

# Murder & Masochism:

Exploring Violence as a Mode of Engaging with Fiction  
in From Software's *Dark Souls*



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## Abstract

Violence permeates the act of playing videogames, extending beyond superficial representations of violence into the culturally formative. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the complexity of videogame violence through a close reading of From Software's *Dark Souls*. I argue that violence functions as a mode of engaging with fiction in videogames. Players destabilise the potential meanings a videogame can generate by altering its material reality through play and translating their experiences of it through interpretation. Videogames reshape players by conditioning them toward new modes of playing, thinking and feeling. Ultimately, videogame violence is a mode of engaging with fiction that enables a mutually transformative interaction between players and videogames.

## Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “Murder & Masochism: Exploring Violence as a Mode of Engaging with Fiction in From Software's *Dark Souls*” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University. I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. Finally, I also certify that this thesis has been amended in response to criticism from both the appointed markers.



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13/12/15

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# Introduction

## **From the Age of the Ancients**

“Well, what do we have here? You must be a new arrival. Let me guess. Fate of the Undead, right?” —  
Crestfallen Warrior (From Software 2011)<sup>1</sup>

Videogames acquaint players with violence in ways that are unique to the medium and disruptive to traditional modes of engaging with fiction. The act of play renders videogame fictions uniquely accessible, as players' thoughts, feelings and actions permeate to radically rewrite the realms they engage with. In essence, videogames empower players to engage with and largely reshape their meanings through necessarily violent interactions without requiring them to be consciously aware of it. This amounts to a deeply personal mode of engaging with fiction that resists, but is not immune to, institutional control. Players' intimacy with violence through videogames has led to controversies in both mainstream media and academic circles. Videogame scholars have already dispelled the notion that videogames are merely a simulator for physical violence and, in doing so, have alluded to violence's complex function in the medium (Squire 2002; Kontour 2009; Ferguson & Kilburn 2010). This discourse has been vital to countering dominant misconceptions about the nature of videogames and creating a strong foundation for deconstructing the medium. In reminding us what videogame violence is not, game studies has done little to explore what it is.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the complexity of videogame violence through a close reading of From Software's *Dark Souls*. I will argue that violence functions as a potent mode of engaging with fiction in videogames. I eschew strict definitions of videogames and play in favour of focusing on what makes the medium a unique method of generating meaning, that

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<sup>1</sup> All *Dark Souls*' character quotes beneath sub-headings share this citation.

is, its violence and volatility. I adopt the term violence to refer to the intensity of play. This is not to equate it to physical violence, but to highlight the potent forces that shape both player and videogame during the act of play. My conception of videogame violence ranges from the representational, to the metaphoric and the symbolic. Representational violence refers to explicit and implicit depictions of or allusions to harm, brutality or other destructive realities. In contrast, metaphorical violence refers to the transformative forces that underpin the act of play. Symbolic violence highlights the innate violence involved in transcribing played experiences into writing. The digital manifestation of an axe cleaving into flesh would be representational. The player's numbing to the brutality of this act would be metaphorical. The words the scholar uses to transcribe this experience would be symbolic. These three forms of violence are not absolute, but they are important in illustrating the multidimensional and inherently violent nature of videogames. This allows scholars to comprehend videogame violence even in superficially non-violent videogames, as metaphorical and symbolic violence are no less real or potent than representational violence.

When game studies scholar Hector Rodriguez states that “play is meaningful to the agent”, he echoes a commonly player-centric usage of the term “meaningful” (2006). While I support the centrality of the player in meaning-making, it is important to acknowledge but not overstate the agency of technology in play. I describe videogame violence as potent rather than meaningful because of its mutually metamorphic nature. The term “potent” is broad enough to encompass the powerful changes enacted and undergone by both the player and videogame. I refer to these changes as transformations and metamorphoses because of their lingering effects. Volatility has connotations of changeability and, in an immediately human context, unstable temperaments or sudden turns to violence. I use the word to evoke both these definitions, representing play as a process of constant transformations triggered by the

interaction between player and videogame, manifesting in potentially explosive and disorienting ways.

The notorious brutality of *Dark Souls* renders it an ideal catalyst for exploring the multidimensional nature of videogame violence. *Dark Souls'* horrific themes and excessive violence exemplify the medium's capacity to represent violence. At the same time, its complex lore and implicit interrogation of players' expressions of agency render its brutal representations of violence meaningful. In short, *Dark Souls* conveys the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction by embracing it in both its excesses and subtleties. Representational violence establishes a foundation for deeper exploration into the depths of metaphorical violence in *Dark Souls*. Not all videogames explicitly represent violence, but all involve the necessarily violent interaction between player and videogame. The violence represented in *Dark Souls*, either as part of its world or as a consequence of the player's actions, conjures images and understandings of play that are immediately comprehensible to players and, to a lesser extent, those unfamiliar with videogames. In essence, it is a simple and relatively accessible starting point for a far more complex discussion about videogame violence.

