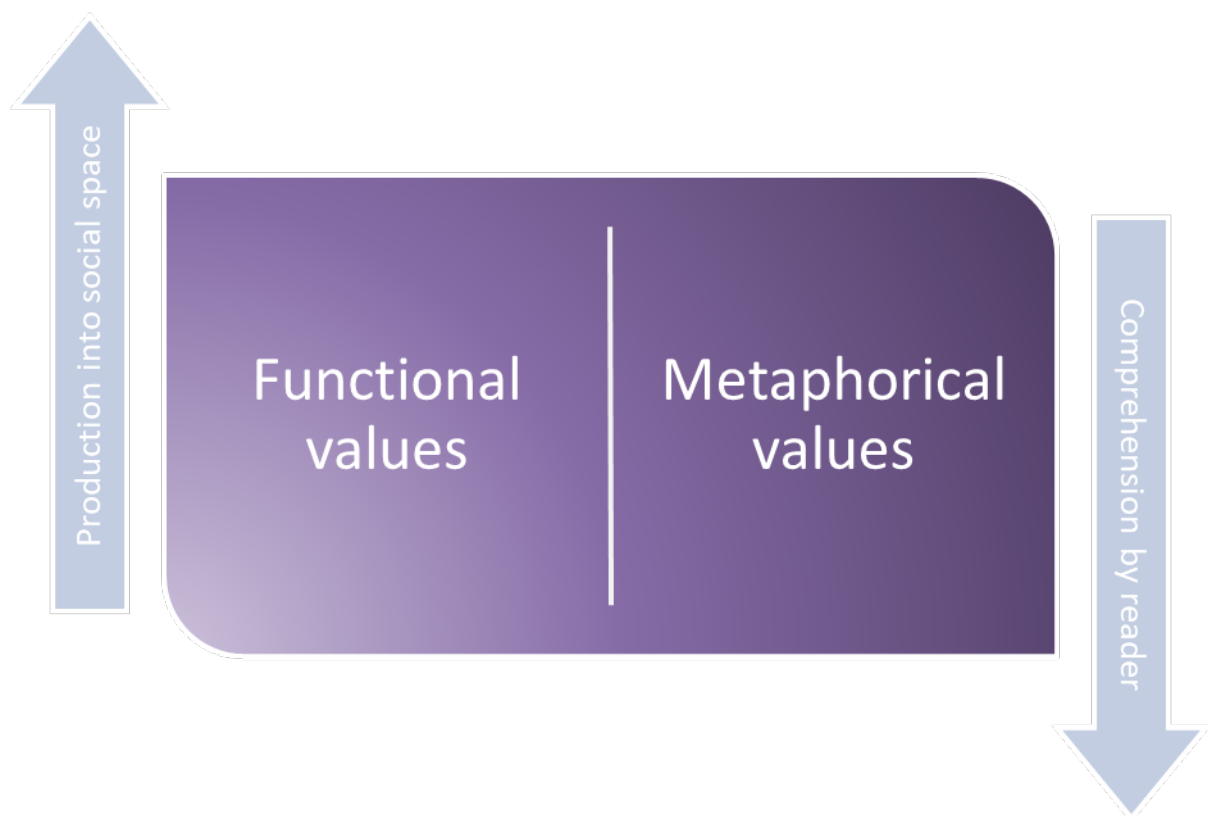


Figure 3.8: Diagram illustrating the multivalent values of a spatial-architectural object and how these relate to comprehension and production processes.

Since these processes also involve the articulation of architectural forms that are both an expression of space and its content at the same time, studying architecture as a communicative system must, therefore, contend with two major categories of meaning: (i) physical functions that are denoted by its form, and (ii) metaphoric values that are connoted from a set of associated contextual meanings (Jencks, 1980b:86; Eco, 1980b:214). This is where I believe an approach based on consolidating the principles of minimal departure and experientiality⁷⁸ may be beneficial. The process of reading space is likely facilitated by microstructures that govern the grammatical relations and constituency of its macrostructures⁷⁹, making it akin to an act of language comprehension (Leach, 1976:88). Therefore, one could interpret a gameworld by reading and analysing its composite features, namely those that comprise and construct the levels denoted as spatial frames, setting, and story space (or gamespace, in the case of this study).

The five main categories of spatial-architectural features presented below guide the interpretation of the gameworld under study. These are conceptualised as follows, and are supplemented by insights offered by the theories discussed above:

i. Sequential emic units

The smallest meaningful unit of an architectural ‘language’ should arguably be an essential utterance of cohesive spatial-architectural objects that expresses its key forms and associated functions simultaneously (Mylov, 2002:66). There are no discrete ‘words’ constituting architectural expressions, but rather dynamic, spatially articulated ‘phrasal’ forms that are produced according to conventional means of construction and act like a single unit; ‘sign-vehicles’ whose significance stems from their relations to other such units, and which may or may not be comprised of otherwise meaningless (and not necessarily architectural) smaller elements (cf. Eco, 1980b:215-216). These include visual characteristics and functional features of architectural designs that are used to construct spatial-architectural forms (e.g., walls, paths, points of egress, and the like) as well as any of their details and material embellishing.

Furthermore, any model of space should reasonably consist of a combination of spatial components and their use/influence through the movement of characters and objects (cf. Dennerlein, 2019:19). A potential lexicon, or vocabulary, of spatial-architectural phrases thus

⁷⁸ Defined by Fludernik (1996:12) as the “quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience”. In this sense, I acquiesce that, when reading (narrative) spaces, their meanings are therefore generated from one’s interpretation of information encoded on its underlying structural modalities.

⁷⁹ Such as Ryan *et al.*’s (2016) typology of narrative space (see: section 3.1.).

further points to broader (lexical) categories of consistent semantic content – which I call locsemes – as well as the infrastructure throughout its phonology, morphology, and syntax (cf. Rauch, 1999:14; Mylov, 2002:63). Semantic topological codes may thus be determined by one's familiarity with architectural expressions and their frames of reference as they work to compare syntactic properties within architectural systems (cf. Jencks, 1977:72; Rauch, 1999:14; Bal, 2017:130).

ii. Spatial markers

According to Ryan and Bell (2019:18), one should think of a storyworld (or narrative world) in terms of its actual ontological structure. This proposes that the storyworld is an entire modal universe comprised of a plurality of possible worlds, each branching out from the succession of actualised events occurring before it. Much like how possible worlds theories are applied to empirical existence, a theory of semantic topology postulates that one will 'recentre' themselves into a new 'actual' world each time they engage with a narrative storyworld, for each subsequent engagement will involve new knowledge about the narrative elements that was previously either uncertain or unknown.

Grammatically speaking, this implies the existence of syntagms – elementary constituent segments – that link to other unique semantic components, regarding their actual or implied spatial positioning in linear sequential or directional relation to one another. These signifying elements may guide and direct one from within the space, like 'signposts' that connect areas or ideas, or from external points outside the current frame of reference (cf. Lynch, 1960:85-86; Johnson, 1985). Such components can be conceived of as prominent physical or abstract markers, like landmarks and similar prominent focal points, or some other kind of metaphoric signal that corresponds with the strategic focal points of specific locations.

Consequently, spatial markers tend to relate to the functional meaning – the 'tectonics' – of the spatial-architectural forms they constitute (Jencks, 1980b:86). For example, objects like doorways mark points of egress, bell towers hold bells, and hallways connect adjoining rooms. It is important to note that these are not the most dominant elements comprising spatial-architectural objects, as they may contain other syntagms that form part of their linear sequential arrangement into a pattern. Spatial markers are, therefore, only part of the expression denoted by spatial-architectural phrases, and there may also be deeper metaphorical associations linked to their forms.

iii. Metaphors and metonymy

Aside from acting like functional markers, spatial elements may also be encoded with thematic and metaphoric associations that signal a deeper layer of meaning often associated with cultural, geographical, temporal, political, historical, and other similar categories (cf. Eco, 1980a:49; Whistance-Smith, 2022:58). These are invoked by visual details and layouts that are used to associate an idea or notion to specific forms, with or without deliberate rhetorical purpose. Such associated concepts oppose the functional potentials denoted by the appearances of spatial-architectural forms since such figurative aspects usually inspire a comparison of concepts from two distinct conceptual domains. Or, as is the case of metonymy, they could be from two more closely related concepts that fall under a larger, encompassing structure as well – like a storyworld (Steen, 2005a:306).

In everyday use, metaphoric components may eventually become part of architecture's general 'language use'. This soon leads to them having a bearing over embedded and emergent narratives – playing rhetorical or structural roles concerning the structure and organisation of narrative elements in a space (Steen, 2005a:306; Steen, 2005b:307). Decoding metaphoric meanings is thus sensibly informed by one's personal life experiences and curtails the already limited possibilities of conclusions drawn from what one perceives (cf. Bennett, 1976:202-203; Rauch, 1999:4-5). Here I am, of course, referring to the production of relatively large spatial units built in sequential configurations – things like buildings, towns, and their surrounding natural landforms.

Moreover, as familiar metaphoric elements signal a specific figurative meaning, the more frequently conventionalised associations spring up around their visual forms. In rare cases, this can result in the articulation of larger socio-culturally defined units that become a synecdoche of a particular building style or location. For example, how the iconic Opera House in Sydney Harbour has become synonymous with its city, or how the Taj Mahal complex with its accompanying minarets is often admired as a masterpiece of Indo-Islamic art. The greater the sense of agreement surrounding the similarities between abstract ideas and physical forms, the more prominence these edifices gain as symbolic entities.

iv. Allegory

From sections of individual rooms to building layouts (plans and stylistic conventions) to large-scale city districts and terrain, any architectural metaphors may become pervasive if they

comprise spatial-architectural objects that carry the *modi operandi* of a particular space. There need only be a consensual transference of some characterising idea from one semantic domain to another across a wide expanse of space. The configurations of semantic spatial types may thus further develop popular figurative values when they become narrativised or embody concealed figurative associations by acting as the discrete focal point of an associated spatial practice or cultural identity (cf. Dennerlein, 2009; Rauch, 1999:75).

This is one of the features that best supports a case in favour of architecture-as-language, because it suggests a potential use for prevarication – for architecture to express socially acceptable lies or otherwise attempt to evade disclosure of the truth (cf. Rauch, 1999:17). Allegories are extended metaphors that are consistently used throughout artistic works to represent ‘veiled’ figurative meanings, often with a measure of moral or political significance. For example, columns from the Classical orders are understood to represent trees, and are now famously allegorical for expressing harmony between human proportions and their built environment by recalling the sacred groves where the gods of Greco-Roman mythology had once been worshipped (Wittman, 2009: 142; Hopkins, 2012:162). An allegory is thus representative of the common values that people ascribe to shared familiar grounds, often to the point of personifying these domains and sites to the extent that grants their associated abstract concepts a sense of reality.

In this sense, allegories may help members of a society identify and express complex features of their worldly experience through a mixture of linguistic, narrative, and visual means. These mostly appear through allegorical representations of abstract concepts like religious scenes, landscapes, and pure emotions that can manipulate the sense of multivalency. An allegory is thus made successful by its ability to command forth the inspiration of emotional resonance, contemplative reflection, and a significant visual impact. In the eighteenth century, as another example, the politically allegorical criticism of French architecture was aimed at making the social meanings of France’s built environment accessible to the wider public – to comment on how erudite classical allegories were popularly used by the supporters of a corrupt aristocratic regime to keep certain socio-cultural practices from the more patriotic sphere of public discourse⁸⁰ (Wittman, 2009:143-144; 158).

⁸⁰ This marks a potential limitation of the communicative potential offered via architecture, and one that is often exploited for mass psychological persuasiveness and the manipulative political polarisation of city or regional districts – which have historically resulted in selectively exclusionary ‘interdictory’ or ‘non-existent’ interstitial spaces that emerge from systemic mass segregation or genocidal projects like the notion of

Moreover, the repetition of constituent allegorical elements may thus characterise spaces with a common motif, topic, or theme that underlies its entire spatial structure, from one's immediate surroundings to an entire modal storyworld. Here, one can note that while *representations of space* are tied to the mechanistic ways in which space is produced physically and reproduced cognitively, *representational spaces* are themselves considered to be the component of (social) spaces where spatial, or indeed architectural, objects embody more complex layers of deeper figurative meanings (Lefebvre, 1991:33). Allegory breathes life into space, embedding personified concepts into its spatial-architectural forms, and thus also signals the kinds of values, beliefs, and traditions that have historically been upheld – and opposed – by society as phenomenological, even existential, truths of its existence (Musgrove, 1987:xvii ; Lefebvre, 1991:42).

v. Spatial patterns and their guiding leitmotifs

By the early twentieth century, architects and art historians in Germany began to recognise the generative formation of physical space as an essential feature⁸¹ of architectural designs (Sack, 2019:31). Social spaces are hereby thought to be comprised of sets of 'good design solutions' that are not prescriptive, but are instead believed to emerge as gradual, organic additions to their conjoined spatial-architectural features as buildings and towns grow (Alexander *et al.*, 1977:3). A collection of spatial patterns that may benefit one's day-to-day activities as they become intimately familiar with its design, and can then later be used to sub-consciously enrich one's abilities to navigate, infer, and discern the potential use of similar architectural configurations (Barney, 2021:14; Attademo, 2023:45).

Phrasal forms may, therefore, as repeated sequences of conjoined meaningful elements that construct visual codes of thought, contend with more phenomenological values than functional

Lebensraum, *Spazio vitale*, *Apartheid*, and '*Habayta*' (Hebrew: לחבל עזה הביתה – חוזרים; "Home – returning to the Gaza Strip") currently seen in the Israeli occupation of Gaza (cf. Eco, 1980a:40; MacLeod & Ward, 2002:162; Buys & Farber, 2011:87-88).

⁸¹ German building and artistic traditions continue to hold space in high regard, so much so that the terms *Raumgestalterin* (German: "the 'creatress' of space") and *Raumdarstellung* (German: "spatial representation" or "spatiality") are widely used today in reference to architecture as interior, materially defined spatial designs and the compositional positioning of objects in spatial planes respectively. These terms highlight the social dynamics present in notions of lived space through the construction and use of architectural structures.

descriptions and thus convey a sense of human experiences through visual forms (Eco, 1980b:214-215). These patterns are the dominant elements of spatial-architectural objects – repetitive collections of similarly conjoined elements into cohesive, identifiable sequences that may help one frame their spatial experiences. This is achieved by organising cognitive thought processes related to activities (spatial practices) that might occur in a specific spatial context (Zarzycki, 2016:204; Barney, 2021:11).

Of significance here, then, is Lynch's (1960:99) argument that humans tend to naturally organise and arrange their social spaces collaboratively into dynamic, "melodic" clusters of elements. These clusters become akin to syntactical units arranged on interrelated levels of systemic organisation, each ebbing and flowing from the previous into the next over a substantial interval of time (Lynch, 1960:85-86). Additionally, by drawing analogies to music, Lynch (1960:67-68) relates the experience of moving along a path of these combined spatial elements to a melody, where distinct events and characteristics – relating to things like texture, forms, symbols, use, activity, and inhabitants – may be encountered and experienced as sequentially organised thematic units: indeed, as motifs.

However, Lynch (1960:114-115) does not believe it is feasible to conceive of unified large-scale patterns that can account for the consideration of an environment holistically, deferring instead to notions of a network governed by a spatial hierarchy or dominant element. I would concur, although I maintain that spatial elements can come together on various scalar levels to facilitate one's conception of a space's overarching image (or visual plan). This can likely be achieved by considering distinct fractal semantic elements that repeat along sequential 'melodic lines' of spatial patterning, supporting their conjoined existence naturally.

This implies an organic rhythm to the construction and reading of spatial-architectural objects set along a 'procession' of network sequences – with movements guided by 'archetypal' patterns embedded in spatial compositions that characterise their surrounds and which humans are naturally sophisticated in recognising (cf. Alexander, *et al.*, 1977:xvii; Barney, 2021:14). To wit, Alexander *et al.* (1977:xii-xiii) conceptualised a pattern language⁸² regarding architectural building and urban planning where embedded spatial patterns are said to be hierarchically connected to larger ones 'above' their station, and also smaller ones 'below'; tying in to notions surrounding

⁸² This conceptual framework, often attributed to Alexander, sets out a practical pattern language of over 250 collaborative forms in architectural design and human development.

generic tropes, since they can be used to delineate particular sets of formal (and thus functional) mechanics that encapsulate a socio-cultural context (Barney, 2021:16).

Hence my consideration for the concept of a leitmotif as a potential nexus point for reading large-scale built environments. Borrowed from the field of musicology, any short, recurring musical phrase that possesses some unique thematic identity may be considered a leitmotif (White, 1976:26-27). When used in relation to a unique person, place, idea, sentiment, or emotion, it may become identified with that subject or allude to a wider, often over-arching theme (Murphy, 2019:2). In relation to architecture, these are then the familiar characterising forms that underly its structural quality and allow one to orient themselves more easily in narrative space. Leitmotifs are thus unifying 'guiding motifs' that can enhance narration by subconsciously connecting certain narrative elements to motif patterns when paired with storytelling techniques like foreshadowing or allegory, thus helping one shape their understanding of a fictional storyworld.

Spatial forms are always read in context and, thus, in the continuous sequence of appearance from an observer's starting point in the environment. One cannot separate a building from its town or isolate a mountain from its surrounding landscape. They work together to orchestrate and sustain a dynamic, vivid image. The production of meaning is achieved through a combined effort of the player's engagement with gamespace, their ability to read spatial forms, and the subsequent reproduction of spatial practices in accordance with the needs of gameplay. Aspects of the gameworld in *Dark Souls* can hereby be regarded as leitmotifs, provided there are recurring spatial forms that allude to dystopian qualities, which help the player understand and co-construct its narrative content through their gameplay actions.

Therefore, the narrative spaces and especially the storyworlds of the genre seem to manifest representations of space that are inherently ideological⁸³ in their internal mechanisms but require the context of storytelling to become allegorical. One may derive or ascribe meaning from the object expressed across these three strata according to (i) functional and (ii) metaphoric values. Again, this marks a *fluctuating* meaning of spatial-architectural objects between a broadcasted functional intention and a narrowcasted metaphoric expression that *changes over time*. The content from both these channels exists simultaneously and is distinguishable as needs see fit.

The use of familiar, readable spatial-architectural objects in video games is indicative of a two-way process of reading and constructing space similar to that of the storyworld, using this as the

⁸³ As a reminder, there are no formal dystopian ideologies. What I am referring to here is the ability of storyworlds to manifest their practical elements as prominently as theoretical ones.

convergent centre for producing narrativity (Ryan & Thon, 2014:3; Ryan *et al.*, 2016:24). Therefore, as constituents of a quasi-linguistic system, these spatial-architectural objects must likely be based on a grammar that should reasonably be shaped and organised according to such linguistic components as syntax, semantics, and pragmatic use (cf. Wittmann, 1995:205). These objects have ‘phrasal expressions’ inexplicably interwoven into their forms – cohesive compositions of spatial-architectural elements that enact double articulation⁸⁴ across three major, diapositive levels or strata of relational meaning.

* * *

The methodological approach used in the analysis of Lordran, the gameworld of *Dark Souls*, can therefore be summarised as follows:

I begin with a brief discussion of the spatial-architectural features **perceptible** in these areas, highlighting those that can be used to assist with one’s orientation or navigation through the gamespace. These are described according to the first two categories discussed above:

- i. **Sequential emic units** – the basic visual characteristics and features of architectural designs that are used to construct spatial-architectural forms (e.g., doors, paths, points of egress, and the like)
- ii. **Spatial markers** – elements that link others with regard to their spatial positioning in relation to one another (e.g. landmarks or sites of action/inaction)

I then address the **cognitive** features that can be inferred from the percept of gamespace, specifically focusing on dystopian connotations identified in:

- iii. **Metaphors and metonymy** – elements that are encoded with layers of deeper meanings, each associated with cultural, geographical, temporal, political, historical, or other similar categories and frameworks of reference
- iv. **Allegories** – extended metaphors that are consistently used throughout the ‘text’ of the game, relating, in the context of the present study, to their treatment of dystopian themes and concepts

⁸⁴ This is a fundamental phenomenon of natural languages, also known as a duality of patterning (Eco, 1980a:36-37). It refers to the two-level structure where small distinctive elements, that are unendowed with meaning, are combined to produce larger meaningful ones i.e. a composition of architectural elements produce edifices which are in turn used to produce (social) space.

Lastly, I consider the metaphoric meanings identified in these areas to determine the final category of features:

- v. **Spatial patterns and their guiding leitmotifs** – the repetitions and collections of metaphoric elements that are closely associated with dystopian tropes; noteworthy features that characterise sections of the gameworld with a motif or theme nascent to its dystopian connotations

Thus, each area under review is essentially treated as a locseme derived from the composite parts of gamespace **enacted** by playing *Dark Souls*. The table below presents a concise overview of this approach for quick reference.