Venturing from the representational to the metaphoric involves examining the transformative interactions between players and videogames. Beginning with a useful but necessarily fallible binary, I explore how players transform videogames as a type of metaphorical “murder” and how they allow themselves to be transformed by the videogames they play as a sort of metaphorical “masochism”. This dichotomy allows me to interrogate the uniquely interactive nature of videogame fictions and thus explore the potency of videogame violence. The further we analytically submerge ourselves in the depths of videogame violence, the more such categorisations break down and reveal the violent, volatile and mutually metamorphic



interaction between players and videogames. The discussions of symbolic violence that thread through my analysis are essential in portraying how writing about played experiences is in itself an act of violence that brutally warps the fictions and meanings generated through play.

This thesis understands representations of violence within the context of players' broader experiences, acknowledging that meaning does not appear in a vacuum. Even the most superficial representations of violence in videogames evoke histories and possibilities that extend beyond the violence players enact or endure. For example, in *Dark Souls* the acts of violence perpetrated by or against the player character offer an explicit but only partial glimpse of its portrayal of violence. Seemingly conventional role-playing game background details such as corpses, abandoned treasures and ruins all imply death and decay that occurred outside of the player's immediate experience of them and draw on symbols from prior fictions. Reframing violence as a messy collision of past, present and future possibilities of destruction allows me to analyse it as a complex function rather than just an outcome of an action. This shift in perspective is necessary to adequately explore how violence permeates the act of play.

### **Critical Framing**

"...Friend, I have an idea. A good one, really..." — Siegmeyer of Catarina

This thesis is geared to function as a catalyst for violently reshaping how videogames are critically discussed. Numerous videogame scholars have catalogued and negotiated various definitions of games and play, but few have embraced the fundamental violence and volatility of the medium. This requires adopting a theoretical framework that forefronts the centrality of play in generating meaning while remaining flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of the medium. I have chosen to address this challenge by tempering my immediate experiences

of *Dark Souls* with a close reading that draws on interdisciplinary research and analytical deconstruction. In doing so, I encompass the interactivity and brutality of videogames as a medium.

My theoretical approach is rooted in post-structuralist and post-modern critical theory. It involves navigating *Dark Souls* as a ludic space to discover the possibilities for meaning play creates and articulating them through semiotic analysis. The close reading relies on language drawn from literary studies, film studies and performance studies to deconstruct elements of *Dark Souls*. This methodology stresses that meaning is generated in the interaction between player and videogame, accounting for the materiality of videogames and the fallibility of the player. My notion of materiality refers to the ‘virtual tangibility’ of playing videogames, that is, how videogame worlds and players’ interactions with them virtually manifest during play.<sup>2</sup> By contrasting notes taken from my initial play-through of *Dark Souls* with online resources and notes from future play-throughs, I illustrate how my (mis)conceptions shaped the process of play and consequentially altered the possible meanings generated. In this sense, I simultaneously understand videogames as living texts and ludic spaces to be explored, experienced and contemplated but never contained or accurately categorised.

Before delving into the metaphorical violence that permeates the act of play, it is essential to review how we analyse the process of signification in interactive fiction. Videogame and film scholar Bernard Perron has written extensively on the survival horror genre of videogames. He explores his experiences of oppressive dread in titles such as Konami’s *Silent Hill* (1999) and Capcom’s *Resident Evil* (1996) by analysing the multi-layered representations of violence that frame the act of play. He roots this sense of foreboding in the signs and symbols geared to

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<sup>2</sup> In this I differ from game studies scholars and media theorists Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemanne, who offer a definition of materiality that "links digital games to the world and demands that they are also understood as objects in the world" (2012, p.15). Without denying the productive avenues for analysis this opens for game studies, my relatively narrow take on materiality is necessary for unpacking videogame violence within the context of play.

flag danger to the player, noting that “the visual warning system is displayed on the screen or the audio cues are extradiegetic, these signs are not for the avatar’s benefit” (Perron 2004, p.7). While seemingly obvious, his statement alludes to the unique degree that representations of violence in videogames motivate the player’s actions during play. This meta layer of representation complicates traditional semiotic analysis by demanding scholars assess how videogame mechanics act as a form of representation. The shortening of a red health bar, for example, does not accurately simulate an injury but is often vital to conveying that a player’s character has been harmed. Similarly, when game studies academic Tanya Krzywinska draws attention to the restriction or enhancing of player agency in horror videogames, she implicitly reinforces how abstract videogame mechanics represent forms of violence (2002, p.13). Videogames thus represent violence through both what players interact with and how. This renders representative violence a process of imaginative reconstruction rather than artificial reproduction.