Locseme		
Functional meanings (related to potential use and structure)	Metaphoric meanings (Dystopian connotations)	Emergent meanings (Spatial practices and experiences)
Perceptible strata	Cognitive strata	Enacted strata
(i) Sequential emic units (ii) Spatial markers	(iii) Metaphors and metonymy (iv) Allegories (v) Leitmotifs	Gameplay

Figure 3.9: Table summarising the methodological approach used in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETATION: CONSTRUCTING THE DYSTOPIAN GAMEWORLD THROUGH SPATIAL-ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF GAMESPACE

*Don't get yourself killed,
neither of us wants to see you go Hollow.*

- Andre of Astora (*Dark Souls*)

4.1. Introduction

According to Lynch (1960:67-68) and Alexander *et al.* (1977), there are patterns that underly the structural quality of all spatial-architectural constructions, and may thus characterise spaces with a guiding motif, topic, or theme. In the case of dystopian spaces, these underlying meanings could be suggested through the repetition of common features or design similarities – like ruins that can signify a broader theme of ‘desolation’ or a noticeable invariance in local architectural styles that can signal ‘societal conformity’. This chapter presents the observations of my investigation into the gameworld of *Dark Souls* that lead towards its interpretation as having a dystopian setting. Below, I discuss how the distinct, mappable areas of Lordran are comprised of distinct spatial-architectural features suggestive of its overarching dystopian themes.

In particular, I seek to highlight some of the more noteworthy sequences of gamespace in *Dark Souls* where spatial-architectural features express meaningful dystopian metaphors – suffusing the environments in the game with visual representations of dystopian tropes – so that leitmotifs indicative of the dystopian may be explored further in the following chapter. One cannot separate these features from the rest of the gamespace entirely because, as discussed above, their meanings are derived from the context and variations in their recurrent appearances provided across the experience of playing the game (cf. Fuglestedt, 2018:96). Moreover, when combined, these features inform the development of a set of dystopian tropes that are prevalent in Lordran and, indeed, most dystopian settings found across the genre.

Thus, I begin my interpretation of *Dark Souls*' dystopian gamespace with a paradigmatic⁸⁵ analysis of four areas that I believe are strongly indicative of key themes associated with wider dystopian tropes. In this sense, I argue that one's exploration of Lordran is equivalent to navigating an arrangement of its sub-spaces, that the sequencing of gamespace occurs during gameplay and facilitates the development of a more vivid, comprehensive image of the gameworld over time. Therefore, each area the player explores has paradigmatic-syntagmatic relations between the other areas connected to it, resulting in a 'procession' of gamespace unique to the player and their gameplay experience. Finally, the last section of this chapter addresses the dystopian tropes represented in *Dark Souls* and, thus, the consideration of Lordran as a dystopian setting.

4.2. Paradigmatic analysis

Seventeen distinct maps can be identified in the gamespace of *Dark Souls*, which may be divided further into a set of thirty-two smaller, composite areas⁸⁶. Each is named and incorporates distinct, multivalent designs that emphasise broader patterns and recurring visual elements associated with the game's overarching narrative. Most of these areas appear to make use of an interplay between variance and consistency in their spatial compositions to signify dystopian characteristics – often reflected in the presence of dilapidated or repurposed structures that are functionally similar while also implied to have been, at one time, more opulent than how they appear during the events of the game. By means of mental associations and visual contrast, these areas arguably ensure the player's familiarity with a broader narrative background of the game's setting and themes, in addition to the non-player characters and events involved with recounting that narrative.

Each of these named areas in *Dark Souls* is distinct and comparable to a larger, lexical unit of the gamespace – the explorable locsems presented in the game (see: section 3.4.4.2. above) – and thus act as staging grounds that may provide additional insights to guide the development of one's conception of the gameworld. However, throughout the presentation of my findings and analysis,

⁸⁵ This term is used to suggest the study of broad spatial arrangements that share common patterns; it is not tied to narrative unfolding *per se*. Additionally, the patterns perceived across the gamespace can hold multiple meanings depending on the current context in which they are read, or as they are understood in a more dynamic sequencing like gameplay.

⁸⁶ For reference, a comprehensive list of these named areas, along with their corresponding game maps, is presented in appendices C and D.

I am focusing only on those composite spatial units of the gameworld that are strongly emblematic of the dystopian in *Dark Souls*. There are four locsems that, I believe, may fundamentally shape one's conception of the gameworld as dystopian due to the metaphorical connotations embedded within their spatial layouts and designs. These four are (i) Anor Londo, (ii) the Painted World of Ariamis, (iii) the Abyss under New Londo, and (iv) Ash Lake.

4.3.1. Anor Londo

The first of these locsems is Anor Londo, a highly affluent settlement at the centre of Lordran, in a mountain valley surrounded by natural and man-made barriers. Anor Londo is implied to be the socio-political capital of the kingdom – the lordly seat from which Gwyn and his peerage conduct their affairs. Accordingly, one might therefore assume it to be bustling with servants and attendants of the gods' court, and yet, most of the NPCs encountered here are knights and sentinels. Better still, apart from the few remaining sentries posted on guard throughout its immense halls and defences, the rest of Anor Londo's residential district appears mostly abandoned during the events that unfold during play. With Fire fading and the rest of the kingdom seemingly on the brink of collapse or already in varying states of disarray, the air of tranquillity and gilded opulence found in Anor Londo make it feel strikingly out of place in a world otherwise characterised by excessive death and decay.



Figure 4.1: Screenshot of a royal chamber within Anor Londo, with knight statues adorning the walls.

In stark contrast to the often bleak and destitute areas the player passes through to reach it, Anor Londo immediately appears otherworldly and unnerving. The entire area is saturated in an inescapable golden light that radiates outwards from a setting sun ever visible in the distance of the map's skybox⁸⁷. No other area in the game is as well illuminated – or, indeed, as pristine – as this space, signifying Anor Londo as the manifestation of Gwyn's stately authority, as the self-proclaimed 'Lord of Sunlight' overseeing his kingdom. Moreover, the use of warm, gleaming textures in its stonemasonry (reminiscent of limestone⁸⁸) is overtly indicative of Gwyn (Welsh: "white" or "blessed") and his church, the Way of White or "white faith" (Japanese: 白教; *shiro kyō*). These details present the capital as a *seemingly* utopian state – an ideal reflected further in its unique naming convention⁸⁹, which appears to have been derived from Tolkien's Sindarin, and roughly translates to mean the "(land-locked) Haven of the [setting] Sun" (Lokey, 2023:51).



Figure 4.2:
Screenshot of
the architectural
styling present in
Anor Londo.

⁸⁷ A skybox is the term used to refer to the visual textures and imagery that are mapped onto the six geometric faces enclosing three-dimensional gamespaces, implying distant objects and weather effects. These are often stationary projections of static images or pre-rendered geometry used to create the illusion of a three-dimensional environment with an expansive sky, hence the use of the term to denote a literal textured cuboid viewed from within.

⁸⁸ Limestone (and marble, its metamorphosed variation) has been historically used in architectural projects and sculpture for centuries because of its malleable yet durable form, allowing those working with the material to produce a wide variety of opulent, high-quality textured finishes (Hansen, 1992:114-115).

⁸⁹ It is possible that this convention also follows that of the Holy See, where "Vatican" may have been derived from the terms *Vatica* or *Vaticum* – referring to the name of an earlier Etruscan settlement on the Vatican Hill in Rome (Richardson, 1992:405). Connections can certainly be drawn towards Anor Londo's consideration as a papacy with Gwyn serving as its Holy Father. By extension, "Londo" may have been derived from 'Lordran', or an earlier settlement named after the "Lords" (Japanese: ロード; *rōdo*).

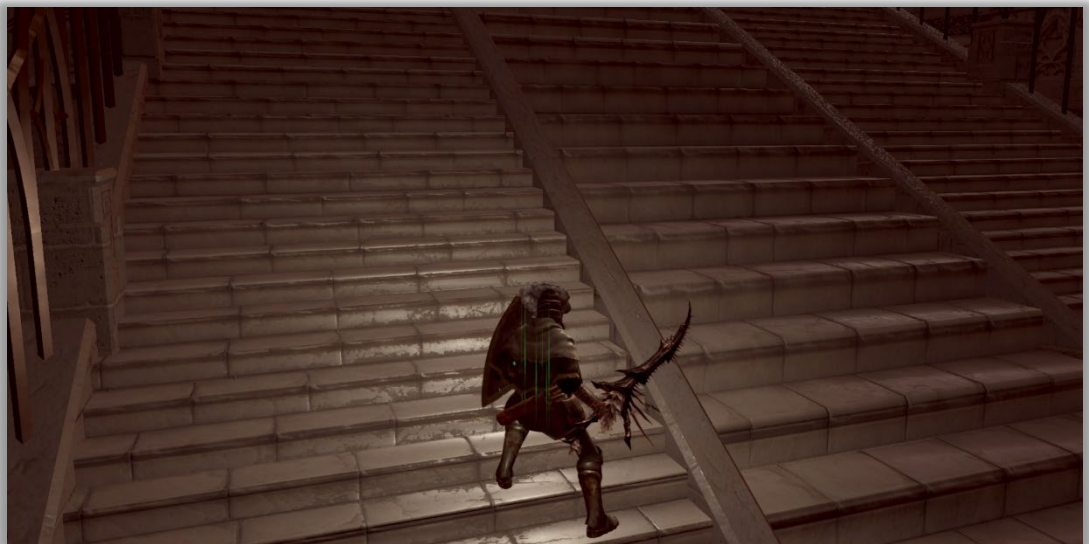


Figure 4.3: Screenshots of architectural details present in Anor Londo.

I say seemingly, however, because a few interesting structural and decorative features are present in Anor Londo's finer details that belie this idea. For instance, most of the piers, arches, and other grandiose support members seen in Anor Londo appear to form chiefly blind arcades or faux-vaulting – arrangements that serve purely as decorations – yet they are mostly unadorned. Basic agricultural motifs of what appear to be grapevines, wheat, and acanthus leaves (or their fictional equivalents) are also repeated across the settlement with little variance in their styling or layout, along with identical statues of silver knights (the royal guard) and no stained-glass windows. Indeed, although the entire area seems to be an homage to famous medieval European religious and historical sites, such as the *Duomo di Milano* in northern Italy and the *Château de Chambord* in central France, the features present in Anor Londo seem to serve a different purpose entirely – one of fortification (cf. Dell'Acqua, 2005:195; FromSoftware, 2014).

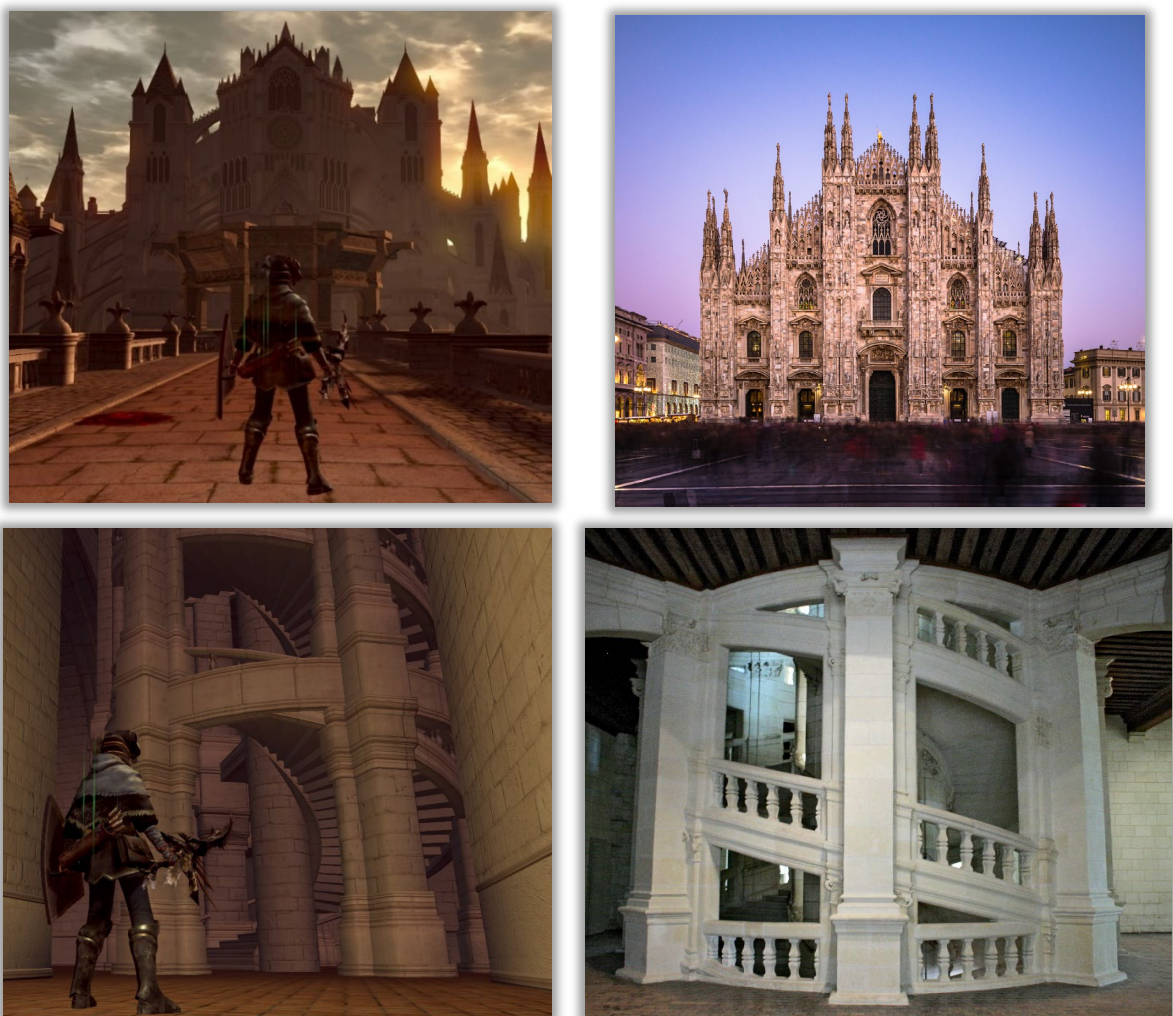


Figure 4.4: Details of the central edifice in Anor Londo and its spiral staircase, compared to photographs of the *Duomo di Milano* (above right) and double helix staircase of the *Château de Chambord* (below right).



Figure 4.5: Screenshot of a shallow barrel vault inside a building in Anor Londo, with the basic plant motif adorning its coffers.

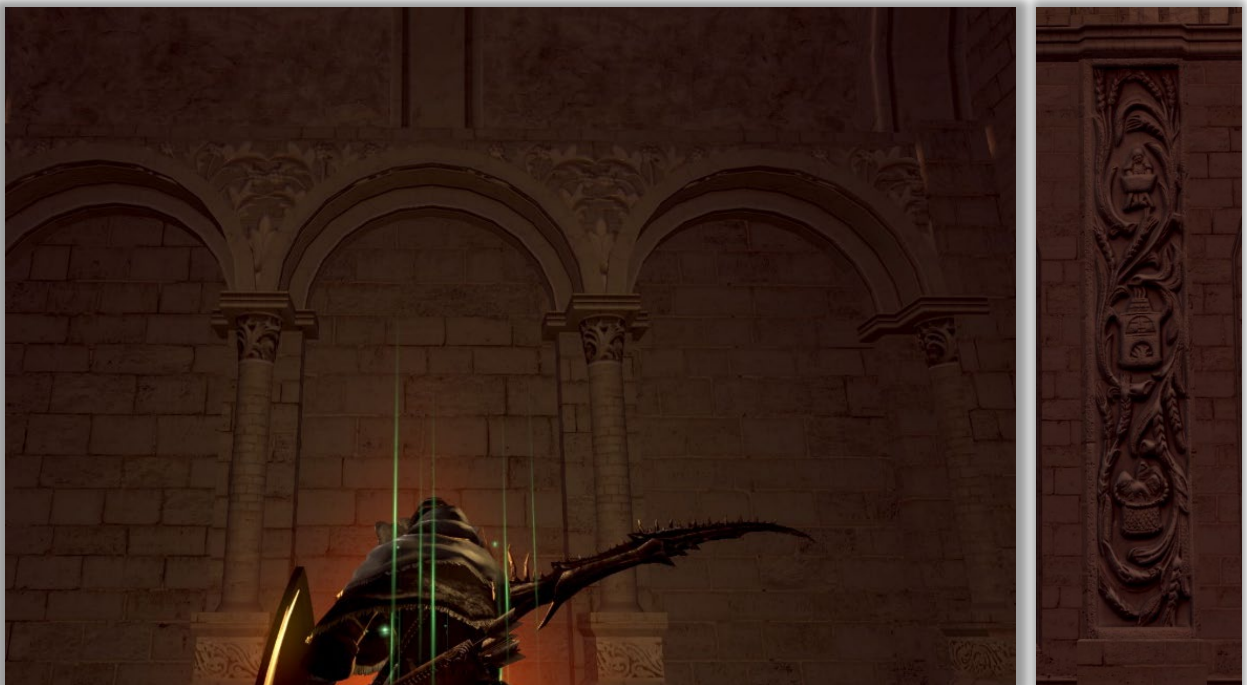


Figure 4.6: Screenshots of a blind arcade (centre) and agricultural motif (right) inside buildings in Anor Londo.

Entry into Anor Londo is only achieved by first overcoming the challenges of Sen's Fortress – an old military fort that guards the mountain path leading into this area – situated on the opposite side of its fortified curtain wall. However, with the tunnel (perhaps intentionally) collapsed by what seems to be a cave-in, the player's only reliable means of reaching the capital is by summoning an envoy of flying demons that will carry them over its outer wall to land on a bartisan overlooking the capital's enceinte. The enceinte – as one of the first and largest edifices visible from this vantage point – is a massive basilican structure that is further protected by a raised section of guarded walkways, with a massive rotating staircase situated between these walkways and its entrance. This staircase is raised upon first entering Anor Londo, and the player will need to lower it to reach the basilica. This forces them to first navigate across a series of flying buttresses and raised supports that will eventually lead them to a point on the far side of the basilica, where they can open access to its central hall.



Figure 4.7: Screenshot of the player's starting position when first arriving in Anor Londo, showing their goal in the distance.

Rather than reinforcing the initial impression of Anor Londo as the sole remaining source of Fire's Light and authoritative power in Lordran, these elaborate defences and a lack of decorative ornamentation make it more of a stone keep than a basilican cathedral. These structures are, first and foremost, a pragmatic representation of the gods' religious and socio-political bodies combined – merging the functionalities of a feudal castle (Japanese: 居城; *kyojō*) with a metaphorical seat (Latin: *cathedra*) of an episcopal see, and a noble manor house (French:

château) for the Lord of Sunlight and his peerage of gods. Furthermore, the imposing basilican structure at the heart of Anor Londo is devoid of any signs of an active ruling presence. No raised throne or altar within its great hall might signal to Gwyn's successor; only an incomplete set of statues set into the far wall, below the chamber where the player acquires the Lordvessel relic from an illusion of the princess Gwynevere.



Figure 4.8: Screenshots of the royal statues (above) and Executioner Smough and Dragonslayer Ornstein guarding the central hall in Anor Londo (below).

In conjunction with the strangely basic agricultural iconography⁹⁰, this imagery is the player's first sign that Gwyn and those loyal to him should not be trusted. Indeed, Anor Londo seems to be a desperate and vain attempt of Gwyn's few remaining allies to safeguard what little is left of their 'golden' Age of Fire. There is no care given towards the safety or well-being of the denizens of Lordran suffering beyond their walls, only the preservation of Fire and their Light. 'Killing' the projection of Gwynevere will also dispel the sunlight present in Anor Londo, revealing it to be another façade – an illusion, like the princess Gwynevere – woven by Gwyndolin, the youngest prince, who has sequestered himself away beneath the basilica; in an empty tomb dedicated to his father Gwyn.

Seeking council with Gwyndolin forces him to attack the player, as they have now undone his ruse to inspire the undead's faith in his father's legacy. Still, it proves that the capital of Lordran is as dark and desolate as its surrounding areas. Almost ironically, the illusion of Anor Londo at the height of its splendour lays bare the consequences of performing the Firelinking ritual as effectively as its true visage. The Age of Fire is *Gwyn's* golden age, and preserving it would thus be to the detriment of those who – like humanity – find solace in the Dark.



Figure 4.9: Screenshot of Anor Londo, as it appears after dispelling its golden illusion.

⁹⁰ Moreover, it is unclear why the gods would use such motifs other than to inspire *humanity's* reverence in the sun and sunlight – symbols associated with Gwyn himself. The gods have no clear need or desire to cultivate land; their focus is on rearing loyal human subjects who can be sacrificed to sustain their Fire.



Figure 4.10: Screenshot of the player's character first arriving in Anor Londo, showing a cinematic overview of the area.



Figure 4.11: Screenshot of Anor Londo's true form, taken from an alternative cutscene of the player's character being carried over its outer ramparts after the illusion is dispelled.

Additionally, from an exploration of the game's map files and virtual geometry, one may note that while everything in Lordran appears to be centralised around Anor Londo, it is not the true centre of the kingdom. This indicates the capital's metaphorical significance outside of gameplay links, and reaching this area becomes one of the player's main objectives early into the game rather than later. Interestingly, Anor Londo's positioning in-game may be attributed, more accurately, to the fact that it is situated directly above the Kiln of the First Flame – the site of Firelinking and, thus, Fire's preservation.

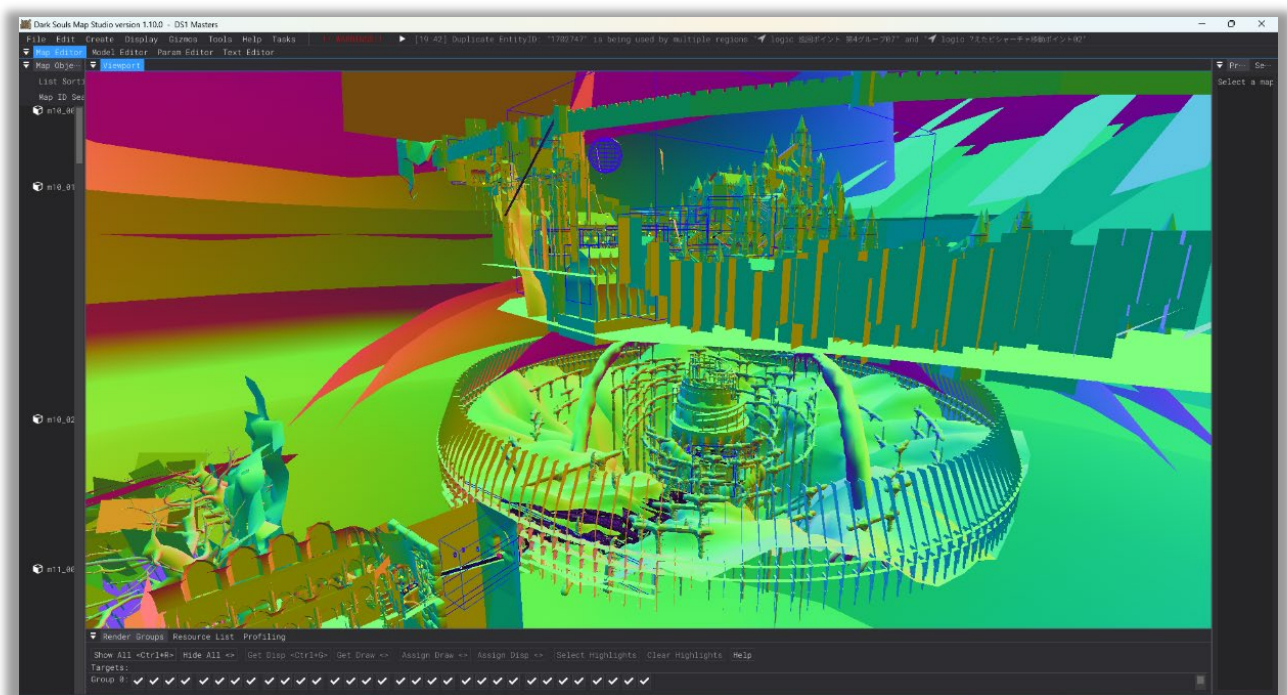


Figure 4.12: Screenshot of collision data from the game's archived map files, showing the Kiln's location directly beneath Anor Londo.

While this positioning does imply a direct relationship between the gods and the ritual of Firelinking, it also indicates a need felt by the gods to protect the Kiln, above all else, from their enemies, the Everlasting Dragons, who would most likely launch an assault from the skies. Anor Londo is thus built primarily as a fortification that defends the ruling class's claim to total and absolute power in Lordran. Its ability to inspire a sense of divine reverence and awe for Fire, and especially Fire's Light, is secondary. This is the ultimate display of Gwyn's militaristic power over the rest of Lordran, as the feudal stronghold of the Lord of Sunlight.

4.3.2. The Painted World of Ariamis

The Painted World of Ariamis is an optional (and easily missed) area, hidden entirely within a secluded section of Anor Londo. To the side of the capital's raised walkways is a slightly smaller (but no less imposing) basilica that houses an enormous painting depicting the ruins of a small keep atop a snowy mountainside. As the name suggests, this landscape contains the Painted World – a magical creation of the artist Ariamis, known only by name. Although the painting is relatively easy to find, the player's means of accessing this area is not.

Indeed, the key to accessing the Painted World lies in the player first returning to the Undead Asylum, where they started the game, and recovering a peculiar doll from a cell hidden beneath this keep's courtyard. Reading the doll's item description reveals that it once belonged to a "detested creature" or "undesirable" (Japanese: 忌み者; *imisha*) that was, at some point, taken away, drawn into a cold, painted world. When the player returns to Anor Londo with this doll in their inventory, they are prompted to enter the painting, which triggers a short cutscene where their character is pulled into the canvas and transported to the bridge seen in the foreground of its composition.



Figure 4.13: Screenshot of the player's character interacting with the painting hanging in Anor Londo.

At first glance, the Painted World is not outwardly remarkable, aside from the fact that this is the only area in the game to feature prominent snowfall. These ruins are, thus, suggested to be situated somewhere outside of Lordran – in a world without Fire. The keep is almost identical in form to the ruins shown on the canvas in Anor Londo, with the dense forest surrounding it. Once within, however, the player is trapped in the painting until they can reach the structure at the far end of the keep – a tower overlooking a dark chasm that will bring them back to Lordran.



Figure 4.14: Screenshot of the ruins in the Painted World.



Figure 4.15: Screenshot of the ruined tower within the Painted World, surrounded by a chasm.

By exploring the keep's ruins, it seems this world is meant to be the more recent asylum of the doll's former owner, Crossbreed Priscilla. As a "half-dragon" (Japanese: 半竜; *han ryū*), Priscilla is implied to be the illegitimate child of Seath – the scaleless dragon sorcerer that betrayed his kin to ally with Gwyn, later becoming appointed a duke who oversees the Archives near Anor Londo – and either the princess Gwynevere or Velka, the goddess of sin (Lokey, 2023:206). According to interviews with Miyazaki and the game's artistic leads (as cited by FromSoftware, 2014 and u/Sentuh, 2016), Priscilla was originally intended to fulfil the role of the player's confidant in early concepts for the game, much in the same way as the Maiden in Black from *Demon's Souls*, the Emerald Herald in *Dark Souls II*, and the Fire Keeper in *Dark Souls III*. Maidens are a recurring character archetype in FromSoftware titles, often appearing as the avatars of some mystical or divine power – such as Fire – and thus typically serve as the player's primary means of strengthening their character's abilities and attributes (Lokey, 2023:168-169).



Figure 4.16: Screenshot of the player's character talking with Priscilla in the Painted World.

Moreover, in a similar fashion to the 'Artemisian champions' (see: section 2.4.3. above) popularised in contemporary dystopian fiction, these maiden characters are known for their virginal mastery and independence from the machinations of the dystopian state – making Priscilla appear as a patron saint of those who have been judged 'abominable' or 'unworthy' by the gods to live in Lordran. The fact that this painting is housed under the gods' ever-watchful eyes in Anor

Londo indicates some use as a ‘prison’ – before the game’s events. With Anor Londo now largely abandoned, the Painted World has, therefore, become an unceremonious asylum for the various refugees and ‘heretics’⁹¹ that were likely previously imprisoned or oppressed by the gods for refusing to acknowledge their rule as absolute. This would explain why none of the painting’s inhabitants seem eager to leave, even though they easily could, and likely why they view the sudden appearance of the player’s character as an invasion threat.



Figure 4.17: Screenshot of a statue in the Painted World, depicting a robed woman (assumed to be Velka) comforting a young child (assumed to be Priscilla).

Priscilla’s character is also noteworthy, not only because of the unique circumstances surrounding her birth and exile, but because she is the only boss-type enemy in the game who is *not* outwardly hostile towards the player. She will defend herself if provoked, of course, but her initial meeting with the player’s character begins with an earnest plea for them to return to Lordran peacefully.

⁹¹ Velka’s presence is felt strongest in the Painted World, with the appearance of crow demons (Japanese: ベルカの鴉人; *beruka no karasujin* or “Velka’s crow-man”) roosting in the keep here. Some items found in *Dark Souls* suggest earlier dissension from the gods’ dogma; most of which are associated with Velka and her “heretical” (Japanese: 異端; *itan*) iconography (VaatiVidya, 2012; Lokey, 2023:206). This insinuates that Velka broke away from her fellow gods some time after Gwyn linked the Fire, possibly taking pity on the victims of the gods’ unjust punishments – those judged to be ‘sinners’ because the gods feared them or their resistance.

Unwelcome there, it appears that she seeks only to protect what little shelter she has left from those who would judge her, seemingly, for being different, for being an “enemy of life” (Japanese: 生命の敵; *seimei no teki*) that could potentially threaten the authority of the gods (Lokey, 2023:203). Yet, she welcomes the desolation around her as if it strengthens her. Pricilla does not desire to forcibly stop the player from linking the Fire or leaving it unkindled – her fealty is to those under her care, and the snowy ruins they call home.

In contrast to the cold, distressing darkness felt in Anor Londo after dispelling its illusion of sunlight, the Painted World feels calmer, almost serene. Allegorically, it stands as an acceptance of the possibilities presented in a world without Fire, proving that, although different and destructive, desolation is not inherently bad. Instead, the dystopian qualities felt in Lordan are likely a result of Fire’s unnatural *continuation* through Firelinking. The Painted World does, however, still share the ubiquitous sense of sadness and loss expressed throughout other areas of the gameworld, but this is, arguably, coming more from a place of grief for the suffering previously experienced by the painting’s residents in their past lives. Unlike the Undead Asylum, which is more of an imprisonment for the undead than a place of sanctuary, this is a true place of healing for those other ‘unwanted’ members of the god’s society, safety far beyond the reach or influence of their Fire.

4.3.3. The Abyss under New Londo

The Abyss is located below the town of New Londo, a seemingly endless void bereft of all forms of light and Fire. It is believed to be a physical, corrupted manifestation of the power of Dark that actively seeks to consume anything aligned with Fire (Lokey, 2023:20-21). Because of its Dark nature, the Abyss is entirely uninhabitable to beings aligned with the Light – thus, the medials and their gods – without magically protective equipment. Humans, however, seem able to survive within this void with no adverse effects. At least for a time, until the collective Dark becomes strong enough to forcibly rip one’s humanity from their body – killing them instantly and transferring their spirit into a humanoid dark sprite that continues to wander the void in search of more humanity. The eponymous ‘Dark Souls’ in the game’s title thus refers to fragments of the original Dark Soul that were split by humanity’s ancestor – black sprites from one of the first and most powerful souls in existence – that are synonymous with the ‘spirit’ found within all humans.

In *Dark Souls*, the Abyss serves as a unique arena where the player may challenge the formerly human statesmen of New Londo – known as the Four Kings – who are implied to have once been

close political allies of Gwyn and the gods of Anor Londo. Indeed, it seems likely that New Londo was initially established as a vassal town under Gwyn's rule, as reflected in the similarities between their architectural styles and names. However, the Kings were convinced by a primordial serpent, Darkstalker Kaathe, to embrace their lost heritage sometime after their appointment. In an act of treason, the Four Kings sought to embrace the Dark and conjure a source of its power at the heart of New Londo. This power soon corrupted them, transforming them into giant arboreal-like spectres, and quickly began to spread like a ravenous ooze from the Kings themselves – coalescing into the void of the Abyss.



Figure 4.18: Screenshots of humanity sprites found in the Abyss (above) and one of the Four Kings (below).

The Kings likely became emboldened by this power and passed it down unto their own order of knights, the Darkwraiths, who would later become vicious, skeletal-armoured raiders that are said to have frequently invaded other human settlements nearby to plunder humanity from their victims. Fearing the unknown powers of an amassing Dark that this settlement now commanded, Gwyn and his allies ordered the town of New Londo to be flooded, resulting in the lake of haunted ruins the player first encounters upon their character's arrival in the area. These ruins are thus evidence of the gods' swift and unrelenting decisiveness in eliminating any threats to their absolute rule in violent and immoral ways.



Figure 4.19: Screenshots of the flooded ruins in New Londo.

These ruins also clarify the establishment of the Undead Burg and Parish *above* the Firelink Shrine, which appear to be more recent human settlements constructed directly beneath Anor Londo. New Londo is steeped in a culture that reveres death and the Dark – societal ideals that likely made the gods fearful of a revolt against their authoritative rule. Worse still, it may have spurred a competition over human sacrifices, since there is evidence in the game to suggest the gods' intent of rearing loyal human subjects that could be manipulated into 'atoning' for their sins by participating in Firelinking rituals (Lokey, 2023:215). Flooding New Londo and relocating all their remaining human subjects into the Undead Burg – likely under the guise of 'protection' from the Darkwraiths – would thus allow the gods to keep a watchful eye over their supply of sacrifices and exploit their loyalty for future Firelinking rituals.

In a similar fashion to the Painted World, the significance of the Abyss, therefore, lies not so much in how it is depicted but more in what it represents as a dystopian space. Functionally, the area is nothing more than pitch-blackness that seems to extend endlessly in all directions, but this void is a tangible manifestation of the darkness that Gwyn and the gods fear will arise from Fire's fading. In an almost ironic sense, the Abyss results from their actions to preserve the Age of Fire; it is a *corrupted* form of darkness that seeks to undo the damage of Firelinking. Moreover, if the player manages to defeat the Four Kings early into their playthrough – which is possible if they are skilled and knowledgeable enough – they can meet with Kaathe in the arena after the battle.

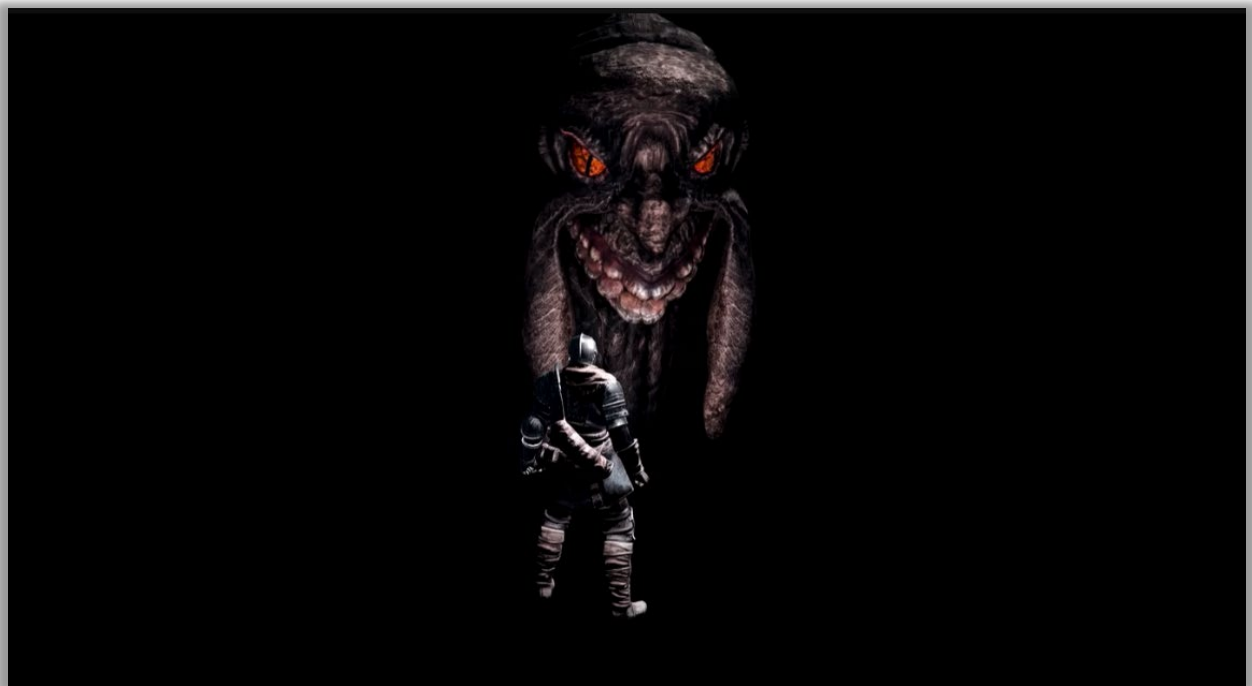


Figure 4.20: Screenshot of the player's character talking with Kaathe in the Abyss.

Kaathe confirms that Gwyn and the gods have manipulated humanity for centuries by inadvertently cursing them with undeath. According to Lokey (2023:8), curses in *Dark Souls* are a magical affliction that imposes a harsh limitation upon their target. Having been split between countless bearers had weakened the Dark Soul's power, so Gwyn used the strength of Fire to curse its bearers – humans – by sealing the Dark away within them. With Fire waning, however, the limitation that Gwyn afflicted humans with is thus slowly being undone, and the fragment of trapped humanity in each human has started to burgeon and churn, forcing their bodies to hollow and endure beyond death.

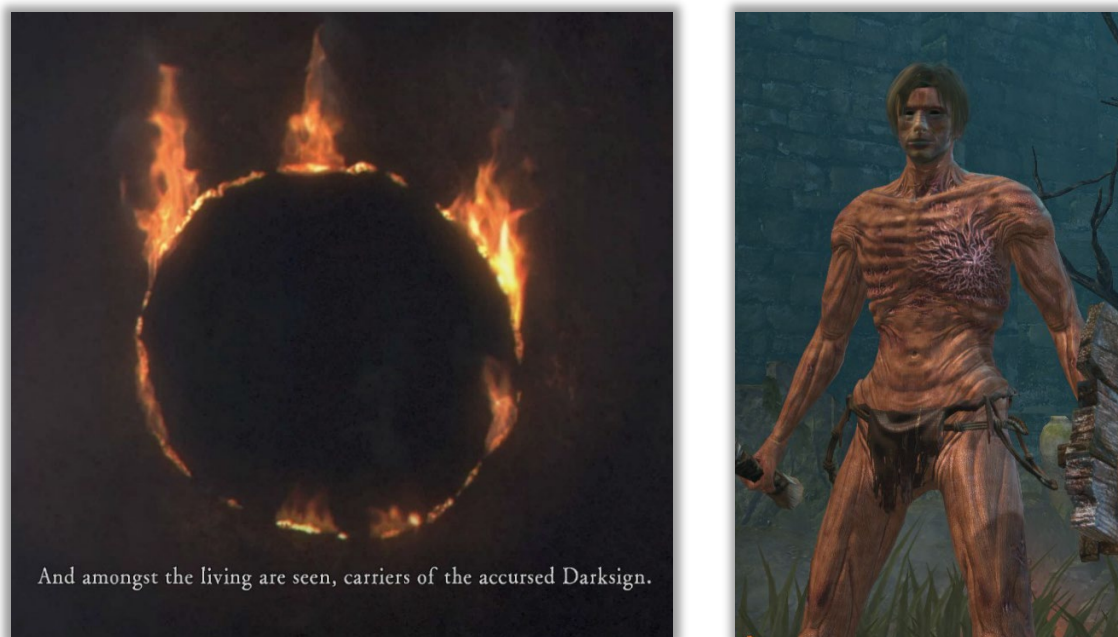


Figure 4.21: screenshots of the Darksign, as seen in the cinematic prologue (left) and as a mark on the chest of the player's character (right).

Kaathe informs the player that Gwyn ultimately succeeded in suppressing humanity's heritage and, in doing so, placed the "shackles of the gods" (Japanese: 神の枷; *kami no kase*) on humans, eventually leading to the Abyss's formation. From within the Abyss, black sprites of humanity take on a will of their own and become phantoms that seek to grow the collective power of Dark. Gwyn, therefore, made humans dependent on the gods and their Light for survival, distancing them from their true nature and history with the Dark – effectively *dehumanising* them in an extreme sense of the term. This quality of dehumanisation is arguably reflected in the architectural styling of New Londo as well – as if the gods were trying to forge this vassal town into an image mimicking their own society.

By restricting the creativity of human architects and urban planners, the residents of New Londo were likely forced into adopting spatial practices of the gods as well – namely, the reverence of sunlight and participation in Firelinking rituals – but from a position of supplication, as their dependants. Moreover, the distinct lack of fortifications in New Londo, in conjunction with how easily it seems to have been flooded, insinuates that the gods did not intend to protect the town at all. Instead, these vassal towns *are* the defences for Anor Londo, as seen in the Undead Burg and Parish being constructed into the massive looping walls extending out from the capital, using them as an expendable means of protecting the capital from below and warning of incoming threats.



Figure 4.22: Screenshot of the Undead Burg and Parish from an aerial view.

4.3.4. Ash Lake

The Ash Lake is the lowest geographical point of gamespace that players can reach in *Dark Souls*, accessed by descending through a series of tunnels and platforms hidden in the hollow trunk of a great tree visible from Firelink Shrine. Giant trees are abundant in *Dark Souls*, believed to have been spawned from the great stone ‘archtrees’ that were razed by the Lords in their campaign against the dragons. An endless expanse of these great trees is visible from the Lake’s shore, implying that as Fire burned, the fog that once covered the world during the Age of Ancients – as seen in the cinematic prologue – started dissipating, revealing this massive subterranean lake.



Figure 4.23: Screenshot of the expanse of giant trees, as seen from the shore of Ash Lake.

Ash Lake thus forms part of a large subterranean body of water, with thousands of great trees surrounding it, and possibly emerged as a geological remnant of Disparity – as a byproduct of Fire in the aftermath of its fading. Alternatively, since it seems likely that the gods used limestone (or its equivalent) in the construction and masonry of Anor Londo, this lake might have formed as part of the drainage system connected to the quarries they erected to source building materials. Regardless, the entire area is highly reminiscent of karst topography and sedimentary landforms that often form *beneath* the earth near large deposits of carbonite rock (Twidale, 1990:344).

The appearance of Ash Lake therefore implies that Lordran is stratified into two layers – an upper and lower world⁹², each separated by a thick layer of earthen material that forms the geological foundation of the Lords' kingdom. The Lake is situated in the bedrock beneath this earthen layer,

⁹² To reiterate, although there are demonic and god-like beings involved in the *Souls* series' narrative universe, these epithets are not used in any sense related to concepts derived from Judeo-Christian or similar religious mythos. Rather, godhood and demonism are akin to titles that reflect one's social prestige; a sign of these characters' status in the context of their respective societies, which is supported accordingly by a widespread veneration of their respective abilities and civilisation in human lands. Neither entity is inherently good or evil. Thus, any allusions interpreted as a signal towards concepts of 'heaven' and 'hell' in *Dark Souls* are unfounded – there are no such domains in the ethos of its narrative universe.

and the thousands of giant trees seen in its skybox thus extend upwards to join together. Like a network of gigantic pillars, they support the layer of earth that rests upon their immense, interconnected canopy (Lokey, 2023:22). In a metaphorical sense, then, although these trees may recall notions of ‘world trees’ in Norse cosmology, I believe they are instead singular (if conjoined) structural members comprised of a single body of naturally formed, unadorned material. This is likely a type of quasi-living stone or exceptionally strong bark, if they are indeed descended from the archtrees or ‘ancient trees’ (Japanese: 古木; *furuki*) that populated the gameworld in its narrative past.