## **Structure**

“You come, I forge, we talk. You good friend. I very happy” — Giant Blacksmith

My central argument is that videogame violence serves as a potent mode of engaging with fiction. The thesis begins with "Murder", where I reconfigure how we consider the relationship between the player, developer and videogame by appealing to the theories of authorship expressed by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. I trace continuity between popular contemporary understandings of the ludology versus narratology debate and ongoing conflicts between formalist and post-structuralist approaches to game studies. Specifically, I position the common trend toward superficially dividing the ludic and textual elements of videogames as a consequence of the overly deterministic nature of formalist approaches to videogame analysis. This involves rejecting appeals to authorial intentions and relocating the

site of meaning-making to play. I frame the player's interaction with videogames as a dual process of destabilisation, where players brutally rewrite videogame fictions and meanings through their material actions and interpretations. I portray symbolic violence as a necessary consequence of writing about play, as scholars abstract players' fictions and experiences from play and transcribe them through text. With no way to accurately replicate played experiences, scholars must effectively rewrite them through their interpretations and critical engagement.

I argue that the interactivity of videogames mandates immersion by rendering players' material actions integral to videogame fictions. This practical sense of immersion doubles as a unique form of accessibility, as every material action the player makes alters the material worlds they navigate and reframes their interpretations. In the same way interpretations influence material actions, material actions influence interpretations, culminating in a mutually metamorphic mode of play. The player's implicit understanding of their agency within videogame fiction underpins the unique ways videogames allow individuals to engage with and reshape meanings. I touch on the potential for videogame violence to function as a socially transformative mode of engaging with fiction, as online connectivity and interactions between players allow fictions and meanings to bleed into each other. This almost functions as a material manifestation of symbolic violence, as players gain the capacity to tangibly warp each other's fictions.

In "Masochism" I analyse how videogames condition players to interact with and engage with their fictions, positioning play as an act of surrendering the self to be violently reshaped by videogames. Inspired by Foucault's concept of genealogy, I explore the violence and volatility of play by repositioning individuals' played experience as integral parts of their personal fictions. By invoking Johan Huizinga's magic circle to demonstrate its incompatibility and unproductivity within game studies discourse, I reinforce the realness of play. I acknowledge

popular perspectives on videogame conditioning discussed by prominent videogame designers before expanding this process to include how players are conditioned to experience fiction in certain ways. I combat the mechanisation of game studies implicit in formalist approaches by emphasising the human elements of play, arguing that videogames are fundamentally geared to guide players toward certain modes of thinking, feeling and playing.

"Murder" bleeds into "Masochism" as I demonstrate how players render themselves complicit in their own conditioning process through their interpretations and material actions. Players consciously and subconsciously build fictions that guide how they interact with and comprehend both videogames and themselves. By exposing the malleable fictions that define players, videogames open the potential for players to test the boundaries of their bodily understandings and peer into the abject.

I conclude that videogame violence offers an intimate, powerful and mutually transformative mode of engaging with fiction. I ground my claim in the decay that permeates *Dark Souls* and extends to me, as the player. I anchor my understandings of humanness in the voices of the non-player characters that echo throughout this thesis. Players' avatars are rendered charred walking corpses upon each death in the game. Players must restore their human-like forms by consuming itemised fragments of humanity. This process of going Hollow serves as a flexible metaphor for my dehumanisation through play and illustrates the intensely personal and necessarily violent interconnection that underlies my experiences of *Dark Souls* and the act of play.

## **Symbolic Violence**

“Thou art welcome anytime. It is only human to commit a sin... Heh heh heh heh...” — Oswald of Carim

The act of writing about play constitutes a brutal violence that further warps the meanings generated by it. The multitude of different approaches to game studies criticism from a diversity of academic fields attests to the importance of creating a suitable dialogue for discussing videogames. The sheer breadth of approaches has inevitably led to numerous conflicts between scholars. Infamous among these debates, is digital cultures academic Markku Eskelinen's criticism of narratologist Janet Murray's analysis of *Tetris*:

Instead of studying the actual game Murray tries to interpret its supposed content, or better yet, project her favourite content on it; consequently we don't learn anything of the features that make *Tetris* a game. The explanation for this interpretative violence seems to be equally horrid: the determination to find or forge a story at any cost, as games can't be games because if they were, they apparently couldn't be studied at all (2001).

Eskelinen portrays Murray as desperately transfixing *Tetris* with a story of her making, thus negating or subsuming the value of its programmed mechanics. His claim has been widely criticised for its reductionist account of videogame narratives and Murray's work (Jenkins 2004; Simons 2007), but his accusation of interpretative violence incidentally alludes to the fundamental violence of videogame analysis. The violent and volatile nature of play renders the process of generating meaning messy, as players and videogames transform one another. In writing about played experiences, scholars inevitably reshape these meanings while forcefully extrapolating them from the context in which they emerged.

The autonomy videogames extend to players lays the foundation for a deeply personal mode of generating meaning, leading to a diversity of potential meanings that no scholar can hope to capture. Any attempts to authoritatively extricate and explain meaning from play risk oversimplifying and overshadowing the medium's intimate and volatile nature. In her critique of ethnographic practices, Kirsten Hastrup questions the violence that underlies writing about others, arguing that "probing into cultural silences may be merely a symbolic act of violence, but it is violence none the less" and "implies intrusion and, possibly, pain" (1992, p.123). She continues by framing ethnographic writing as the dissolution of others' stories, where "the number of voices recorded by the ethnographer is immaterial; writing ethnography is an act which subsumes them all" (Hastrup 1992, p.124). The symbolic violence Hastrup describes refers to is the way ethnographers inherently take informants' stories by retelling them in their own words.

This appeal to ethnographic criticism seems strange until it is reframed to apply to the intimacy of play. Critically discussing the meanings generated through play risks divorcing play from the player and disrupting the very intimacy that makes videogame violence such a potent form of engaging with fiction. While this thesis is not geared to directly incorporate other players' experiences, in writing about *Dark Souls* I must unavoidably privilege my perspective and experience over the interpretations and experiences of others. While this symbolic violence cannot be negated, it can be embraced by abandoning the language of absolute meaning in favour of discussing possible meanings.

## **Situating the 'I'**

“We are both strangers in this strange land. But, at least now there are two of us” — Marvellous Chester

Videogames are unique in that they empower players, both those that comprehend their narratives and those with only a baseline mechanical literacy, to meaningfully engage with their fictions. The interactivity of the medium imbues players' mistakes and misunderstandings with significance, as each misstep materially and interpretatively reshapes the reality of the videogame. By allowing players to directly interface with the material dimensions of their fictions, videogames open the process of generating meaning to broad audiences and empower everyday individuals to engage with and effectively rewrite fictions. To encompass the volatility of play, I need to forgo any concept of the ideal player and acknowledge the fallible human nature of players. Importantly, this understanding needs to permeate the language I use to discuss videogames.

The role of the videogame scholar, as both critic and player, is steeped in violence. Scholars cannot adequately explore the meanings that emerge through play without enmeshing themselves in the very act. Situating the 'I' is thus imperative to game studies discourse. Sociologists Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley identify a suitably messy and personal methodology when they describe ethnography as “a significant *development* of the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world that we all use in our mundane lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge” (2007, p.4). By adopting ethnographic practices my academic study of *Dark Souls* becomes less of a departure from my time as a player and more of an extension of it. My recorded notes and academic research supplement but do not subsume my blunders, triumphs and experiences as



a player. In this sense, ethnography provides the potential for a discourse that bridges academic dialogue with everyday play.

Ethnography, like videogames, offers a variable landscape that constantly transforms and is transformed by the individuals who engage with it (Atkinson & Hammersley 2007, p.1-2). It is hardly unique to argue that ethnography offers a strong methodological framework for understanding videogames. When Tom Boellstorff suggests that “anthropological approaches can contribute significantly to a game studies nimble enough to respond to the unanticipated, conjunctural, and above all rapidly changing cyberworlds” (2006, pp.33-4), he speaks as one of several scholars to have created influential dialogues about videogames through ethnography (Nardi & Harris 2006; Boellstorff 2008; Taylor 2009). I recognise ethnography's strong resonance with videogames, but my ambition to delve into the violent, personal and transformative nature of play demands a more specialised focus; it demands autoethnographic inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Self-reflexivity is a key part of ethnography, but autoethnography's greater emphasis on the relation between the self and the world lends itself exceptionally well to critically examining the relationship between myself as a player and *Dark Souls*. Renowned autoethnographers Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner define the sub-discipline as:

An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and

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<sup>3</sup> While it is important that I distinguish between ethnography and autoethnography to adequately frame my unique approach, many scholars have treated the two terms interchangeably. In positioning autoethnography as a sub-discipline, I simultaneously acknowledge their overlap while illustrating the benefits of specialising.

resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition (2000, p.739).

This methodology is geared to explore the indefinite relationship between the autoethnographer and the world they seek to understand, reframing every analysis as simultaneously academic and deeply personal. In describing mutual metamorphosis, acts of destabilisation and multilayered conditioning in *Dark Souls*, I need a methodology that confronts the violence that permeates play and how it inevitably alters me. Autoethnography allows me to do this while presenting myself honestly, as someone both keenly aware of and vulnerable to the transformative forces of videogames.

Autoethnography provides a methodological framework that reaches beyond the boundaries of theoretical conception into embodied experiences of reality. This methodology equips me with the tools to flexibly explore the bodily nature of play, thus answering autoethnographer Tami Spry's call for an appreciation of “the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy” (2001, p.706). Without necessarily discrediting phenomenological alternatives, autoethnography provides the theoretical tools for a malleable discourse that moves between non-physical and embodied experiences of play. This flexibility mirrors the inconsistency of played experiences, where different aspects of the videogame and self become more or less important throughout the process of play. In short, players are at least as volatile and prone to change as the videogames they play, and autoethnography allows me to embrace and explore rather than overlook this inconsistency.