Figure 4.24: Screenshot of the player's character descending the giant tree to reach Ash Lake.

Indeed, the use of terms such as “unformed” and “archtrees” to denote the grey expanse of gigantic stone trees seen in the Age of Ancients during the game’s cinematic prologue (ref: Appendix A on pg. 205) has typically led to early fan speculations concluding, perhaps erroneously, that giant trees are the *Dark Souls* equivalent to ‘world trees’ (cf. Quelaag, 2012); often using the presence of Kingseeker Frampt and Darkstalker Kaathe’s characters as the ‘primordial serpents’ (another term localised from the Japanese: 世界の蛇; *sekai no hebi* or “serpents of the world”) to infer narrative roles similar to that of *Yggdrasil* and *Jörmungandr* in Norse creation myths⁹³. However, the discrepancy between these suggested terms and more

⁹³ According to interpretations of folklore stories from the thirteenth century Icelandic *Prose Edda* by Thury and Devinney (2017:302-303).

direct translations from the original Japanese have emerged from localisation choices made by Ryan Morris – the lead translator who worked closely with Miyazaki to best reflect his original ideas in the adapted English script of the game (Evans-Thirlwell, 2022: para. 2). The “arch-” prefix is therefore, perhaps, used more aptly to denote this simple architectural (and indeed, archetypal) functionality of these half-living, half-elemental trees in the fictional cosmology of the *Dark Souls* narrative universe⁹⁴. They are the structural supports of the world itself – an ideal mimicked in the overwhelming use of arcuated constructions in Anor Londo’s typology. The gods are thus trying to supersede themselves as the new ‘pillars of society’, but they arguably have no real structural purpose in the socio-political landscape of Lordran.



Figure 4.25: Screenshot of the archtrees in the Age of Ancients, as shown during the game’s cinematic prologue.

⁹⁴ Likewise, although the primordial serpents resemble similarly gigantic serpentine creatures that, like most of the other serpentine creatures found throughout the *Souls* series, are implied to be ‘imperfect’ (mortal) descendants of the everlasting dragons that started to appear after the advent of Fire, they are not giants (referring to the mythological race as it appears in both Norse and *Souls* folklore) nor ouroboric. Both Frampt and Kaathe have comparatively minimal roles involved with the ‘apocalyptic’ events depicted in the *Dark Souls* series overall, which contrasts with the major role of *Jörmungandr* and his emergence from the sea that aligns with the start of *Ragnarøkkr* (Old Norse: “Twilight of the Gods”). If anything, these creatures have more in common with the cultural associations between serpents and notions of duality made popular in Mediterranean Greco-Roman and Near Eastern cultures (Hixson, 2020:86), being primordial creatures that observe and attempt to maintain the logic of Disparity, and thus the world.

Using the terms “primordial” or “giant” as denominate to the serpents and trees in *Dark Souls* is thus more likely meant to represent their being among the first principal forms of life that emerged from Fire’s Disparity. The advent of Fire was a calamitous event – similar to those that usually precede the events portrayed in dystopian narratives – and its unnatural preservation through Firelinking is similarly destructive. To borrow from the analogy of Cole’s *The Course of Empire* series, it seems Lordran is stuck in a limbo between the imagined states of ‘destruction’ and ‘desolation’ – unable to fully transition between them until Fire diminishes entirely.

Furthermore, a lone and tranquil stone dragon resides in a secluded cove at the far end of Ash Lake – recalling the imagery of the heron’s nest in Cole’s *Desolation*. Herons are often associated with motifs symbolising the natural turnover of seasons or fleeting moments of loss, sadness, and despair in Japanese woodblock prints (Park, 2021). The dragon’s nest here, is thus a reminder of the slightly ominous serenity that follows the downfall of an empire. This imagery seems to be used primarily to reinforce the idea that there are viable (future) lifestyles beyond the rule of the gods and Gwyn. According to Lokey (2023:34), this is not one of the Everlasting Dragons that Gwyn and his knights hunted during their campaign, but rather an adherent to their culture and beliefs – discovered through the ability for the player to join its covenant and have their character similarly ‘transcend’ to become a dragon-kin apostle (mostly for player-versus-player reasons).



Figure 4.26: Screenshot of the stone dragon priest nesting in the Ash Lake (right), compared to detail of the heron in Cole’s *Desolation* (left).

4.3. Dystopian tropes prevalent in *Dark Souls*

From the spatial-architectural features discussed above, various tropes of the dystopian setting in *Dark Souls* can be identified. Dystopian storyworlds are often infused with a pervasive sense of melancholy, as epitomic explorations of the corruptible human condition taken to the extreme. The tropes listed below are derived from the metaphorical and allegorical meanings that manifest in features observed in the gameworld of *Dark Souls*, Lordran, in conjunction with commonly recurring themes found in extant dystopian literature (see: section 2.4. above). These features in gamespace have thus become analogous to key visual representations of distinct themes exemplified in the frequently desolate or decrepit settings accompanying most dystopian narratives. My discussions here are also briefly supplemented with examples taken from the setting of *Dark Souls*, those notable for their role in fundamentally shaping one's conception of its gameworld as being dystopian.

Desolate natural landscapes with widespread destruction of civilisation: Analogous to Cole's series on *The Course of Empire* (see: section 2.4.2. above), dystopian settings are often implied to have emerged in a period following drastic change or warfare. The natural world imagined in a dystopian setting may thus be conceptualised as a savage wasteland that needs to be tamed or controlled, or similarly stands as the environment that inevitably reclaims itself from clutches of civilisation and, therefore, tends to assert itself as being more powerful than the characters of the story (Rosenfeld, 2005:46). Following the advent of Fire in *Dark Souls*, the Lords seem to have taken it upon themselves to 'civilise' the grey expanse of archtrees that once house the dragons. This led to the establishment of Lordran after their campaign against the dragons succeeded, as seen during the cinematic prologue of the game.

With the power of Fire waning, however, Lordran seems to have entered a late stage in its development that is analogously reflected in Cole's *Desolation* (1836). Through a complex series of internal conflicts and treasonous plots, most of the kingdom now lies abandoned or in ruins. An extension of this trope prevails throughout the *Dark Souls* narrative universe in the form of Fire and its unnatural preservation. The act of Firelinking ensures that Fire is preserved until the events of *Dark Souls III*, where various lands and kingdoms have later converged into a veritable wasteland of ruins submerged in pale ash that tirelessly suffers under its endless, cyclical waning⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ This wasteland can be seen in the prologue cinematic shown during the opening sequence of *Dark Souls III*, available at: <https://youtu.be/zDZYrIUgKE?si=keKbDYOI9i88rY09>.

Prevailing societal fear: Dystopian societies are typically characterised by the feeling of intense existential dread surrounding a real or imagined threat to their way of life. This fear usually stems from the governing body ruling over the dystopian state and is often concerned with something from its narrative past – such as an important event, character, or personified entity. In *Dark Souls*, this manifests as a fear of everything associated with the Dark (thus, humanity and the undead) as evidenced by the gods’ efforts to prolong the Age of Fire through Firelinking. Furthermore, the presence of areas like the Undead Asylum, the flooded ruins of New Londo, and the Undead Burg implies the enforcement of regulatory policies to corral and control the human populace in Lordran, all seemingly with the intent of rearing a steady supply of human sacrifices that could be used in Firelinking rituals.



Figure 4.27: Screenshot of the Undead Burg, built into the walls surrounding Lordran.

Strong societal divisions: Dystopias are often split into distinct sections characterised by an immediate sense of affluence or destitution. Freedom of movement between or across these different sectors is restricted and usually accompanied by some form of border patrol or public security force. The aim of enforcing these district borders is implied to ensure that no ‘cross-contamination’ of societal classes or hierarchical structures occurs – the upper echelons of the dystopian society are protected from the ‘riffraff’ while those under their systemic oppression are kept under heel.

In *Dark Souls*, this is reflected in the stark visual differences between Anor Londo and the areas preceding it. The capital is shown to be an opulent palace, basking in the ‘eternal’ rays of the sun, while the Undead Burg, the Depths, and Blighttown are all in various states of disrepair or collapse. Sen’s Fortress stands as a dividing barrier between these two districts – even though they all seem to form part of the same building complex – with further barriers in place between the Catacombs and Demon Ruins below the Burg. It appears that the gods placed themselves as far removed from the rest of Lordran as possible, perhaps intending to sequester their wealth or maintain a careful eye over the rest of their kingdom from above.



Figure 4.28: Screenshot of the lower Undead Burg, overgrown and in disrepair.

Totalitarian governance: In many ways outlined by Eco (1995b) in his essay on *Eternal Fascism* (Italian: *Il fascismo eterno*), aspects of dystopian societies regularly display characteristics typically associated with a late-stage totalitarian government. The state is often represented by a charismatic authoritarian supported by a governing body of military leaders and the ruling class of socio-economic elites. Their social power is maintained through repercussions of brutal, inhumane acts of violence against dissidents, justifying a desire for excessive public security, which later gives rise to tensions between different societal groups in the political system. In *Dark Souls*, Gwyn pushes towards an absolute and eternal rule over the lands he claims from the dragons, evidenced through his amassing of military strength and political schemes that (literally) dehumanise or demonise the societal groups that oppose his worldview.

He achieves this using a military liturgy (in the form of knighthood), folklore and propaganda (in the form of miracles⁹⁶ and legends of the gods), and a state-governed church (the Way of White) to support and grow his centralised social power. Besides this, widespread notions of the Undead Mission and a so-called ‘Chosen Undead’ echo what Eco (1995b) calls the “cult of heroism” in totalitarian systems. This is an observable impatience surrounding one’s death that is often tied to preserving or empowering conservative traditions. Undead warriors and NPC adventurers seem to crave purpose through their deaths, which are usually the consequence of dangerous acts of heroism, because any alternative could lead to heartbreak and eventually drive them insane – becoming Hollows⁹⁷ that wander the gameworld aimlessly and attack the player on sight.



Figure 4.29: Screenshots of the remnants of humanity in *Dark Souls*, as Hollows without a white soul (left) and as human phantoms without a corporeal body in the Abyss (right).

False utopia: The prevailing understanding that dystopias are typically ‘anti-utopian’ arguably developed from the point that many of these states may seem utopian, but only at first. These appear to be ideal societies at first, but the underlying excess of corruption, violence, chaos, and

⁹⁶ Miracles are a subdivision of magic in *Dark Souls* that are cast with holy talismans and verbal components. Miracles are thus cast through a form of prayer, and are often learned by recounting stories of the gods in a similar way to real scripture (Lokey, 2023:27).

⁹⁷ This term is used in-game to describe the cursed humans who have been raised after death; derived from the Japanese 亡者 (*mouja*; “dead”) – referring to a loss of will or the sense of self (Lokey, 2023:160-161).

oppressive acts enacted within them later betray this image. This trope surrounding the 'broken façade' in a dystopian narrative is often intentional, as dystopian fiction (and dystopian storyworlds) aims to reflect upon the flaws of various societal aspects that are pervasive at the time of writing. Endorsing socio-political commentaries through implicit narrative (and/or visual) means is often highlighted in these kinds of stories with an exploration of the so-called 'underbelly' present in many dystopias – a place of refuge for those unwanted or distrusted by the governing body, simply because they refuse to conform to its authoritative laws.

In conjunction with this, the fact that many dystopias may seem utopian at first presents evidence supporting the argument of conceiving architecture-as-language. It has been argued that the basic characteristic of a sign (or similar signifying form) is its potential to be used for prevarication, to express socially acceptable lies or attempt to evade the disclosure of truth (Rauch, 1999:17). That dystopias may be considered utopian at first glance is denominative of architecture's ability to 'lie' by suggesting socially accepted truths, in addition to the presence of multivalency in spatial-architectural forms. Anor Londo is arguably the best example of this, hiding the truth of its desolation behind an illusion of falsified grandeur.

Restricted history and secrecy: Most dystopian societies are described as emerging in one of two ways, or possibly as a combination of the two. Either this is the result of failed attempts made in the (unknowingly) collective pursuit of utopian ideals that benefit the ruling class, or it is the fallout of remnants of humanity coming together to survive in the aftermath of an apocalyptic or catastrophic upheaval event that cannot be undone. Thus, to maintain their social power, the ruling class often invokes espionage to filter or mitigate the truth that reaches the general populace. Their offices become the unofficial institutions that curate and distribute large amounts of personal and cultural knowledge or data – as seen in the Duke's Archives beyond Anor Londo.

Truly, dystopian societal structures could not function without some semblance of secrecy to protect the ruling class from extant threats to their continued rule. In *Dark Souls*, Gwyn places the 'shackles of the gods' upon humanity to forcibly subdue their power and make them dependant on his rule, and then exiles any dissidents to asylums or the Painted World. In *The Ringed City* expansion, additional content released for *Dark Souls III* in March of 2017, it is revealed to players that the pygmies – humanity's ancestors – were indeed allied with Gwyn at some point during the war against the dragons, despite a lack of their influence felt in Lordran. Armour and items found here point towards a division of 'Ringed Knights' from early in humanity's development being

under the command of the gods, a sect of warriors whose feats and contributions against the dragons were never celebrated or documented in earnest (SmoughTown, 2019:3m52s).



Figure 4.30: Screenshot of the library within the Duke's Archives.

Loss of personal heritage or culture: In support of the above points, the absolute control that dystopian governments seek is, arguably, only achievable through a complete loss of individualism. Totalitarian regimes may express a desire to target linguistic and cultural expression because they are aware of the individualist power inherent in these facets of society (Van Gheluwe, 2015:12). There is often no means – or tolerance – for the individual to express themselves creatively or authentically under a dystopian state. Forms of high art and creative expression are systematically replaced with bland monocultural expressions that work to subvert and censor creativity.

Furthermore, the senseless regurgitation of artworks that lack creative expression and state propaganda creates a sense of timelessness that permeates into the very being of the dystopian society. Over time, this becomes the norm, and any attempts to deviate or improve upon the norm are seen as more and more unnecessary – leading to a ‘this is the way things have always been’ narrative that characterised the traditionalist ideals held by those in power. In *Dark Souls*, there are no instances of a purely human-made settlement or collection of artworks. Everything is related in some way to the gods or Firelinking, even the so-called homelands that the player’s

character and other NPCs are said to have originally hailed from. Thorolund (Japanese: ソルロンドン), for instance, is described as the new base of operations for the Way of White after Gwyn's sacrifice to link the Fire and can be more accurately translated into *Sorurondo* or "Sol Londo" – implying that it is meant to continue the legacy of Anor Londo (Lokey, 2023:265).

4.4. Summary and closing remarks

To be considered dystopian, a gameworld must arguably achieve two objectives. Firstly, it must be focused on the notable, destructive changes present within an established human settlement and, secondly, it must motivate a critical examination of the faults present in the socio-cultural trends and power structures of the ['utopian'] society that lives there (cf. Barton, 2016:7-13; Van Gheluwe, 2015:7). I have argued that Lordran fulfils both requirements by being centred around the player's exploration of its composite areas, at the tail end of its golden Age of Fire, with the player's main objective surrounding a targeted dismantling of the former head of state's constituency.

The locsems discussed above have decisively proven that exploring the gamespace presented in *Dark Souls* is vital to comprehend its broader narrative themes. Areas like the Painted World and Ash Lake are entirely optional, meaning players may have missed them until their third or even later playthrough if they were unaware of their existence. Yet, these areas can recontextualise so much of the lore and fictional history that one slowly pieces together from their adventures through the kingdom. Similarly, areas that are required stages towards one's completion of the game – like Anor Londo and the Abyss – may hide variations that only the most astute or experimental players could discover.

Consequently, the game is still able to produce a cohesive gameworld that is logically structured and consistent in both its detail and use of narrative elements, despite featuring unfamiliar story scenarios and fictional societal advancements (Ensslin, 2022:23). It follows that, although *Dark Souls* may allude to such things as knights and medieval feudal kingdoms, the ways they are represented in the context of the game's narrative *should* have no 'natural' groundings of familiarity in real-life situations or experiences. The dead do not typically rise to haunt the living. Dragons do not terrorise the skies, let alone exist in any sense of a quasi-living rock creature that cannot feel pain. And the fate of one's existence is not tied to the maintenance of a primordial Fire.

Most humans, as undead, seem to lead fearful and dehumanised lives under the authoritative rule of the gods. They have no understanding of their heritage or legacy, their personal freedoms and access to historical information are heavily restricted, and any who show symptoms of the undead curse become ostracised from the rest of their society. Humanity thus stands divided in their undeath. Furthermore, they cannot effectively pursue alternative ways of living since this requires tremendous personal strength and perseverance, and remnants of the gods' punishments continue to be meted out at the earliest signs of dissidence.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS: IDENTIFYING LEITMOTIFS OF THE DYSTOPIAN IN *DARK SOULS*

Mmm...mmm...Mm! Oh-hoh!
Forgive me. I was absorbed in thought.

- Siegmeyer of Catarina (*Dark Souls*)

5.1. Introduction

From an overview of Lordran and some of its most prominent composite spaces, it emerges that most of the features in its spatial-architectural designs often mimic concepts that allude to characteristics, historical events, or situations from the real world to make their dystopian setting *feel* realistic. This chapter examines the implications of the findings presented in the previous chapter, and thus begins by briefly looking at how spatial-architectural features comprising the gameworld of *Dark Souls* communicate their dystopian characteristics. It then highlights the guiding leitmotifs associated with these characteristics, which best inform the player's mental construction and comprehension of this gameworld as dystopian. The final section of this chapter addresses additional findings that were not initially anticipated under the premise of this research.

5.2. The dystopian gameworld of *Dark Souls*

Before patterns can be identified within the sequencing of its composite gamespace, I believe it pertinent to first address what a more complete conception of the gameworld entails. It is arguably simpler to determine which elements of spatial-architectural expressions stand out as guiding one's interpretation of their arrangement once the total image of the gameworld is understood. Thus, to understand how dystopian connotations are communicated by Lordran, the gameworld of *Dark Souls*, it is imperative that one should first read and comprehend its spatial-architectural design holistically.

The gamespace of *Dark Souls* may, for the most part, be explored according to the agency and needs of the player. The player's traversal of Lordran involves navigating a mixture of overlapping

linear and 'hub-and-spoke' layouts that connect each distinct area (cf. Adams, 2014:445-450). This type of spatial organisation is not unique to *Dark Souls*, but it does allow the player to reorient themselves within the gamespace easily. Even without an accessible map or compass to reference in-game, players can slowly familiarise themselves with the gameworld's topography since they are required to return and pass through the areas they have already explored to access new ones (cf. Wei *et al.*, 2010:9).

Moreover, the areas accessible immediately after one's arrival in Firelink Shrine may be completed in a variety of potential orders or even disregarded entirely without significantly impacting the player's experience or understanding of the game. The primary form through which narrative meaning seems to be expressed in *Dark Souls* is its highly narrativised gamespace, implying that all of its narrative elements can then be reassembled according to one's ability to conceive a gameworld connected to their representations in-game. Essentially, Lordran is therefore comprised of an amalgamation of dynamic vignettes that reinforce its desolate conditions, locuses enacted between the player and the game that all are connected in some way to Firelinking, Gwyn, and the undead curse afflicting the player's character.

Exploring the various interconnected areas and maps of Lordran thus not only allows the player to formulate a more accurate topography of its gamespace, but acts as the means through which one may comprehend the game's narrative as it unfolds during gameplay⁹⁸. It also allows one to adopt spatial experiences associated with these composite areas of gamespace into their experiential background (see: section 3.4.3. above), thereby making its speculative narrative scenarios *feel* more realistic by facilitating player interactions with the game. In this sense, the player forms attachments to areas because they can explore and act within them (cf. Tuan, 1977).

The player's journey begins in a prison complex designed and maintained by agents of the gods in Anor Londo. On their way to completing the game, the player explores numerous locations within Lordran that are similarly overseen by this ruling power – exposing them to the failures and unforeseen consequences of linking the Fire – and are then offered an opportunity to decide the

⁹⁸ While elements of the game's narrative are certainly hidden within the various item descriptions and brief conversations with the NPCs encountered by playing the game, these are all scattered throughout its interconnected areas. Moreover, the only way that players are able to locate and collect these clues in the first place is by a thorough exploration of each area they come across; thus leading to the crux of my argument, namely that gamespace may be read through an association to one's narrative comprehension, because narrative meaning is only *confirmed* by the various events, characters, and items discovered in-game.

future of this kingdom. Features of gamespace are frequently used to show how Hollows and the undead – and thus humanity itself – are made to feel unwelcome in what is, primarily, the lands of the Lords. Most of the architecture connected to the upper echelons of Lordran's society is enormous, in contrast to the characteristically small frame of humans, and thus appears imposing to the player from their (undead) character's perspective.