# Murder

## Discursive Violence in Game Studies

“The Archives, such a storehouse of knowledge. So close, but just out of reach! The thought offends me so, I simply could die! As a student of the arts, you understand me, yes?” — Big Hat Logan

Game studies draws on numerous fields, but its relative youth renders it closer to an amalgamation of existing fields rather than a distinct and clearly identifiable discipline (Aarseth 2001; Mäyrä 2008, pp.5-6; Keogh 2014). The rapidly changing nature of videogame technologies and the sheer breadth of experiences offered by the medium have necessitated the multitude of approaches that comprise game studies. As a consequence, it is difficult to define my engagement with the discipline without delving into the conflicts that underpin it. While key research questions often inquire into the fundamental nature of videogames, including their definition, function and significance, broader debates on how exactly we should study videogames are still prominent and ongoing.

Comprehending game studies requires reframing the ludology versus narratology debate. Many scholars locate game studies' emergence in the 1980s golden age of arcade videogames, but in contemporary discourse much of early game studies is understood in the context of the ludology versus narratology debate (Murray 2013). This superficial binary portrays ludologists as comprehending videogames as ludic spaces. Ludic space is a necessarily broad concept which, as Craig Lindley explains, "captures systems of experience incorporating concepts of game or game play and related experiences" (2005). In contrast, this binary represents narratologists as focused on the narrative elements of play, viewing videogames as living texts. By living texts I refer to the volatility of videogames as forms of fiction that are compatible with semiotic analysis but do not hold still for interpretation or necessarily keep to

the same material form. Prominent game studies scholars such as Gonzalo Frasca have rightly questioned the very idea of this debate; critiquing the forced binary between ludic and textual elements it implies (2003). Videogames are complex systems that offer complex fictions, there is no inherent reason a scholar cannot incorporate both the ludic and textual elements of play. Nor is it productive to artificially aggregate scholars and approaches into the camps of ludology and narratology.

The superficial nature of the ludology versus narratology debate makes it tempting to dismiss it as a vague and overvalued part of game studies' history, but this would deny its relevance to contemporary discourse. Its prominence in accounts of game studies' history is symptomatic of an ongoing conflict between formalist and post-structuralist approaches to videogame criticism. The very notion that scholars could be firmly classified and diametrically opposed as ludologists or narratologists evokes the needlessly restrictive reliance on taxonomies that feature in formalist analyses of videogames. This desire to dissect and categorise the complexity of videogames into easily digestible parts underpins many of the problematic assumptions that commonly hinder videogame analyses. I break down and counter specific assumptions throughout my exploration of videogame violence in *Dark Souls* as part of my broader rejection of formalist approaches to game studies. Post-structuralism offers a messier approach, where categories and meanings are understood as unstable and vulnerable to change, and is therefore more suited to the violent and volatile nature of videogames. The tension between these approaches and post-structuralism's compatibility with videogames becomes evident once we venture into the depths of *Dark Souls*.

The complexity that I ascribe to videogame violence and the inherently violent nature of videogame criticism cannot be adequately described without delving into the act of play. I begin my analysis of *Dark Souls* with its opening cinematic, when the act of play seems to be

at its simplest and I, as the player, am left to interpret the world I have yet to materially navigate.

### **Authorial Intentionality**

“So, you have received a revelation? Very auspicious. I hope for the best. I pray that through you, Her wish will be granted” — Darkmoon Knightess

*Dark Souls* begins as all fictions do, in the violent aftermath of the stories that preceded it. I completed the character creation process with little ceremony, electing to play a pyromancer and choosing the mysterious Old Witch's Ring as my optional starting item. I was introduced to the world of *Dark Souls* through what initially appeared as a lifeless and static landscape, animated only by shifting fog and a mysterious woman's narration: "In the Age of the Ancients, the world was unformed, shrouded by fog. A land of grey crags, archtrees, and everlasting dragons. But then there was Fire". As she contextualised the world and alluded to the experience to come, the fog thinned to reveal a long distance panning view of a dark and desolate landscape (From Software 2011). The opening cinematic literally and metaphorically shrouded the histories of *Dark Souls'* world in mist, provoking my curiosity. The vastness of the bleak landscape before me filled my mind with notions of wide-scale past destruction, beckoning me to reconstruct lost narratives and meanings from remnants of past fictions.



Definite structures and absolute categories are incompatible with the violent and volatile nature of videogames. The popularity of formalist methodologies among game studies critics

has led to a critical trend toward dissecting and artificially simplifying how videogames generate meaning and facilitate play. When formalist game studies scholar Jesper Juul attempts to divide the fictional and material dimensions of videogames by suggesting that "though rules can function independent of play, fiction depends on rules" (2005, p.121), he magnifies this widespread issue. Juul assumes that because rules are programmed into a videogame before the act of play begins, rules must necessarily supersede the player's interpretations of them. This characterisation of play portrays the player's experience as secondary to the videogame's materiality, ignoring the power of fiction in tempering how the player interacts with and reshapes the material reality of a videogame. Rules are an essential component of videogames but during play they become an inextricable part of fiction, vulnerable to the player's (mis)conceptions. In his attempt to contain and accurately categorise videogames, Juul fails to comprehend the volatile nature of videogames as ludic spaces and living texts to be explored, experienced and violently reshaped.

The ludic and textual aspects of videogames interact and overlap in potentially countless ways during play. Superficially, classifying *Dark Souls'* opening cinematic as a non-interactive and purely fictional layer of the played experience seems appropriate. In a deeper sense, this cinematic plays a key role in shaping the player's expectations and eventual navigation of *Dark Souls'* ludic spaces. The fictional space the opening cinematic offered to me, as the player, mirrors the textual space that literary theorist Roland Barthes describes as a "tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture" (2014, p.4). Barthes' metaphor refers to the innate messiness of literature, revealing the impossibility of absolute originality or novelty when all texts are born from countless sources of influence. *Dark Souls* did not create new meaning by presenting me with a bleak post-apocalyptic landscape. Instead, it triggered my imagination and motioned me to draw from vast networks of meanings and fictions I have previously experienced to make sense of its otherwise alien landscape. In other words, my

interpretation of the opening cinematic is inextricable from the material actions I chose to take after it. Barthes portrayal of texts as multidimensional indeterminate spaces provides a helpful framework for understanding videogames as complex amalgamations of ludic and textual elements that cannot be anchored to any origin or concrete foundation.

By depicting videogame fiction as wholly dependent on rules, Juul also highlights a pattern of prioritising developers as meaning makers in game studies criticism. His assumption positions players as slaves to developer intentions and fixed meanings, only ever as potent as the videogame's design permits them to be. This assumption subtly lurks beneath many videogame critiques, even those that do not explicitly advocate for the value of authorial intentionality. When media critic Ryan Lizardi portrays *Bioshock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007) and *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) as exemplars of complex choices in videogames, he refers to the scripted choices that result in one of few limited preset endings (2014). Without necessarily invalidating his analysis, it is telling that of the seemingly countless choices players can make during play, his analysis centres on the choices its developers and marketing teams have highlighted as central to the play experience. Lizardi's conception of choice and, consequentially, the scope of his analysis are thus unnecessarily narrowed by his implicit reliance on developer intentionality. This dependence arbitrarily shifts the focus from analysing what meanings are produced through play into guessing what meanings the developers may have liked to have been produced.

Ignoring the impracticality of expecting an individual or development team to have static, resolute and unified meanings mapped out for their game, there is no reason to value authorial intentions over play and many reasons not to. Apperley's take on counterplay highlights the weakness of Lizardi's and Juul's limited scope by revealing the player's capacity to resist authorial control. Apperley defines counterplay as consisting "of actions taken in games that

are within the scope of the designed rules of the game but were not intended to exist or be a significant element of play” (2010, p.140), which “establish new forms of digital game play inside, and tangential to, the coded limits of the game space” (2010, p.144). His take on this theory encompasses the ways in which personal and global contexts bleed into play, manifesting as players leverage their agency to interact with videogames in unpredictable and unintended ways. Relying on authorial intentionality therefore requires sacrificing the full extent of play agency, offering only an overly simplistic perspective on play.

While a reliance on authorial intentionality is not strictly an issue limited to formalist approaches, the problem stems from a similar underlying desire to find certainty and stability in otherwise messy and indeterminate processes of meaning making. Barthes demonstrates a keen awareness of this problematic attitude when he rejects the use of the author figure as an explanation for meaning. He positions society's obsession with authorial intent as the “epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology”, arguing that “the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author” (2014, p.2). This critique of literature can explain the predominance of these assumptions in videogame criticism. The product oriented culture surrounding mainstream videogames bleeds into game studies, where videogames' marketed meanings can steer scholars' analyses.

By relegating the generation of meaning to what developers and their marketing departments deem to be the 'main story' or intended purpose of the game, game studies scholars risk restricting the depth of their analyses. This is not to denounce insightful game studies research that explores the role of marketing within and outside of videogames (Chambers 2005; Lewis & Porter 2010; Vanderhoef 2013) nor to ask the impossible and demand scholars be immune to developer intentions and the signs and marketing that helps convey them. Instead, I propose



analysing how meaning is generated in the medium by consciously prioritising the act of play and the interaction between player and videogame that underlies it.

While Apperley's variation of counterplay demonstrates the player's potential to disrupt and deny authorial intentions, I argue that all forms of play constitute an implicit rejection of authorial control. In this sense, every act of play functions as a kind of counterplay.

Understanding the videogame violence players enact and how it dissolves the author figure demands an exploration of how player agency manifests through play.