Aside from the Undead Asylum and Painted World, which are both technically located outside of Lordran, the only places where the spatial-architecture seems suited to the player's character size are in the winding, labyrinthine passageways of the Undead Burg, New Londo Ruins, and Depths. These claustrophobic areas may all be associated with the waste and 'run-off' of the gods' capital, a fact heavily implied by the ramshackle Blighttown built out of the kingdom's waterway network. Thus, the player understands that humans (and those associated with them) have become victims of the gods' systemic injustices, likened to a pest that has, even centuries after Gwyn's apparent sacrifice to link the Fire, become a faceless enemy to the state: undead abominations who are too weak to break free from their shackles of Fire and too strong for the gods to control indefinitely as Fire fades.



Figure 5.1: Screenshot of the Northern Undead Asylum exterior.

The gameworld of *Dark Souls* is strange and fantastic, diverting from the physical laws and logical principles that constrain life in the real world to present a dark image of a fictional humanity that

conveys its dystopian themes. Indeed, most dystopian narratives seem ‘unnatural⁹⁹’ with regards to the speculative scenarios they proclaim are feasible in the future, using societal concepts and structures that have solid grounding in real-world counterparts (Ensslin, 2022:21). Dehumanisation – quite literally, due to Gwyn having sealed away the fragments of the Dark Soul present in every human – seems vital to the continuation of the Age of Fire; a fact that only becomes apparent after one has performed a thorough exploration of the composite areas within this kingdom of the Lords.

5.3. Leitmotifs of the dystopian in *Dark Souls*

In conjunction with an overview of Lordran, as discussed above, I find a handful of recurrent spatial-architectural features accompany expressions of its dystopian qualities. Those related to Lord Gwyn – emblematic of his Firelinking and subjugation of humanity – that routinely demonstrate his oppressive rule over an undead human populace that is made to feel dehumanised. These noteworthy features characterise sections of the gameworld with a motif or theme nascent to its dystopian connotations and have emerged from reviewing my subjective conceptions of the gameworld, developed from time spent playing and researching the game. They are coalesced into a series of guiding patterns, or leitmotifs, explored below.

I argue that these repeated features are akin to metaphorical ‘markers’ of the dystopian themes explored in *Dark Souls* because, as Whistance-Smith (2022:58) argues, metaphor is a pervasive cognitive process that allows patterns learned in concrete experience to structure abstract thought. Virtual environments rendered in a video game can be designed to metaphorically evoke underlying meanings beyond what is functionally apparent (see: section 3.4.2. above). Thus, features of the gamespace in *Dark Souls* can embody metaphorical associations through their use of recognisable materials and the general articulation of their spatial-architectural forms.

When their repetition becomes identified with a specific character or theme, it may be regarded as a leitmotif common across the gameworld – since these arguably underlie its structural quality

⁹⁹ Ensslin follows Monika Fludernik’s (1996:9-13) definition of this term, taking ‘natural’ to denote narratives that include spontaneous, conversational-esque storytelling conventions common within familiar socio-cultural environments and paradigms. Any narrative that likely subverts known human experiences of storytelling within a certain context – like dystopias, and especially those that utilise environmental storytelling techniques – are thus ‘unnatural’, depending on the experiences and familiarity of the individual.

and inform its development. In a poetic sense, these distinctive patterns are repeated across the gamespace to announce familiar forms and situations to the player, allowing them to orient themselves more easily in its narrative space. The leitmotifs guiding a dystopian reading of *Dark Souls* are thus interpreted as I set out below.

The radiant and the desolate: After Gwyn claimed what is believed to be the most powerful Lord Soul from Fire and won his conquest against the dragons, he established the capital of his utopian state above ground to be closer to the symbol of his power – namely Anor Londo, the ‘Haven of Sunlight’. This capital is the socio-political core of Lordran and thus houses his peerage and the political body of gods that he governs, a position reflected by it being situated at the topographical centre of this kingdom. Although Gwyn is thus worshipped as an omnipotent ruler of the gods, it appears that his crown and sovereignty are both self-proclaimed notions enforced through widespread support.

Notably, none of the other lords wear such headdresses, only those related to Gwyn’s peerage in some regard – as seen in the statues decorating the halls of Anor Londo. In comparison to notes by Harmon (as cited by Pearse, 2001: para. 26), the style of Gwyn’s crown bears a striking resemblance to descriptions of the *corona radiata* (Latin: “chaplet furnished with rays [of the Sun]”) frequently associated with Augustus, Nero, and those Roman Emperors after Caracalla with a known penchant for cruelty. Gwyn’s crown is thus his personal symbol of the royal authority *he* commands, and not one of the theocracy he oversees. It is an artefact that is synonymous with the adoration of his power – Light and the Sun – as the Lord of Sunlight.

This imagery is emphasised by the surprising golden brilliance accompanying initial impressions of Anor Londo, placing it in immediate contrast with the often bleak and decrepit environs of areas preceding it. Indeed, many areas implied to have been forsaken by the gods in Lordran are lacking in natural sunlight, although this in no way seems to have hindered those seeking to establish settlements beyond the reach of the Sun. Similarly, with New Londo and Firelink becoming an apparent vassal state to Anor Londo above them, this places the textured shafts of sunlight visible from these ruins in greater context – humanity is expected to revere the gods as their superiors, with the hierarchical ordering implied as the gods being above them.

Furthermore, as I have previously discussed, the image of the eternal sun in Anor Londo is a façade. With the power of Fire waning, Lordran seems to have entered a late stage in its development, which I feel is analogously reflected in Cole’s *Desolation* (1836), with the distant moonrise centred in its background. However, the absence of sunlight is felt far more prominently in the true version of Anor Londo. This argument may be further supported by the unique design

of Gwyndolin's crown, as his symbol of the Darkmoon (Japanese: 陰の太陽; "sun of the shadows") that ostensibly seeks to emulate his father's power through its similar radial design (Lokey, 2023:342). Thus, the moon ascends, following the sun, to take its place over the ruins of an empire that is slowly being extinguished.

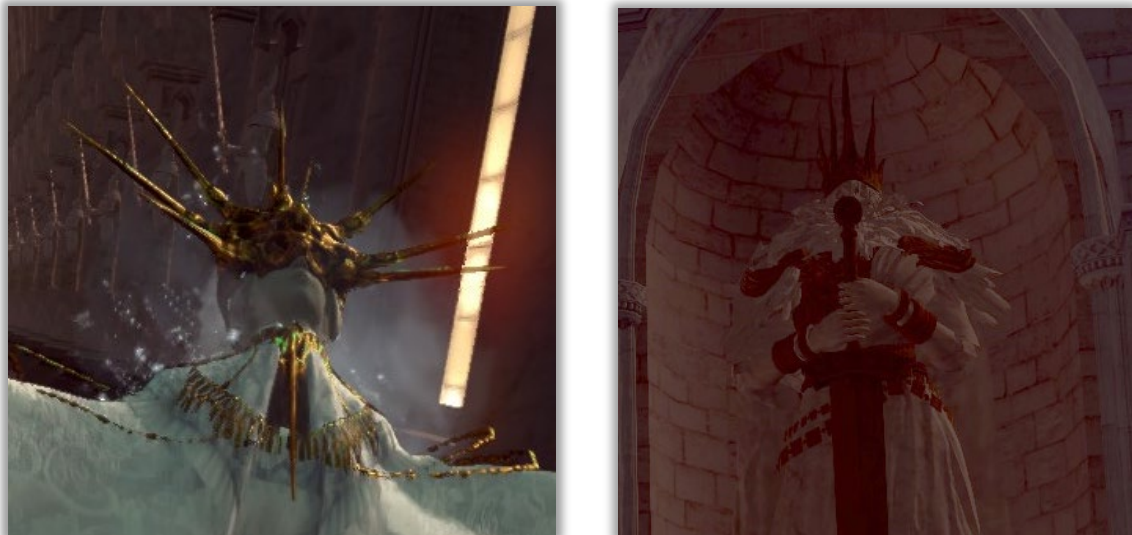


Figure 5.2: Detail of Gwyndolin's crown (left), in comparison with Gwyn's crown [as seen on a statue of him in Anor Londo] (right).

Fealty: In addition to ruling over the gods in Anor Londo, Gwyn's authority also seems to extend to the governance of their lands. With Lordran's setting mostly inspired by medieval Europe, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the gods were quick to impose a feudalist hierarchy following their establishment of Anor Londo (cf. FromSoftware, 2014). With most of the other areas surrounding this capital, Lordran could thus be considered a dark fantasy equivalent of a fiefdom, with partitions of its land granted to the other Lords and vassals based on having pledged their loyalty to the Lord of Sunlight.

New Londo, for instance, is strongly implied to be a vassal state connected to Anor Londo, but I believe the same can be said of Izalith, the Tomb of the Giants, the Duke's Archives, and the Royal Woods of Oolacile (which is represented by the overgrown ruins in the Darkroot Forest during the events of the game). These could all have begun as property granted by Gwyn to his political allies in return for their military support against the dragons and, perhaps, later against the undead as well. This would also mean that each lord is thus dependent on Gwyn and the gods to some extent, whether they wish to be or not. My reason for not including the Undead Burg and

Parish in this list is because, although European architectural influences are more prominent in Lordran, I find the layout of this undead settlement highly evocative of the Japanese *jōkamachi* (Japanese: 城下町; “city below the castle”). The Blacksmith NPC, Andre, even describes it as such in his Japanese subtitles¹⁰⁰ (Lokey, 2023:87).

Castle towns were popularised in fifteenth-century Japan, and many have historically developed around the former citadels of *daimyō* (Japanese: 大名; “feudal lords”) that reside at their centre. This urban plan often employs designs that could express or glorify the authority of the *daimyō* while simultaneously seeking to hamper the advance of potential invading forces through a balance of natural and man-made barriers. Thus, the layout of a castle town often includes a labyrinthine network of claustrophobic pathways below the citadel, amidst compact public housing; a range of small earthen mounds and geographical features like rivers or moats; and intermittent guard posts or walled gates along the main route leading towards the castle (Rozman, 1989:534-536). These features are all present in the Undead Burg – in both its upper district leading to the Undead Parish and Sen’s Fortress and its lower district leading to the Depths and Blighttown.

Another notable feature of the *jōkamachi* is that the main road leading to its castle never passes through its back, but always around or to its side – a feature similarly implemented in *Dark Souls* with the design of the route between the Duke’s Archives and the Undead Burg. To reach Seath, after placing the Lordvessel, players must pass along the outskirts of Anor Londo and take a bending tunnel to reach the archives atop a nearby peak. Ironically, this would place the Duke *above* his socio-political patron, Gwyn, although this may have been a strategic powerplay on his part.

Indeed, Gwyn is highlighted throughout the *Souls* series as a coercive leader who acts with extreme prejudice against his enemies. If the dragons were ever to attack Anor Londo from the skies, the Archives would likely be the first target in their path, thus giving the gods time to ready their defences from below. Anor Londo is thus well-prepared for an assault from either direction,

¹⁰⁰ Although the FromSoftware team originally developed *Dark Souls* in Japanese – with Miyazaki fulfilling the roles of the game’s director, producer, and lead writer – its voiceover dialogue was recorded exclusively in British English to suit the Western medieval-inspired setting (Evans-Thirlwell, 2022: para. 7). In this case, the Undead Burg is referred to as the “Undead Town Below the Castle” (Japanese: 城下不死街; *shiroshita fushigai*).

with the Archives acting as an early warning sign from above, and Sen's Fortress with the Undead town guarding the main route from below.

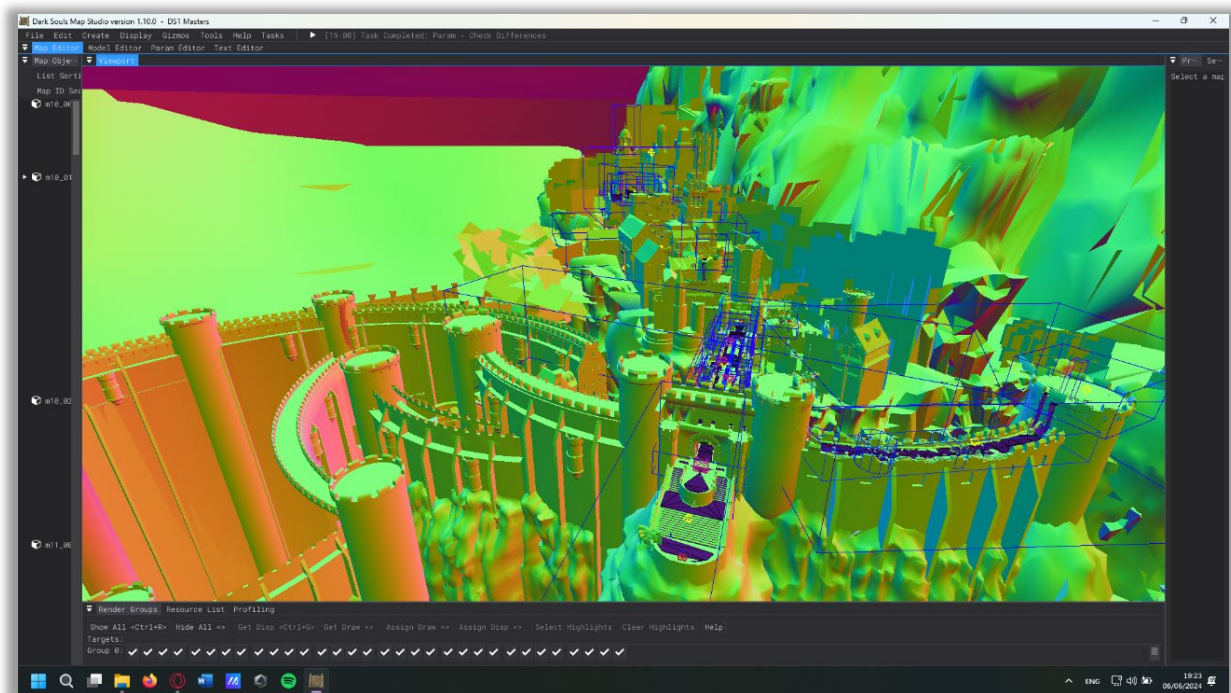


Figure 5.3: Screenshot of the Undead Burg's map data, showing how it is built into the fortifications surrounding Anor Londo behind it.

Inconsistent and intense urban sprawl – I have already discussed this extensively above, but the architectural typologies appearing across Lordran are almost an authentic reflection of its major historical influences. Anor Londo, in particular, *looks* European with the basilican edifice at its centre seeming to amalgamate the functionality (and, indeed, metaphorical connotations in addition to this) of multiple structures associated with the upper echelons of its society. Namely, a nobility's *château* mixed with a state cathedral of an implied episcopal see, as well as a feudal lord's castle (Japanese: 居城; *kyojō*). However, and perhaps unintentionally on the part of the game's developers, I find the layout of most areas comprising Lordran to be reminiscent of a strange mix of planned city designs that developed from nineteenth-century utopian socialist movements and intense urban sprawls that feel like they developed randomly throughout Lordran's development.

For instance, Anor Londo and New Londo are comparable to the *phalanstère* design first conceived by Charles Fourier for a self-contained utopian community. The inclusion of

forges/workshops that are separate from, but still connect to, multi-storey sections that seem to be designated for private dwellings and public social relations are clear indications of this (cf. Beecher & Bienvenu, 1971:240-241). New Londo also appears to include a marketplace or caravansary that connects to its social quarter, something one would reasonably expect to find in Anor Londo too, unless commercial practices are confined to the undead town and other vassal states below. However, this town – and other areas like the Depths, Blighttown, the Catacombs, and Demon Ruins – are far less cohesive, as if they are implied to be smaller districts that unexpectedly grew beyond what was initially anticipated or planned.



Figure 5.4: Screenshot of the marketplace in the New Londo ruins.

To extend on the discussion of historical Japanese urban planning noted above, Lordran itself thus appears to be comprised of complex polycentric structures distinguishable only by their sporadic clustering of buildings around major urban cores. In other words, its composite areas elicit localised consistencies in building types and uses that do not seem to be organised according to any regulated land use policies or categorisation. Instead, numerous sections of these areas overlap residential districts with what appear to be fictional equivalents of Lordran's commercial and industrial sectors – a phenomenon similarly observed in Japanese cities rebuilt after the indiscriminate US army bombings of residential/industrial/commercial areas during the Second World War.

Perez, Araldi, Fusco, and Fuse (2019:4-6) discuss how cities in the metropolitan region of Keihanshin (Japanese: 京阪神; “Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe”) tend to merge and mix urban, residential, and industrial regions with disproportionate residential growth and urbanisation. This has primarily led to large-scale issues of gentrification and ineffective land development, a phenomenon similar to that observed in utopian socialist projects (see: section 2.1.). These secular communities were ‘jumpstarted’ because they were expected to attract millions of potential members, but often failed to regard issues surrounding economic inequality and development (Brustein & Roberts, 2015:33). Most utopian socialist projects are arguably characterised by an overwhelming desire to prove that their theories are indeed viable, with no sustainable plan of anticipating future, or even present needs of its community members (Harrison, 1969:162-163; Wilson, 1964:102-103; Knapowski, 2023:1). This is not to say that Japanese urban planning ascribes to utopian socialist ideals, but rather that rapid, unsustainable urbanisation tends to lead to intense urban sprawl and a need for more stringent city planning instruments and tools¹⁰¹.

Strangely, an outcome of this phenomenon seems to be a reliance on the paths and channels that naturally emerge between the sporadic clustering of buildings around major urban cores. Likewise, it appears that the major ‘thoroughfares’ between the composite areas of Lordran are the only consistent referential (focal) points for players seeking to navigate its increasingly dense and compact urban sprawls. Prominent landmarks are mostly lost in the midst of this mass of buildings or seem to have degraded over time. Exploration is thus vital to understanding its layout because sites of focal activity and repetitive spatial practices become akin to the only consistent points-of-reference one can use to orient themselves in the gameworld. Furthermore, this notion supports arguments in favour of the belief that Anor Londo may have started as a community seeking to establish an ideal utopia – one that Gwyn sought to prove could work with the addition

¹⁰¹ I feel it pertinent to mention here that the realisation of *machizukuri* practices (Japanese: まちづくり; “town development” understood in a manner of gradually cultivating “community empowerment” through socio-cultural activism) and intervening Land Readjustment (LR) policies have therefore been vital to enacting urban re-planning efforts with collaboration between experts, local communities, and their municipal governing bodies. Most projects have sought to focus on promoting more diverse city functions and anticipate for future developments in more efficient ways that can benefit and strengthen a society holistically; often including welfare projects related to improving urban spaces and living environments *for the public* on a micro-scale by means of allocating land for amenities such as roadways and accessible transit systems, parks, schools, sewers, and welfare centres (Satoh, 2019:128-129).

of Firelinking but ultimately failed because the gods could not account for the external factors of socio-economic inequality and unsustainable urbanisation.

Follies and the natural world: A folly is typically found in the context of Romantic landscape design, where unusually extravagant structures and edifices are used to enhance what is otherwise a (mostly) natural landscape (Ching, 1995:27). These types of buildings are thus primarily ornamental, with the intent of being decorative. However, they may have limited functional purposes disguised behind their elaborate outward appearances. Looking at the gamespace of *Dark Souls* on a technical level, it becomes evident that hundreds of assets and models are artfully used to ‘populate’ the environment and skybox of each map by making them feel lived in. However, after a thorough exploration of Lordran, it arguably becomes increasingly apparent how much of the opulence surrounding even its major urban cores is feigned by outward appearances.

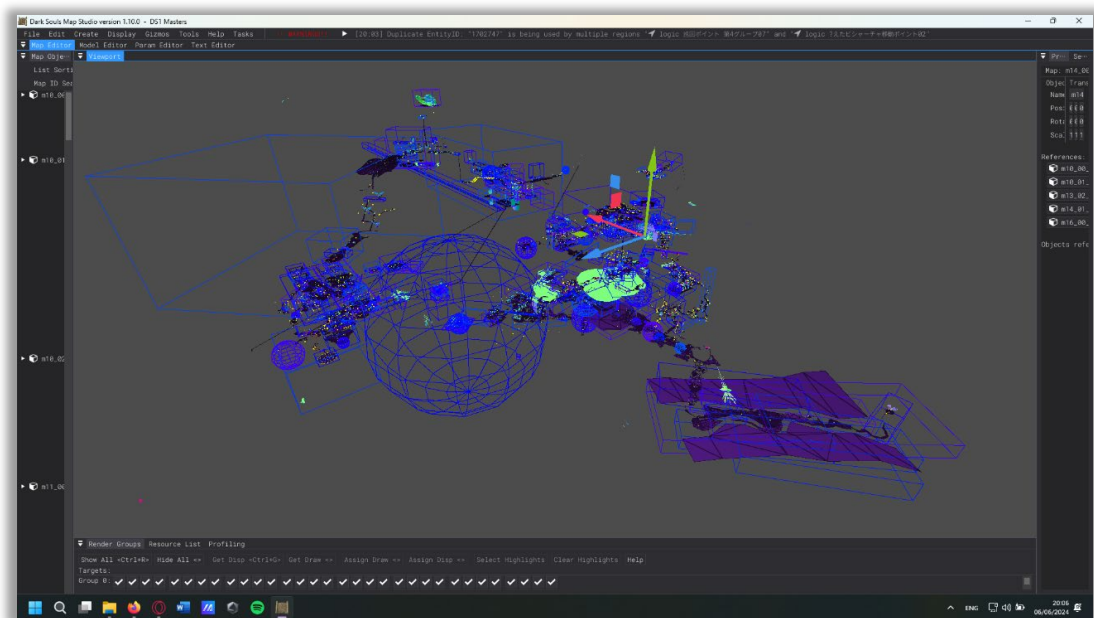


Figure 5.5: Screenshot of the entire gamespace of *Dark Souls* with its map pieces and assets removed.