### **The Dual Process of Destabilisation**

"I must admit, I am fond of you humans. May you enjoy your serendipity. And may the Age of Fire perpetuate" — Kingseeker Frampt

Destruction and creation are inextricably connected in the world of *Dark Souls*. This paradoxical relationship marks one of many dualities that the narrator attributed to the "Age of Fire" in the opening cinematic: "And with Fire, came Disparity. Heat and cold, life and death, and of course... Light and Dark" (From Software, 2011). The cumulation of paradoxical imagery was accompanied by a camera simulating a first-person descent into a dark tunnel before opening to a long distance view of a wall of fire. While the wall of flame initially appeared to be a dividing line between two disparate areas, a close-up camera angle quickly revealed that I, as the player, was within the flames. This dramatic shift led me to interpret fire as the embodiment of duality. I reasoned that heat is felt in relation to cold, that fire must consume before it can foster life, and that it must reside in darkness to light. I therefore understood fire as encapsulating both sides of each disparity simultaneously, functioning as a volatile force that self-perpetuates through self-destruction. I was entranced by the ever-changing form of fire represented

in the opening cinematic, conflating it with my pyromantic powers. To me, the “Age of Fire” signified the age of agency, when I could reshape the world of *Dark Souls* by playing through it.



Comprehending the importance of player agency is fundamental to understanding the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction. The metaphor of murder that marks this chapter encompasses the dual process through which players destabilise the generation of meaning in videogames and negate the possibility for absolute meanings to exist. This dual process refers to the material actions players make to reshape the material reality of a videogame, and the interpretations which further warp the meanings videogames generate. Barthes' theory of authorship is geared to liberate the reader from the shackles of authorial intent by suggesting that "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" (2014, p.6). By abandoning notions of texts having predefined meanings, criticism can begin to navigate the breadth of possible meanings created in the interaction between reader and text. Barthes' phrasing suits game studies. Adapting his work to videogames reveals that players have the means to violently alter the process that videogames generate meaning through play, destroying absolutes and metaphorically killing the author figure.

The intimacy of play and its necessity in generating meaning can only be comprehended in the absence of the author. Building from Barthes' work, Michel Foucault instructs critics to "locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance" and "watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers" (1998, p.209). In doing so, he extends the scope of critical analysis

beyond simply dissolving author figures into examining how meaning is created in their absence. In videogames, these openings are the meaningful interactions between players and videogames. While the power dynamics between them may change, their interdependency in generating meaning through play remains constant. This signifies the intimacy of play. For example, it is impossible to precisely measure the extent in which *Dark Souls'* fire motifs eventually guided my pyro-centric play style. It is similarly impractical to determine what exact degree my prior knowledge of fire symbology in fantasy fiction governed my fixation and interpretation of fire in the game. But that this interaction occurred, and motivated my navigation of *Dark Souls'* ludic and textual dimensions, is central to understanding how meaning was generated while I played *Dark Souls*. To put it simply, the act of play is the site of meaning-making.

Post-structuralism offers a theoretical approach that enables scholars to examine the intimacy of play by exploring the dynamic relationship between player and videogames. Foucault presents a relatively moderate variation of Barthes' theory when he rejects the autonomy of the author in dictating meaning by asserting that "writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits" and repositioning the purpose of literature as "a question of creating a space in which the writing subject constantly disappears" (1998, p.206). By comparing text with a game that transcends its intended boundaries, Foucault situates meaning beyond authorial intentions. In the context of videogames, the space Foucault describes can be understood as literal and figurative. Literally, the player navigates and alters the material world of the videogame they play. Figuratively, their experience of the videogame and its material reality is transformed through their interpretations. When adapted to game studies, his post-structuralist theorisations of authorship allow scholars to highlight the violent and volatile interactions that characterise play and underlie the process of generating meaning.

Binding videogame analysis to authorial intent or absolute meanings implicitly denies the intimacy of play and thus overlooks one of the key properties that make videogame violence a unique and potent form of engaging with fiction. Whereas the taxonomical rigidity of formalism prevents it from engaging with the symbolic violence that underlies writing about videogames, post-structuralism offers the potential to embrace it. The violence of writing about videogames primarily lies in how scholars must necessarily abstract meaning from play, the intimate process through which meaning is generated. Transcribing it into text and compounding it with theory further removes it from the immediacy of play, essentially stealing meaning from its context and its players. Even when the individual is both player and scholar, meaning is always be malformed and at least partially lost in translation. By confining meaning to absolute categories, formalist approaches implicitly ignore symbolic violence, presenting an image of videogames that needlessly undercuts their violent and volatile nature. Similarly, any attempt to definitively separate the ludic and textual aspects of videogames oversimplifies their complexity, as both overlap in messy ways during play.

The act of play transcends its instantiation, spanning across breadths of fictions and positioning the player as a reteller. As players engage with and transform videogames through their material actions and interpretations, they actively imprint themselves onto fictions which reshape how they engage with future fictions. It is tempting to frame the player as a creator, if not co-creator, of videogame meanings. In contrast to traditional forms of media, players are empowered with a radical degree of freedom by the act of play. This liberty does not negate the inevitability of past fictions informing contemporary fictions. Similarly, the meaningfulness of one player's experience does not preclude the value of others' played experiences. My agency manifests in the multitude of choices available to me as a player. Of these, my capacity to interpret videogame fictions enables me to alter them with every

thought and (mis)understanding I develop throughout the process of play. My interpretations echo my violent power as a player, signifying one half of the dual process through which I destabilise videogame meanings. The magnitude of this metaphorical violence is evidenced by the transformative consequences of my interpretations of *Dark Souls*.