Anor Londo is, again, the most striking example of this. Yet, I believe that other areas directly connected to it – such as the Undead Burg, the Parish, and the Duke’s Archives – are worthy of consideration as follies as well. The undead town and its church are directly below the gods’ capital, between an old military fortress and the extensive fortified walls surrounding the kingdom. This positioning is important because it disguises the true reason for the gods wanting to have a human settlement close to hand (for raising sacrifices to be used in their Firelinking rituals) behind the falsehood of public security – a desire that arguably became exasperated after the failures

witnessed in the downfall of Oolacile and New Londo, and the gateways to the Abyss that were spawned in both of these vassal states.

Likewise, the Duke's Archives is the closest thing Lordran seems to have resembling an academic institution, but is mostly used as a makeshift prison for victims of Seath's magical experiments during the game's events. Indeed, most of the 'follies' identified in Lordran seem to either embody or display a quality of dehumanisation – in the sense that they are often utilised in ways that exalt the subjugation of humans behind an opulent display of power related to Gwyn's peerage. They are thus designed to showcase an overwhelming support of the gods and their reverence of Fire by disparaging anything associated with the Dark and humanity.

Additionally, it is unclear whether a standard module¹⁰² was used in the construction of the folly structures seen across Lordran, as there is a noticeable variance between the mechanical and visual scales used in these buildings throughout the game. Notably, most of the structural features in Anor Londo (such as the basilican stairs shown below) incorporate design proportions that make likely humans, as one of the smallest races, feel alienated in spaces designed with the ergonomics of larger medials and giants in mind. Even elements of the natural world appear far larger than most of the built environments, as evidenced by the size of the giant trees seen from Ash Lake.

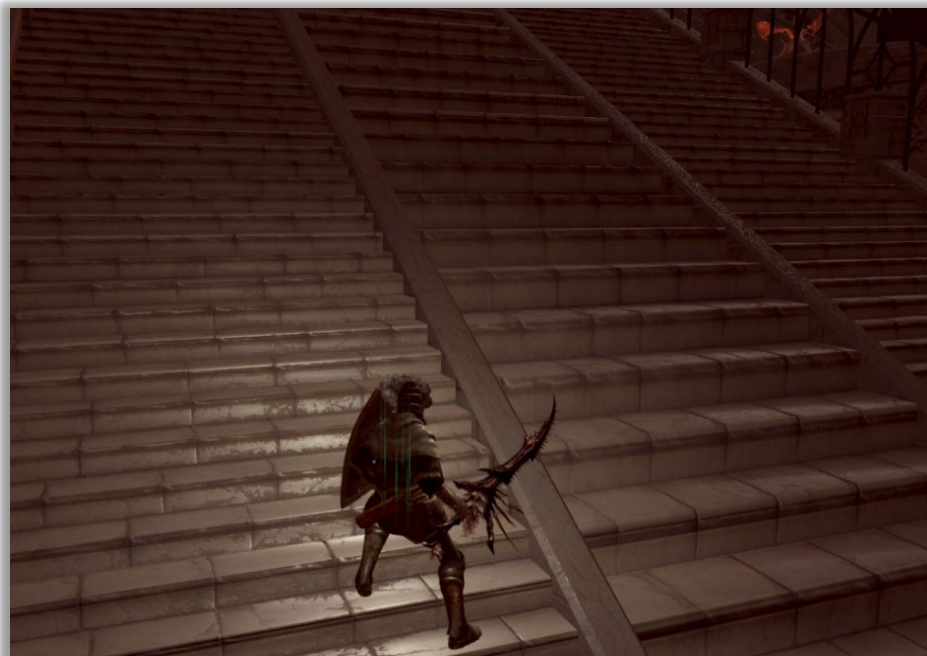


Figure 5.6: Screenshot of the stairs leading to Anor Londo's central basilican hall.

¹⁰² The term 'module' refers to a unit of measurement used for determining the standardised proportions of a building that regulates its architectural composition (Ching, 1995:56).

The rare appearance of any natural scenery that remains unfurnished by the gods is thus refreshing – although no less dangerous – and, perhaps, symbolic of hope for a return to a familiar, humanised way of life should Fire eventually give way to the Dark. Firelink Shrine and the Painted World are significant in this regard, being among the only areas where the solemnity of Fire’s waning is arguably acknowledged by the atmospheres felt in these locations. I do not consider the Ash Lake or Darkroot Forest included in this group because they propound how nature may reclaim former settlements after they fall into a state of desolation.



Figure 5.7: Screenshots of the Darkroot Forest (above) and Ash Lake (below).

Bonfires: Bonfires are arguably one of the most recognisable elements across all of the *Dark Souls* titles, becoming synonymous with the series since its initial release in Japan. It is believed that the major narrative ideas surrounding a profound reverence towards fire came from Miyazaki's desire to implement imagery of people gathered around a bonfire. Silhouetted against the darkness, he believed this could inspire a universal sense of comfort through human connection (FromSoftware, 2014). In *Dark Souls*, bonfires are therefore used almost exclusively by humans or, more aptly, the undead, stemming from fictional traditions believed to have been started by the gods as a means of controlling, guiding, and purifying those cursed with undeath through fire (Lokey, 2023:170).

Interestingly, much like their real-world counterparts, the bonfires in all three games seem to embody a mixture of elements based on the term's European etymology (Gailey & Adams, 1977:34-37). They emanate as both literal *bone-fires* (from the Latin: *ignis ossium*) and a metaphorical 'fire of joy' (French: "*feu de joie*" and German: "*Freudenfeuer*") as players navigate the gamespace looking for a momentary place of safety and respite. Indeed, bones¹⁰³ of the undead seem to be the most common fuel source burned to sustain these fires. Their use subsequently allows the undead to collect and bottle the fire's heat in a liquid form known as Estus¹⁰⁴, or 'Est' (Japanese: エスト; *esuto*), which has natural healing properties when consumed by the player's character.

Functionally, the continued use of bonfires is thus vital to the player's efforts to progress through the game. This is chiefly due to their abilities to replenish healing flasks and save one's progress when resting at a bonfire. Better still, regarding the conception of a gameworld, the functionality of bonfires extends beyond this to become what Cohn (1999) dubs "signposts of fictionality" – they subtly remind the player that they are playing a game because one is constantly on alert for

¹⁰³ This implies early attempts at burning the first Hollows to prevent the undead curse from spreading, and may also be a reference to the fact that bonfires technically function like a non-player character according to their format classification in the game files and coding (as I discuss briefly below in the section that follows). Indeed, bonfires have been used for centuries to promote the wellbeing of man and livestock, typically through the burning of refuse or waste materials, and also to observe ritualistic celebrations and traditions – some of which are still observed seasonally today, particularly in Northern Ireland (Gailey & Adams, 1977:27-28).

¹⁰⁴ This term is derived from the Latin *aestus*, meaning "heat" or "fire", but has also been used in reference to the ebb and flow of the tide. Appropriate, I would argue, considering Fire's new cycles of endless fading and resurgence as a result of the Firelinking ritual. Estus may also point to the wider implications of the gods having created bonfires to ensure the success of the Undead Mission.

these spatial-architectural features. Therefore, whether consciously acknowledged or not, bonfires allow one to maintain their orientation in gamespace and determine the path forward by observing their character's surroundings.



Figure 5.8: Reproductions of the cover box art for physical copies of *Dark Souls* (2011) and *Dark Souls: Remastered* (2018) sold in Japan for Sony's PlayStation consoles.

In addition to their ludic functionality, bonfires also have significant narrative associations. Sometimes, one can discover a bonfire tended to by a kind of priestess – often human, but always a maiden – known as a Fire Keeper. These Fire Keepers, or “fire defence women” (Japanese: 火防女), allegedly serve as a kind of avatar whose life essence is tied to the survival of their bonfire's flames. They are said to act as living vessels for the humanity offered by the undead to mitigate the effects of Hollowing, by strengthening the fire's flames (and thus one's seal around their Dark Soul fragment), becoming physically deformed (and often blinded) in the process.

Fire Keepers are thus physical incarnations of the bonfires themselves, but this marks bonfires as the epitome of Firelinking in the *Dark Souls* narrative universe. Ritual sites used by the undead to offer sacrifices of their humanity (fragments of the Dark Soul) to the gods, and thus Fire, mimicking that of Aryan rituals from the Vedic period (cf. Kleiner, 2015:438). If bonfires had been conceived before Gwyn linked the Fire, as they likely were, they may have been an early foray testing the theory that Fire could be linked to a new fuel source. Indeed, humanity proves itself a

viable substitute for whatever Fire had originally used for fuel – likely another type of soul, since they are of a similar nature to both Fire and humanity – and there are fictionally historical reasons behind this explained through dialogue with Kaathe that is not immediately apparent to new or more casual players.



Figure 5.9: Screenshot of the bonfire in Firelink Shrine, showing its sword-like poker and human bones it burns as fuel.

Bonfires thus serve as a brutal symbolism for what Gwyn's militant reign has become: scattered remains of an ashen fire built upon and fuelled by the literal bones of a race that has been unknowingly complicit in their own subjugation and divine persecution for centuries. Humans seem to be targeted simply because of their association with the Dark, and yet, from the few lines of narration provided in the game's cinematic prologue, one learns that the powers of all lords were originally claimed from within Fire – implying, once again, that *all* living beings emerged from the Dark into a new world lit by Fire. Not only humanity's primordial ancestor, the furtive pygmy, but also Nito, the witches of Izalith, and – indeed – Gwyn and his clan of medials before they became gods. The gods revere Fire because it grants them power, and what they fear in humanity is thus a reminder of the fact that Fire is transient. The gods then push this fear onto humanity, with the reverence of Fire propagated through their church and the wide-spread use of undead bonfires.

5.4. Additional findings

This section briefly addresses some of the secondary findings and implications that emerged during the course of my research. While they do not fall within the limitations initially set for this study, I feel they are still worth including because they are related to a conception of ‘spatial agency’ or the notion of narrative space as a reactive participant in storytelling. In other words, an understanding that gamespace *acts* in tandem with the player’s actions during gameplay.

Gamespace seems to remediate the spatial narrativity inherent in architecture, installation art, theme parks, and designed landscapes, employing techniques of spatial expression unique to these domains to benefit environmental storytelling (Jenkins, 2004; Ryan *et al*, 2016). In other words, gamespace may be used to convey narrative information effectively through implicit means. These spatial expressions are measured by how they shape the rhythm of movement through their boundaries. They are entrenched in the resulting dynamic relationship between a body and its environment and the interactions that arise from this relationship (Whistance-Smith, 2022:52-54).

The semantics of narrative spatial content and its aspects are thus determined by the reader’s familiarity with the text and their working frames of reference (Bal, 2017:126). A deep experiential background (see: section 3.5.3.) may lead to additional metanarrative associations between spatial positions and specific moods perceived in the gamespace, as well as between certain visuals and anticipated actions related to gameplay (cf. Lammes, 2008:94; Bal, 2017:130). When translated into a video game like *Dark Souls*, this likely manifests as a learning curve experienced by the player – the more time one spends playing a game, the easier it becomes to read patterns present in its gamespace and thus anticipate what one needs to do to progress, without being told explicitly.

Furthermore, although narrative space is markedly distinct from notions of, for example, character as an element of narrative (see: section 3.4.), it is similarly subject to variability and dynamic change that *characterises* its appearances over time. Moreover, changes observed in the narrative space may appear relatively independent and occur regardless of whether the other narrative elements remain consistent or not. Story space is arguably the basis from which changes in the other narrative elements are measured (cf. Buchholz & Jahn, 2005:554). Thus, on the macro-structural level of gamespace (referring to the syntactic strings of spatial frames sequentially arranged into ‘expressions’ of spatial experience), a locseme may be expressive of meaning in and of itself. Yet, this is only possible if the unit of narrative space being examined can be categorically arranged with other paradigmatic structures according to their shared

similarities or differences. Arguably, by identifying similarities and discrepancies in spatial design ‘archetypes’, one can infer what kind of activities take place there and shape their behaviour to suit it appropriately – taking their own needs and desires into account (Lakoff, 2008:22).

* * *

In addition to playing *Dark Souls*, replicating how the base files and map data are implemented during the game’s runtime has allowed me to further identify how the game’s composite maps and areas connect in-game by examining how these locsems are partitioned, function, and connect to each other in terms of the games’ virtual geometry. To clarify, none of the *Souls* titles include a map the player can refer to while navigating its gamespace. This is an intentional feature of the game, meant to complement its inherent difficulty (Stanton, 2018: para. 11). Therefore, it is only through open-source community modding projects, such as those led by Katalash¹⁰⁵ (shown below), that players have been able to extrapolate a more accurate conception of the topography of the gameworld.

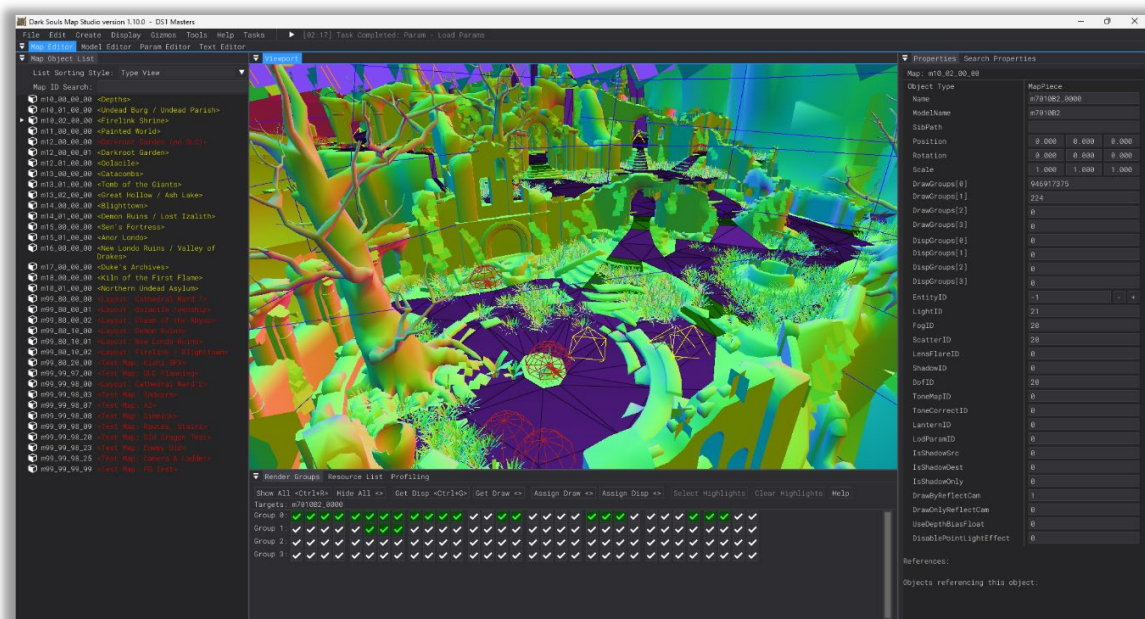


Figure 5.10: Screenshot of a modding tool (DS Map Studio) using custom software to edit map data archived in the game file directory of *Dark Souls: Remastered*.

¹⁰⁵ Katalash is an alias of the lead author working on the DS Map Studio project, which is available as open-source code at: <https://github.com/soulsmods/DSMapStudio>. This is a standalone tool suite that currently allows one to edit maps, game parameters, and in-game text of at least nine different FromSoftware game titles compatible with its integration software.

These modding projects have also revealed that most of the files from earlier versions of *Dark Souls*, including the digital maps and their unique assets, were transferred into the *Remastered* version with minimal changes to their code. Each map still contains most of the same assets, textures, shaders, models, static objects, and dynamic object actions (animations), in addition to enemy and NPC placements, possible event-trigger scripts, lighting parameters, and collision meshes. Therefore, the gamespace present in *Dark Souls*, as available in the game today, is almost exactly the same as it was thirteen years ago, upon the game's initial release.

Tangential to my discussion on their associated leitmotif features above, bonfires are also extremely fascinating to study as game assets because they operate weirdly on a technical level. Upon a closer examination of the game's files, bonfires appear to be coded in a way similar to non-player characters, with an object mesh effectively superimposed over an invisibly rendered character model¹⁰⁶. This means that, functionally, bonfires may be categorised as *personified* spaces in the most overt sense of the term. Thus, when the player interacts with a bonfire to rest and replenish their health, their character's avatar functionally opens a dialogue menu like one would with a merchant, blacksmith, or magic trainer.

Also, the coiled metal rod buried into the base of every bonfire (shown above) may not actually be a sword, but a fire poker modelled after a sword. The curves along the shaft would likely allow one to overturn the ashes and sift clinker to preserve the fire for longer without burning excessive fuel. The similarities in its design to a sword are coincidental or, perhaps, meant to indicate the prevalence of violence emanating from Gwyn's rise to power, in addition to the thousands of human deaths that have occurred under his rule.

Moreover, the imagery of swords planted blade first into the earth is often used as unofficial grave markers in the *Souls* series and related FromSoftware titles, like *Elden Ring* (2022). Swords regularly appear in great numbers (and varying sizes) at sites of historic battles, as seen with those scattered around Artorias' grave in the Darkroot Garden. This motif, along with many others

¹⁰⁶ This seems to be a common practice for how *Dark Souls* games and similar FromSoftware titles have been coded to function, and there are in fact several notable examples where hidden models have been jerry-rigged or 'macgyvered' to facilitate specific gameplay requirements (Zullie the Witch, 2021). Although it is quite fitting, I believe, for the bonfire to have a character model, considering Miyazaki's initial image for *Dark Souls* concerning human connection at a bonfire.

across each of the three *Souls* games, is likely inspired by the *seinen* manga¹⁰⁷ *Berserk* (Japanese: ベルセルク; *Beruseruku*). *Berserk* is a long-running series, created by Kentaro Miura in 1988, that is similarly set in a medieval European-inspired dark fantasy storyworld. It follows the tragic story of a legendary swordsman, known as Guts, seeking revenge against his former comrade-in-arms turned demonic sovereign. The manga has been highly influential to the broader dark fantasy genre, and *Dark Souls* does not seem to be the only video game from the early 2010s inspired by its mature narrative themes and distinct visual style.



Figure 5.11: Screenshot of the main menu in *Dragon Age: Origins* (first released in 2009), depicting stylised swords implanted on a battlefield.

¹⁰⁷ Manga (Japanese: 漫画; “involuntary or leisurely drawing”) is a widespread form of serial story-comics and graphic novels originating in Japan, typically published as black-and-white panels in long-form magazine or book format. Manga series became popular after the Second World War, and seems to have developed in a similar manner to dystopian fiction in the West – often used to caricature everyday life or serious themes with playful imagery and satire as far back as the Meiji Restoration in 1868 (Fukushima, 2010:7-8). The term *seinen* (Japanese: 青年漫画) here refers to an editorial category of manga that is typically marketed towards young adult men because of their generically mature topics, philosophical quandaries, and realistic approach to intercharacter relationships.



Figure 5.12: Panels showing the ‘Hill of Swords’ from *Berserk* Vol. 17, ep. 130: “A Feeble Flame” (Japanese: かよわき炎). Read from top to bottom and right to left.



Figure 5.13: Screenshot of Artorias' grave in the Darkroot Forest in *Dark Souls*.



Figure 5.14: Concept art for Artorias' grave in the *Design Works* art book.

5.5. Closing remarks

For authors, artists, and game designers, spatial descriptions and representations provide a basis for the worldbuilding needed to transform the abstraction of its narrative content into readable forms (cf. Juul, 2014:183). Such subject matter seems reliably presented within the narrative space (setting and historical locations) of the story being told, allowing those engaging with the text to pick up on the clues 'hidden' throughout their presentation (Stein & Kissel, 2005:568; Ryan & Thon, 2014:68-69). In this sense, the gameworld of *Dark Souls* can, therefore, be viewed as a construct of multivalent architecture since: (i) a deeper understanding of the world and its history enhances one's appreciation of its less obvious imagery; (ii) it encourages players to develop their own, personal understanding of the world and its inhabitants; (iii) narrative meaning is subtly coded in its environment and spatial-architectural forms.

Consequently, *Dark Souls* can produce a cohesive gameworld, despite featuring unfamiliar story scenarios and societal advancements, because it is logically structured and consistent in both its detail and use of spatial-architectural features (cf. Ensslin, 2022:23). This is to say, although the game may allude to such things as knights and feudal kingdoms, how these are represented in the context of the game's narrative should have no 'natural' groundings of familiarity in real-world situations or experiences because they are fantasy variants. Yet Lordran – as a fictional, dystopian setting – is fully conventionalised within the unnatural narrative that accompanies its (equally unconventional, in a good sense) gameplay – primarily through the use of leitmotifs that can bridge an abstract understanding of the gameworld with the concrete, embodied experience of playing the game (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

To borrow an analogy from Charles Duveyrier (as cited by Baridon, 2017:12), the kingdom of Lordran is like a man's body seated in a mountainous chair – each area forming an appendage where gameplay activities slowly incapacitate his faculties. For instance, if one takes the Kiln to be this kingdom's 'heart' – the core where Fire seems to have been maintained and rekindled during Firelinking rituals – then the areas of Anor Londo and the Duke's Archives directly above it could form its head and mind respectively. The Undead Burg, along with the massive winding defensive walls, is thus akin to its chest and each of the fiefs – from Izalith to the Royal Woods/Darkroot – are its limbs. An apt comparison, I believe, considering that the contemporary dystopian is arguably a speculative account based on a study of the human condition.

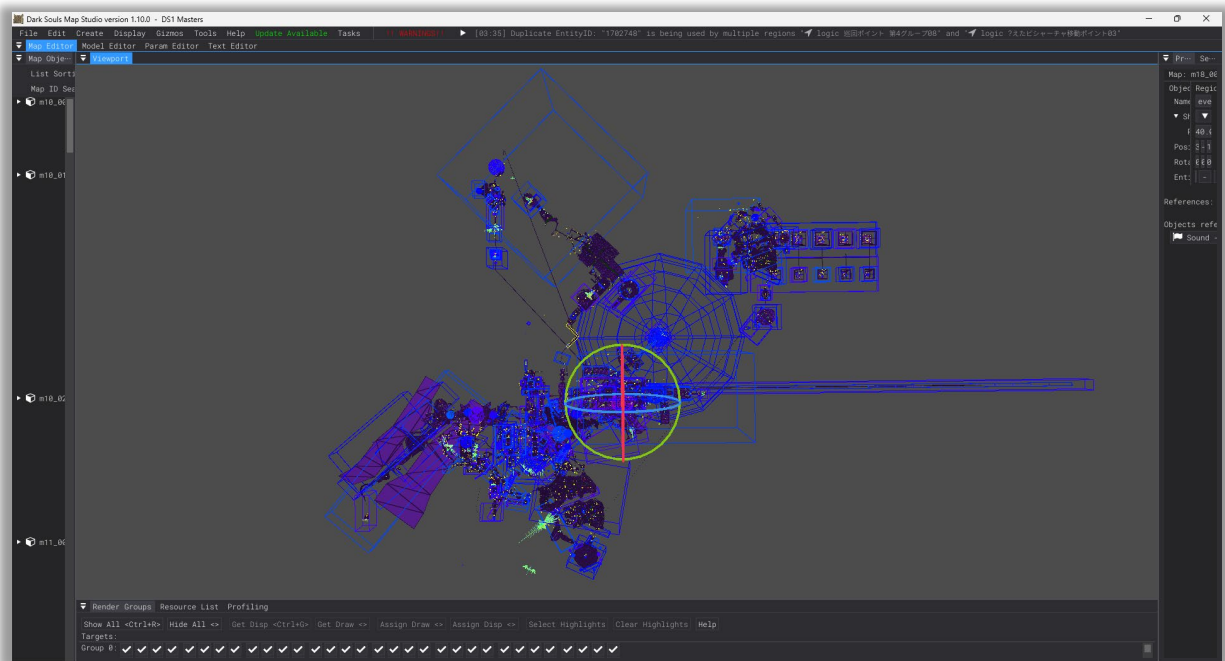
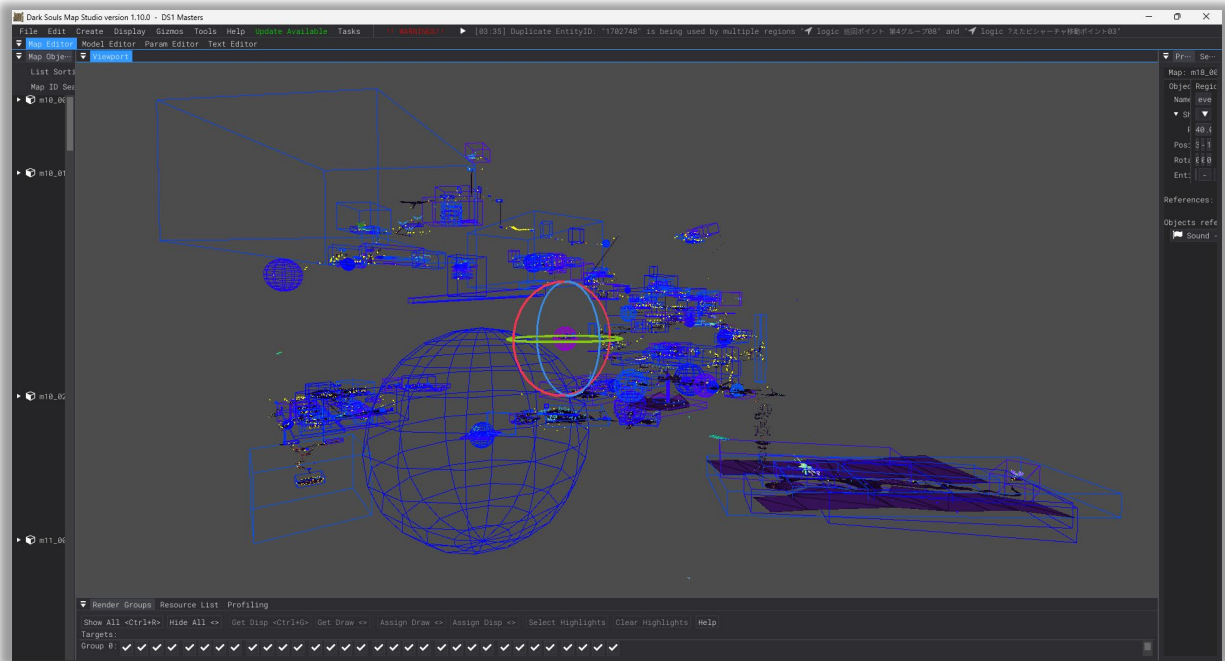


Figure 5.15: Screenshots of the gamespace of *Dark Souls*, showing its vaguely humanoid layout centred around the Kiln of the First Flame (highlighted).

However, unlike Duveyrier's lively personification of Paris, Lordran is a dying, grieving world – not because Fire is waning, but because it is *still burning*. An open space in the game does not feel invigorating; it feels tense, as if, at any moment, something could jump down or swoop in to attack one's character. I would argue that the importance of dystopian fiction and art lies in its ability to

force one into a situation – a tangible space made to feel real through abstraction – that is ‘other’. By doing away with pretence and falsehoods, the dystopian thus reflects an image of the actual harm humans can cause to themselves and the world around them as well. It places one in a possible world where, even for a moment, the ‘other’ *is* – both in the sense of its location and existence. It is a place where the absolute worst of human nature cannot be denied, refuted, or forgotten. A place from which renewed hope may spring eternal.

CHAPTER SIX

RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

6.1. Introduction

This study has investigated characteristics of the dystopian and how they are conveyed in the spatial-architecture of the video game *Dark Souls*. More specifically, I have explored how tropes of the dystopian are communicated and, indeed, constructed through the multivalent spatial-architectural features present in its gamespace, and how these work to guide the player in conceptualising a dystopian gameworld associated with the act of playing the game. In this closing chapter, I briefly re-address the problem statement and research questions raised in Chapter One, discussing how each of these have been answered throughout my study. I follow this with a summary of my proposal for a methodological model concerning the analysis of narrative space, and components of its design, and how this may find broader application in other ludic or spatially signifying contexts. Finally, I conclude by restating my argument that Lordran, the gameworld of *Dark Souls* – in addition to its constituent gamespace – is emblematic of the dystopian and may thus be considered as an exemplary hypertext that bears characteristics distinctive of the genre in its contemporary form.

6.2. Review of the problem statement and research questions

The overall aim of this study has been to explore how tropes of the dystopian are communicated through the multivalent spatial-architecture in the video game *Dark Souls*. Therefore, drawing focus to the metaphorical meanings embedded in sections of its gamespace that are evocative of dystopian qualities. Four research questions emerged from this problem statement. I address these below, briefly showing how each has been answered throughout this study.

What tropes are conceptualised in prominent dystopian literature, with special reference to visual and spatial corollaries? The first question of this study addressed the thematic, visual, and narrativised characteristics of the dystopian in prominent works of art and literature. Although

dystopian narratives became popular as a form of anti-utopian critique, the genre has undergone significant development over the last century – as highlighted in section 2.4. More recently, works of art dealing with dystopian narratives and themes seem to focus on the consequences of unmitigated human destruction and corruption by confronting one with settings characterised by how realistic or authentic they seem.

While there is no definitive list of tropes associated with a ‘prototypical’ dystopia beyond observable destruction and implied meta-commentary surrounding socio-political trends, a number of such tropes seem common across various forms of the genre. These are refined in section 4.3. with specific visual examples provided from the gamespace of *Dark Souls*. The dystopian genre is thus suited to what I call ‘world-stories’ – narratives that can explore emotionally engaging content and themes without disregarding the importance of a character’s relationship to their surroundings and setting.

How can apposite spatial-architectural considerations guide the development of an appropriate methodological approach for exploring the gamespaces and gameworld associated with a video game? The second question addressed the conception of a methodological approach that could guide the analysis of the gameworld under review. This method is summarised in the following section and developed primarily from theories and approaches discussed in sections 3.2. and 3.4.4. Supplementary insights into the structuring and functionality of narrative space are offered from post-classical narratological theories regarding its study, and its relationship with the other three elements of character, event, and time (see: section 3.4.).

Narrative space itself can be studied as a typology that is comprised of five concentric layers. When transposed into the study of narrative space in a video game, these layers are: (i) spatial frames, (ii) setting, (iii) gamespace, (iv) the gameworld, and (v) the narrative universe. Composite units of narrative space – which I have dubbed ‘locsems’ – are thus akin to a ‘grammar’ underlying the entirety of a narrative account, being a visual form that acts along with its action. Furthermore, these units can be characterised with metaphorical meanings that connote meanings in addition to their implied or stated functional meanings – making locsems multivalent components of any narrative utilised in one’s conception of an associated storyworld/gameworld.

How is multivalent spatial-architecture conceptualised in extant literature? The third question considered theoretical expositions of architectural meaning-making that could be supplemented with those regarding narrative space and its possible representation in a video game. Architecture arguably embodies prominent cultural expressions – displaying the values, beliefs, and ideology of socio-cultural groups that share a specific speech community and public spaces. Spatial-

architectural features can, therefore, be – in the sense of both material artefact and visual representation – simultaneously the actor *and* medium for the transference of ideas valued by a cultural, societal, and/or historical group. A dystopian storyworld is thus a kind of pseudo-metalinguistic system, built cognitively by the interpreter (or player), using recurring spatial-architectural metaphors and analogies to develop inferences or critiques based on the author's speculations of a fictional human (or human-like) society. This is done in an imaginative and participatory manner, with one using their own experiences and background knowledge to fill in gaps left between narrative elements during narration.

How does the multivalent spatial-architecture of Lordran in the gameworld of Dark Souls convey its dystopian themes? The final question of this study addressed how dystopian qualities are achieved in the gameworld of *Dark Souls*, specifically referring to its composite spatial-architectural features and their guiding leitmotifs. Chapters Four and Five have presented a comprehensive discussion of the spatial-architectural features most emblematic of the dystopian in Lordran, highlighting five leitmotifs that are pervasive throughout its gamespace. These are listed as being: (i) the radiant and the desolate, (ii) fealty, (iii) inconsistent and intense urban sprawl, (iv) follies and the natural world, and (v) bonfires. Each leitmotif is linked in some way to characterising tropes of the dystopian – thus reflecting dystopian qualities in the composition and comprehension of *Dark Souls'* gameworld.

6.3. Methodological model for studying narrative space

Below is a summary of my proposal for a methodological model concerning the analysis of narrative space and components of its design that may find broader application in other ludic or spatially signifying contexts (see: section 3.5.).

The surroundings of a focalising agent may be represented on three disparate but overlapping levels of **perceptible**, **cognitive**, and **enacted** space. This may be applied to any level of narrative space since locsemes are expansive and dynamic concepts that may derive their meaning(s) through comparison to each other within and across the broader communicative system. Locsemes are further comprised of, or may include, five different types of spatial-architectural features that are split across its three levels of perceptible, cognitive, and enacted space.

These spatial-architectural features are as follows:

- (i) **Sequential emic units** – the visual characteristics and features of architectural designs that are used to construct spatial-architectural forms (e.g., doors, paths, points of egress, and the like)
- (ii) **Spatial markers** – elements that link others with regard to their spatial positioning in relation to one another
- (iii) **Metaphors and metonymy** – elements that are encoded with a layer of deeper meaning associated with cultural, geographical, temporal, political, historical, and other similar categories
- (iv) **Allegories** – extended metaphors that are consistently used throughout the ‘text’ of the game, relating, in the context of the present study, to their treatment of dystopian themes and concepts
- (v) **Spatial patterns and their guiding leitmotifs** – these are repetitions and collections of elements that inform one of the kinds of activities (spatial practices) that take place in a specific spatial context

When these features have been identified within specific instances of story space/gamespace, links can be drawn between their functional and metaphoric roles in the context of the text, highlighting multiple values that can express different meanings according to one’s interpretation of the feature’s context in conjunction with their subjective knowledge and experiences.

6.4. Insights and recommendations for further research

Spatial analyses and terminology

Gamespaces often emulate layouts and forms reminiscent of real-world architecture. However, they are not bound by the same logic or level of physical restraints regarding things like gravity or material degradation. Moreover, narrative space is certainly the most pronounced mode perceived when engaging with interactive fiction. Still, it is only one channel of the multimodal ensemble that situates and contextualises other modalities of additional visual cues, sound, text, and haptics. All of these modes combined may comprise a cohesive, embodied narrative experience, and one need not engage with a setting beyond what is needed for basic situational

awareness or narrative comprehension (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Whistance-Smith, 2022:52).

Despite decades of research, space – regarding topographical, geometrical, and geographical properties – seems to remain an ambiguous and highly debated concept in the social sciences. There is a distinct lack of conventional terminology to describe its form and functionality outside of more scientific fields like Euclidean mathematics and applied physics. I hope that, by proposing wider use of the locseme model, some point of standardisation can be reached in the future. Specifically, an overlap that considers space simultaneously as a multivalent entity, a complex network of syntactic-paradigmatic relationships, and a foundational part of a conceptual framework (like a storyworld/gameworld). Spaces have tangible, perceptible forms that act along with their actions – there is no prescriptive definition for any given space because it often encompasses an object and its expression as understood from subjective points of view. To consider otherwise is, arguably, reductive.

Spatial use and practices beyond the purposes of gameplay

This study has coincided with both the launch of FromSoftware’s latest ‘Soulsborne’ title, *Elden Ring* (2022), and its highly anticipated DLC *Shadow of the Erdtree* (2024) – which surpassed five million copies sold globally within a week of its launch¹⁰⁸. The success and wide-spread influence of FromSoftware and its *Souls*-related titles in current game industries cannot be downplayed, even more than a decade and a half after the launch of *Demon’s Souls* (2009) – a spiritual precursor to *Dark Souls*. These are among the most critically acclaimed and widely celebrated game titles of all time. Despite their initial narrative ambiguity and unconventional control schemes, they have arguably earned that praise – becoming the early 2010s trailblazer equivalent to *Metroid* (1986) and *Castlevania* (1986)¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ According to a recent post uploaded to the official *Elden Ring* account on X (formerly Twitter): <https://x.com/ELDENRING/status/1806326803276906929>

¹⁰⁹ These games inspired the sub-genre now lovingly referred to as ‘Metroidvanias’ in wider gaming jargon. A similar phenomenon is notable in the mass appropriation of mechanics, control schemes, terminology, and gameplay features highlighted in FromSoftware titles like *Dark Souls*. A succinct discussion of this is presented by Polygon’s Patrick Gill in a satirical YouTube video (available at: <https://youtu.be/9aiTXXifbwE?si=XWYcJcwluXZsS5Jl>) that chronicles the so-called ‘decade of Dark Souls’.

Every year, close to the international release date of *Dark Souls*, dedicated fans of the game organise a global event, inspiring others to go and replay it in their own time. ‘#ReturnToLordran’ and similar online movements have helped reinvigorate the game after its original release, bringing newfound focus to player and community engagement in an online capacity. Thus, although the gamespace in *Dark Souls* has not changed much since its release, with many more players joining these events each year there are added roleplay elements that encourage different forms of engagement with others through the game and its gameworld. These community-driven efforts have been vital towards recreating the experience of playing *Dark Souls* similar to when it first launched in 2011 – allowing players new and old to experience the game as if it were a brand-new release.

Following national lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic, studies focused on furthering research into the social exchange and dynamics involved in online gaming – often compared to more traditional face-to-face table game sessions – seem to have become popular. Studying the online-facing components of *Dark Souls* and its related titles could lead to interesting studies surrounding the ‘collective gaming unconscious’ and its ability to foster communities within online spaces. Despite its co-operative and competitive player-versus-player mechanics being an optional feature for the player to enable when they play what is (for the most part) a single-player game, *Souls* communities have an online presence comparable to some of the most popular MMO titles like *World of Warcraft* and *Final Fantasy XIV*. This is not only from a player’s perspective but also from those of game history enthusiasts, game developers, digital archivists, and self-proclaimed ‘lore masters’ interested in uncovering every secret these games have to offer.

Dystopian genre studies and the cathartic popularity of the artform

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray (1997:25) considered the possibility of immersive fiction in providing safe and cathartic places to confront the ‘intangible’ – disturbing thoughts, feelings, or threatening fantasies – in ways that could empower rather than paralyse. Indeed, more contemporary forms of dystopian fiction seem to tend towards the dismantling of oppressive power systems in ways that mimic the pervasive sense of hope that began with utopian ideologies. However, dystopian fiction is not as idealistic as its predecessor – it grounds its speculation in settings that seem and *feel* slightly more realistic.

Like fairy tales for children, it would seem that adults often enjoy and are fascinated with confronting an “often acute dread of the unknown” when guarded by the relative safety of

storytelling (Claeys, 2017:75). Similar to science fiction and fantasy literature, there are socially reconstructed metaphors in most dystopian fiction that symbolise notions of 'good' and 'evil' – the 'civilised' and the 'monstrous' – that now appear to be pervasive on a global scale. Connotations that may be used to teach an audience about the dangers of misbehaviour (such as human aggression, selfishness, greed) taken to the extreme. Yet, the contemporary dystopian narrative is more complex than this, offering an image of a place that is reasonably 'bad' because of the representations of fear that embody it, but somehow simultaneously 'good' because it ends with the leading characters' triumph over the evils of malevolent power structures.

Engaging with dystopian fiction seemingly allows one to address the 'intangible' directly and broaden their experiential background by adopting metacommentaries into their own subjective knowledge and observations. I believe studying less mainstream occurrences of dystopian artforms could be beneficial to conceptualising a more complete understanding of the genre – certainly better than I could have hoped to achieve in this study. There is something strangely comforting in being able to name a 'beast' and learning, through the insights of others, that it can be slain.

Dystopian spaces, phenomenology, and existentialism in hypertexts

The importance of storyworlds to dystopian storytelling marks its narrative spaces as vital components of their narration. Phenomenological analyses of dystopian hypertexts could provide further insight into the relationship between embodied individuals and their narrative storyworlds, since phenomenology similarly focuses on the essence of experiences – on the *eidos* or visible forms that intangible ideas are communicated through. Thus, studying how dystopian narratives address notions of embodiment – as the immersion of one's consciousness in the virtual spaces of hypertexts like video games – could further refine analytical frameworks that can be correlated to the forms of embodiment assigned to dystopian qualities that are allegorical to things in the actual world.

Phenomenological approaches are also weighted towards an understanding that one's experiences of the actual world give rise to categories of knowledge in one's mind – in a similar vein to the discussion on experiential backgrounds in section 3.5.3. Dystopian spaces are fictional, but they blur the lines between actuality and potentiality by confronting one with spaces that *feel* lived-in. This phenomenon is pronounced in hypertexts and digital technologies where virtual spaces evoke nascent human reactions, ranging from overwhelming discomfort to the

fervent impulse of hope. These hypertexts anticipate engagement from readers (and players, in the case of this study) that is emergent and persistently existential, thus subsuming one into the realms of fiction and virtuality.

Therefore, phenomenological studies of dystopian hypertexts could lead to an improvement of existing theories regarding the ways people think about more mundane spatial-architectural forms and behavioural tendencies perceived in everyday experiences with immersive and digital technologies. Space, as an object of inquiry, is charged with all manner of political, cultural, and social meanings that underly what is perceived by the individual that traverses its boundaries, regardless of whether it is real or simulated. Phenomenology could thus bridge emerging theoretical gaps between the individual and more interactive, engaging digital technologies and artefacts.

6.5. Summary and closing comments

The gameworld of *Dark Souls* – as informed by its constituent gamespace – embodies definitive qualities of the dystopian that make it worthy of consideration as an exemplary hypertext bearing characteristics distinctive of the dystopian genre in its contemporary form. I believe its creative director put it best in an interview with IGN, where Miyazaki (as cited by Stanton, 2018: para. 10) said that:

I would like *Dark Souls* to be a broad exploration game filled with so many veiled things and details. A broad map that lacks details cannot be attractive for users who want to explore it in depth. Having said that, the reason why I put a lot of care into details might be much more simple. I enjoy the process of adding elaboration into games, and like to communicate with users through the details I create.

Dark Souls is, fundamentally, a game about human connection and collaboration through the depths of understanding shared suffering and misery – sometimes self-inflicted, sometimes not. This may be conjecture but it is, arguably, why *Dark Souls* remains a critically acclaimed work of art in the current global zeitgeist more than a decade since its original release. Perhaps Miyazaki saw a rising complacency in gaming or a lapse in games that challenged the design trends of the early 2000s.

The game is indeed intended to frustrate players who cannot adapt to its more implicit communication style. Still, more importantly, it gives one all the tools needed to learn its spatial-architectural ‘language’ from the onset of gameplay. Within the first few hours of playing *Dark*

Souls, the player will learn how the game mechanics function, how information is communicated to them primarily through visual clues and prompts, and how to progress through its levels by exploring the gamespace for all its hidden secrets – all expressed through visuals that were developed to align with the gameplay requirements first, and later enriched with additional narrative connotations. All it asks of the player is their perseverance and willingness to learn from earlier mistakes so that they can improve upon their own situation – qualities that are both expressed at the core of dystopian fiction.

The dystopian has thus become a genre that raises issues far more complex than a simple Manichean divide between convictions of right and wrong or good and evil. In fact, I would argue that neither utopias nor dystopias are inherently good or evil, but both are certainly undesirable because their societal conditions are a result of actions taken to secure the desires of a minority group, which tends to place the remainder of a vast majority under systemic oppression. The dystopia is therefore not oppositional to utopian ideologies but, rather, critical of them – mostly because none exist, but also because there are stark similarities shared between the two.

Dystopian narratives emphasise concepts surrounding human suffering, because they seek to express an acceptance of the fact that (i) human conceptions of idealism are unattainable, and (ii) suffering may be necessary to attain greater insight into the human condition, but this does not make it insurmountable. To paraphrase Savannah Brown (2024), the great crisis of the twenty-first century is not just epistemological; it is not only concerning a seeming unwillingness or stubborn resistance to rapid change. It is a crisis of meaningful communication, understanding, empathy, and personal accountability. One should not be afraid to seek out assistance or guidance from others, and doing so – especially when learning something new – is not a sign of weakness. There is a universal comfort and, arguably, an innate pleasure found in assisting others; to collaborate with one another towards the achievement of shared and personal goals.

Today, most people have access to the greatest collection of human knowledge and a means of near-instantaneous connection with others, almost regardless of distance or location, without any formal instruction on what to do with these services or even a rudimentary understanding of how best to utilise it. One finds that they often have the means to change the world ‘for the better’ (and is often inspired to do so) without an understanding, firstly, of whether that is necessarily possible or even justifiable. Social power is (and arguably should remain) a transitory right maintained only through a measure of majority communal support. However, it is thus often granted to those who can most effectively coerce others into helping them achieve their ideals and goals – veritable

societal ‘gods’ among the working men who attempt to place their own shackles on those they imagine to be opposed to their progress.

The result of humanity’s current global circumstances is typically an all-consuming melting pot of voices where the only guarantee is noise, and the emotional weight that begins to manifest from engaging with that noise is becoming more and more overbearing. Most recently, this phenomenon can be seen in the ‘endless’ applications of deep learning LLMs (Large Language Models) and transformer GAI technologies to image generation and prose writing – an entirely counterintuitive process. Without the understanding, without the *experience*, of making art that is personal to its creator(s), the final product is meaningless¹¹⁰. The end product may be artistic in a functional sense, but it fails to communicate any underlying or metaphoric meaning beyond a fundamental avoidance of personal accountability. If there is no interest, passion, or sincerity put into making something creative, there should be no interest in celebrating its completion.

This is the ‘bleeding heart’ that sets the dystopian apart from anti-utopian critique and what makes its accompanying storyworlds so endearing and important. These domains contain the *experience* of suffering to inspire real, positive change – not in the world but, arguably, where it matters most: within the individual. It is an expression of hope for the future of humanity and faith in the power of mundane, ordinary acts of kindness, gentleness, and unconditional love. Dystopian narratives are best suited as ‘world-stories’ because they invite their audiences in as participants. They anticipate that one *wants* to engage with their distressing content – to understand the experience of suffering without the irreparable damage of real trauma or, perhaps, even to process trauma from real experiences – and they provide the space within which victory against seemingly insurmountable odds can be achieved.

The dystopian is a reminder that one *must* believe in goodness. Facets of love, compassion, or care cannot be ignored because these are qualities that are arguably worth fighting tooth and nail for. People do not create places that are inherently bad or good. They create homes that are inherently hopeful, which inevitably fall, and then they begin again. And thus, the search for deeper meaning that arises from dystopian storytelling does not end with its discovery, but rather

¹¹⁰ As if preordained by fate, the final thoughts included in this chapter came to mind after a rewatching of Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* (Japanese: *となりのトトロ*; *Tonari no Totoro*), a Studio Ghibli film first released in 1988, to the ultimate chagrin of its maker. In 2016, Miyazaki – the film’s lead writer and director – responded to a presentation of potential applications of GAI to future CGI animation and character rigging, calling the very idea insulting. Saying that by seeking to build machine models that generate art without human understanding or consideration, “We humans are losing faith in ourselves” (Arakawa, 2016).

a reassurance that the suffering that humanity faces in spite of this cyclical process is not egregious. If there is an answer, it will become glaringly obvious at the right time for one to make of it what they will, because it will have always been there – etched into the very real expressions of one's surroundings and brought to life by the experiences felt within their boundaries.

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Appendix A: Cinematic prologue to *Dark Souls*

Transcript (English) | Narrated by: Pik-Sen Lim

In the Age of Ancients, the world was unformed, shrouded by fog.

A land of grey crags, archtrees, and everlasting dragons.

But then there was Fire. And with Fire, came Disparity.

Heat and cold, life and death, and of course... Light and Dark.

Then, from the Dark, They came, and found the Souls of Lords within the flame.

Nito, the first of the dead,

the Witch of Izalith, and her Daughters of Chaos,

Gwyn, the Lord of Sunlight, and his faithful knights,

and the furtive pygmy, so easily forgotten.

With the Strength of Lords, they challenged the dragons.

Gwyn's mighty bolts peeled apart their stone scales.

The witches weaved great firestorms.

Nito unleashed a miasma of death and disease.

And Seath the Scaleless betrayed his own, and the dragons were no more.

Thus began the Age of Fire.

But soon, the flames will fade, and only Dark will remain.

Even now, there are only embers, and man sees not light, but only endless nights.

And amongst the living are seen, carriers of the accursed Darksign.

Yes, indeed. The Darksign brands the Undead.

And in this land, the Undead are corralled and led to the north,

where they are locked away, to await the end of the world.

...This is your fate.

Available to view on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lmEqpgg3B4>

Appendix B: Companion notes for understanding *Dark Souls*

I feel it pertinent to note that most of the content in *Dark Souls* is not readily accessible to the average player. This is partly because of the game's notoriously secretive (and, often, intentionally ambiguous) narrative beats, and partly because players need to complete multiple playthroughs to unlock or discover items and characters that only become available once certain conditions are met. None of this is outwardly explained to the player when first playing the game, but has since become a trademark feature of the series – reminiscent of older video game titles that challenge players with punishing mechanics, difficult puzzles, riddles, hidden secrets, and easter eggs.

This inaccessibility also includes the game's source code¹¹¹ and design history. *Dark Souls* was primarily developed and marketed in Japanese, under the impression that it would barely meet its targeted sales. There are official press interviews with members from the game's development team – including its lead director and producer, Hidetaka Miyazaki – yet most are written with prospective consumers and games-journalist networks in mind. Moreover, most of these resources are not readily available for reference today. Those few original copies that are still available online can only be found in Japanese, or are lacking in their approach to offer supplementary data or insights prevalent to this study.

Therefore, it is only through the collective efforts of English-speaking fans of the series that curated and peer-reviewed translation notes of the original Japanese resources and developer commentary has reached audiences outside of Japan. Here, I am referring primarily to the insights and personal research of Lokey, formally compiled into his *Abyssal Archive* (2023) volumes, as well as the video-format discussions and essays by longstanding fan theorists and community content creators. These include (amongst others) VaatiVidya, SmoughTown, Quelaag (also known as Xingenue), and Zullie the Witch.

For the most part, these secondary sources have spent extensive time playing and researching *Dark Souls*, having consulted transcripts and community notes of the 2011 interviews conducted on the *Game no Shokutaku* podcast¹¹² (translated by Reddit user u/kaelsmith with annotations by

¹¹¹ Trademark and copyright laws restrict members of the public from publishing materials and resources associated with *Dark Souls* and its source code, looking to protect the interest and investments of its shareholders in the KADOKAWA CORPORATION and Sony Interactive Entertainment (Romano, 2022).

¹¹² The first episode of this extended interview is still available online (in the original Japanese) at: <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm16376638>.

u/Sentuh¹¹³), and also those later published in the *Dark Souls: Design Works* (FromSoftware, 2014) art book. To be clear, I cannot speak to the validity or accuracy of these sources, nor do I claim them to be anything more than a careful selection of topics and discussion points combining official and unofficial translations, subjective opinions, and fan speculation. I have, however, found them invaluable for developing my own subjective interpretation of *Dark Souls* and its gameworld in the past. Mainly in helping to clarify some of the more puzzling items and narrative facets surrounding the game's minimalist storytelling that I discovered when first playing *Dark Souls* years ago.

Their inclusion here therefore highlights how any effort made to pursue a more complete, deeper understanding of the game and its narrative aspects inherently invites communal collaboration – an experience shared by millions of players both in-game and online in the various chatrooms, game forums, and video comments sections that emerged after its international release. *Dark Souls* is special in this regard, as are all the related *Soulsborne* titles developed by FromSoftware under Miyazaki's direction. These games are all, at their core, intended to offer collaborate gaming experiences that can inspire one to work with strangers for a 'transient', fleeting moment in achieving their common and personal goals – a feature that was originally developed for *Demon's Souls* and inspired by Miyazaki's own experience of being assisted by a group of strangers when his car got stuck on a snowy hillside (MacDonald, 2010:3).

Therefore, one tends to adopt and extrapolate points from these community theories into their own subjective interpretations of Lordran. They have all been used to varying degrees in my conception of the gameworld, whether this is consciously acknowledged or not. Noting these sources where relevant is simply a means of giving recognition to the original authors and creatives whose terminology and ideas I reference, while most of the arguments made in this study are developed from my own thoughts and opinions. Below, I have included links to supplementary video sources for one to consult, should they wish to better understand *Dark Souls* through the insights and visuals published by noteworthy community members on YouTube. This list is not exhaustive, but it should serve as a brief introduction to the gameworld beyond what can be found in the game through one's own efforts.

¹¹³ u/Sentuh. 2016, Apr 18. Game no Shokutaku, with Hidetaka Miyazaki. *r/darksouls*. [Reddit post; translated by Reddit user u/kaelsmith with annotations by u/Sentuh]
https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/4fbm7y/game_no_shokutaku_with_hidetaka_miyazaki/.

Community YouTube recommendations

VaatiVidya - <https://www.youtube.com/@VaatiVidya>

- ❖ Dark Souls Lore ► Explained! <https://youtu.be/McXJj7sjcZ0?si=62rQMys9RjrDetw6>
- ❖ Dark Souls Lore playlist:
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWLedd0Zw3c5RCXboUsPwHsZJIXB2CzCz&si=K75l73Dvjon7L6AQ>
- ❖ Prepare to Cry Remastered ► Gwyn's Light: <https://youtu.be/2-hFVNCLHOY?si=ydnXhN5xrm93OxkA>
- ❖ Dark Souls 2 ► The First Sin, Explained!
https://youtu.be/Cdk_fvXG5xA?si=RUXa9gqN_wwAjNn7
- ❖ Dark Souls Lore ► Translations From the Abyss:
<https://youtu.be/AdqSUTdnGsk?si=o7mDZVNpAg3xvZFm>

SmoughTown - <https://www.youtube.com/@SmoughTown>

- ❖ Dark Souls Lore | The Pygmy Lords: <https://youtu.be/8oIDU0o-w-U?si=qfABi0gnYc8007JJ>
- ❖ Dark Souls - Lazy Sunday Lore playlist:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnPsDN5cd0UdPDiLW_J6GKMii_tEMyL-X&si=kBPf5jpbzNk_Vpu5

Quelaag - <https://www.youtube.com/@Quelaag>

- ❖ Dark Souls Lore - LORDS SOULS REVISED:
<https://youtu.be/yiYVkkeSKQs?si=I9OZhWYdXH3Dk3Hz>
- ❖ Souls and Symbols: <https://youtu.be/lmi4waiwBnA?si=tsb-78NHV8dUNOp>
- ❖ Souls and Symbols 1: Everlasting Dragons:
<https://youtu.be/l4FEW1zzrxs?si=UwYDFES3GbDptf9l>
- ❖ Souls and Symbols EP. 2 – Vermin and Centipedes:
<https://youtu.be/6sjWz7gg6uQ?si=23qJDGvL8OzZIJTH>

Zullie the Witch - <https://www.youtube.com/@ZullietheWitch>

- ❖ The cruel and beautiful world of Dark Souls:
<https://youtu.be/XQ55eW5Q2jM?si=ITBPtTAqF-ltHzRK>

- ❖ Dark Souls - What happens if you kill Ornstein and Smough at the same time?
https://youtu.be/50U_z48jHiA?si=mWQRULiCoeFRtyFt
- ❖ Dark Souls - What do the Giants actually look like?
<https://youtu.be/OINKWatrdqI?si=pC6KRPs4qIY7GfPN>
- ❖ 500k Special - My ridiculous origin story: <https://youtu.be/nc0JVlwYNIi?si=P-eXsrdYKSN7GoJ4>
- ❖ Dark Souls Remastered - Unused Equipment:
<https://youtu.be/n1Rix42z5ws?si=DKfTHm6qD-Kbuq4m>
- ❖ Dark Souls Remastered - Unused Enemies:
<https://youtu.be/trmFgQqrjYc?si=LBMEaVFiv1v7f-yX>

illusory wall - <https://www.youtube.com/@illusorywall>

- ❖ Dark Souls Dissected playlist: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH-cMCF0_NrYpTFGaU67N4BFauIAL8slJ&si=5ieBnjCkMOYu5KMA

Appendix C: Game map files rendered in *Dark Souls*

Map ID (area_block_00_variant)	Areas included	Internal system reference (Eng)
m10_00_00_00	The Depths	Castle Town 2
m10_01_00_00	Undead Burg + Undead Parish	Castle Town 1
m10_02_00_00	Firelink Shrine	Base
m11_00_00_00	The Painted World of Ariamis	Northern Undead Asylum
m12_00_00_00	Darkroot Garden + Darkroot Basin (Base variant)	Black Forest Garden 1
m12_00_00_01	Darkroot Garden + Darkroot Basin (DLC variant)	
m12_01_00_00	Royal Wood + Oolacile DLC areas	Black Forest Garden – Past
m13_00_00_00	The Catacombs	Catacombs
m13_01_00_00	Tomb of the Giants	Giant Tomb
m13_02_00_00	The Great Hollow + Ash Lake	Subterranean Lake of Great Trees
m14_00_00_00	Blighttown + Quelaag's Domain	Shadow Town 1
m14_01_00_00	Demon Ruins + Lost Izalith	Ruined Capitol
m15_00_00_00	Sen's Fortress	Royal Castle 1 - Booby Trapped Theme Park
m15_01_00_00	Anor Londo	Royal Castle 2 - Royal Palace
m16_00_00_00	New Londo Ruins + The Abyss + Valley of Drakes	Abyss
m17_00_00_00	The Duke's Archives + Crystal Cave	Crystal Tower
m18_00_00_00	Kiln of the First Flame + Firelink Altar	Great Grave
m18_01_00_00	Northern Undead Asylum	Tutorial

Appendix D: Full list of distinct areas in *Dark Souls*

Area	Connecting areas	Bosses	Annotations
Base Game			
Northern Undead Asylum	Firelink Shrine	Asylum Demon <i>Stray Demon</i>	Tutorial area – the player starts the game here Can be revisited later to acquire the Peculiar Doll
Firelink Shrine	Undead Burg The Catacombs New Londo Ruins Undead Asylum Undead Parish Firelink Altar	None	Hub area Player can join the Way of the White covenant here, or by talking to Reah in the Parish after rescuing her in the Tomb
Undead Burg	Firelink Shrine Undead Parish Darkroot Basin The Depths	<i>Taurus Demon</i> <i>Capra Demon</i>	Technically split into an Upper and Lower level; requires the Basement Key found in the Parish Players may enter the Warrior of Sunlight covenant by the broken altar behind the Hellkite Dragon (req. 25 faith after the v1.04 patch)
Undead Parish	Undead Burg Darkroot Garden Firelink Shrine Sen's Fortress	Bell Gargoyles	One Bell of Awakening is located in the belfry
The Depths	Blighttown Undead Burg	<i>Gaping Dragon</i>	Optional area Requires the Key to the Depths from the Capra Demon
Blighttown	Valley of Drakes The Depths The Great Hollow Quelaag's Domain	None	Can be accessed early if the player has the Master Key
Quelaag's Domain	Blighttown Demon Ruins	Chaos Witch Quelaag	One Bell of Awakening is located below the boss arena; entry into the Chaos Servant covenant area behind an illusory wall
The Great Hollow	Blighttown Ash Lake	None	Optional area hidden behind an illusory wall
Ash Lake	The Great Hollow	None	Path of the Dragon covenant area

Sen's Fortress	Undead Parish Anor Londo	Iron Golem	Access requires the player to have rung both Bells of Awakening, which will open the portcullis
Anor Londo	Sen's Fortress The Duke's Archives Painted World of Ariamis	Dragon Slayer Ornstein & Executioner Smough <i>Dark Sun Gwyndolin</i>	Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight awards player with Lordvessel; player can join the Princess's Guard covenant here Blade of the Darkmoon covenant can be joined after the player has obtained the Darkmoon Séance Ring in the Catacombs (if Gwynevere is alive) Access to Archives requires placing the Lordvessel on the Firelink Altar
Painted World of Ariamis	Anor Londo	<i>Crossbreed Priscilla</i>	Optional area Access to painter world requires the player to have the Peculiar Doll
Darkroot Garden	Undead Parish Darkroot Basin	<i>Moonlight Butterfly</i> Great Grey Wolf Sif	Access to entire area requires obtaining the Crest of Artorias from Andre of Astora in the Parish Forest Hunter covenant area
Darkroot Basin	Darkroot Garden Undead Burg Valley of Drakes	None	Entry point to DLC areas Requires the Watchtower Basement Key to open a shortcut to the upper Burg
Valley of Drakes	Darkroot Basin Blighttown New Londo Ruins	None	Optional area for shortcut connections Player will need to obtain the Key to New Londo Ruins in Blighttown to open that shortcut
New Londo Ruins	Firelink Shrine Valley of Drakes The Abyss	None	Area is flooded upon arrival; requires obtaining the Key to the Seal (from Ingward after obtaining the Lordvessel) to drain and access the lower area
The Abyss	New Londo Ruins Firelink Altar	The Four Kings	Requires the player to have the Covenant of Artorias, obtained by killing Great Grey Wolf Sif Darkstalker Kaathe appears here only if the player has not yet placed the Lordvessel on Firelink Altar; allows player to join the Darkwraith covenant
The Duke's Archives	Anor Londo Crystal Caves	Seath the Scaleless (immune)	Inaccessible until the player has placed the Lordvessel Unable to defeat Seath here; player must be killed to access the true fight
Crystal Cave	The Duke's Archives	Seath the Scaleless	Reached after the player escapes from Seath's prison
The Catacombs	Firelink Shrine Tomb of the Giants	Pinwheel	Access to Gravelord Servant covenant via a coffin; can be joined if the player has not killed Nito and is in possession of an Eye of Death

Tomb of the Giants	The Catacombs	Gravelord Nito	Player has significantly reduced visibility without an equipped lightsource Requires Lordvessel to have been placed to reach Nito
Demon Ruins	Quelaag's Domain	<i>Ceaseless Discharge</i> <i>Demon Firesage</i> <i>Centipede Demon</i>	Killing Ceaseless Discharge stops the flow of lava and allows access into lower areas
Lost Izalith	Demon Ruins	The Bed of Chaos	Inaccessible until the player has placed the Lordvessel Majority of the area requires traversal over or through lava
Firelink Altar	Firelink Shrine The Abyss Kiln of the First Flame	None	Player must have rung both Bells of Awakening and obtained the Lordvessel from Gwynevere Only accessible through warping with either Kingseeker Frampt or Darkstalker Kaathe Placing the Lordvessel causes three orange fog gates to dissipate, allowing access to the Archives, Izalith, and Nito's arena
Kiln of the First Flame	Firelink Altar	Gwyn, Lord of Cinder	Player must have obtained and placed the Lordvessel, and filled it with the power of the Lord Souls Defeating Gwyn ends the game
Artorias of the Abyss DLC			
Sanctuary Garden	Darkroot Basin Oolacile Sanctuary	<i>Sanctuary Guardian</i>	Requires player to have rescued Dusk of Oolacile in the Basin, and then obtained the Broken Pendant from a Crystal Golem in the Archives
Oolacile Sanctuary	Sanctuary Garden Royal Wood	None	Small connecting hub between the Garden and Royal Wood
Royal Wood	Oolacile Sanctuary Oolacile Township	<i>Knight Artorias</i> <i>Black Dragon</i> <i>Kalameet</i>	Requires the aid of Hawkeye Gough to access Kalameet
Oolacile Township	Royal Wood Chasm of the Abyss Battle of Stoicism	None	Using a lightsource will allow the player to reveal a hidden room with the Silver Pendant
Battle of Stoicism	Oolacile Township Battle of Stoicism Gazebo	None	PvP combat arena

Battle of Stoicism Gazebo	Battle of Stoicism	None	PvP hub area
Chasm of the Abyss	Oolacile Township	<i>Manus, Father of the Abyss</i>	Unlike the Abyss, it does not require the player to have obtained the Covenant of Artorias to traverse safely
Totals			
32 distinct areas	26 major bosses (12 required + 14 optional)		Ornstein & Smough count as one boss fight Seath is fought twice but can only be killed in the second encounter