### **Interpretative Violence**

“Hrm? Well, this is unusual. You haven't lost your head. And more importantly you're free” — Rickert of Vinheim

Progress in *Dark Souls* is punctuated by boss fights and loosely structured around the goal of finding and defeating the Souls of the Lord bearers (From Software, 2011). The bearers were introduced sequentially in the opening cinematic alongside their role in destroying most of the ironically named Everlasting Dragons. They are, "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...and Seath the Scaleless" (From Software, 2011). My perception of these characters guided my understanding and navigation of *Dark Souls*. I was immediately repulsed by Nito's and Seath's monstrous and malformed bodies. I felt threatened by the imposing figure of Gwyn and his army of black knights. I thought little of the hunched and frail pigmy. But in the witches, I perceived a glimmer of hope. The high angle view of the witches channeling fire magic together humanised them in contrast to the others and alluded to the potential for human connection. When the narrator told that "the witches weaved great firestorms" and the camera revealed the previously dead landscape illuminated by flame, I perceived the potential for great destructive power through unity and pyromancy (From Software, 2011).



While all forms of fiction are vulnerable to the interpretations of their audiences, videogames necessitate a heightened level of interactivity as the player's conceptions of a videogame's realities feeds into how they navigate its material spaces. Interpretation in this sense is not strictly an abstract process. Players' interpretations may be geared toward understanding the narratives unfolding within a videogame or, more immediately, in gauging how exactly they should or could interact with a videogame's material world. The increased emphasis on interpretation, as both an abstract and pragmatic method of comprehending and navigating fiction, becomes particularly clear when examining the complex role of cutscenes in videogames. Countering the common dismissal of videogame cutscenes as watered down film segments, game design and media scholar Rune Klevjer argues that a cutscene "is a narrative of pre-telling" that "casts its meanings forward, strengthening the diegetic, rhetorical dimension of the event to come" (2002, p.200). Klevjer accurately encompasses the potency of the cutscene as a framing device, but misleadingly positions it prior to play rather than during it. Cutscenes form part of the interactive space in which players and videogames generate meaning. They evoke interpretations that resound to affect the materiality of videogames by leading the player to reevaluate their role in the context of the videogame's fictions and the nature of their interactions.

I navigated *Dark Souls*' interactive spaces through interpretations before I materially traversed its gothic architecture and hellish landscapes. I identified the Souls of the Lord bearers as grand and powerful bosses, associating the flames each held with pyromancy. I resolved to destroy and displace them by harnessing the potency of fire. Hoping to ease my fear of *Dark Souls*' horrors, I focused my attention on partaking in the bearers' momentary triumph,

ignoring the signs pointing to their wretched decay. My agency manifested in my interpretations, as my fixation with fire elevated it above all other options I could take as player and, without knowing it at the time, exposed me to the decay that claimed the other bearers. While the cinematic did, as Klevjer argues, frame my interpretation of the narratives to come, it also beckoned me to look back on the decisions I made and informed the materials actions I would take. While I have sought to engage directly with play through self-reflexive analysis, theorising my played experiences involves a necessary symbolic violence.

Interpreting videogame fictions and transcribing them through text reveals the volatile nature of both the player's and scholar's violence. Barthes describes writing as the author's elaborate suicide, positioning text as a "special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices... to which we cannot assign a specific origin" that functions as a "trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (2014, p.2). Barthes represents writing as the generation of a composite entity, made of a multitude of voices that intermingle, overlap and collide in messy indeterminate ways. The metaphorical image of a trap serves a dual function. Keeping with its original application to literature, it conveys how the act of writing ensnares intended meaning and the author, consuming it in the innumerable voices and interpretations of others. In this sense, recounting my played experiences extracts meaning from the intimacy of play to be consumed and warped by others' interpretations. When applied to videogames, Barthes' metaphor echoes the difference between player interpretations and player intentions. To interpret a videogame is not to simply assign it meaning or consciously control its shape.

My interpretations reshaped *Dark Souls* but I did not knowingly dictate its meaning. In this context, Barthes' metaphorical trap can be translated to refer to how my interpretations and (mis)understandings were enveloped by the inherent uncertainty of play. In failing to

acknowledge the ephemerality of flame foreshadowed in the opening cinematic and selectively appreciating the bearers for their power but not their downfall, I revealed the volatility that underlined my violence as a player. It may seem obvious, but the disparity between what I expected and understood as a player and what I ultimately experienced functioned to complicate and intensify my engagement with *Dark Souls*' interactive fiction. This discrepancy is what allowed me to miss the bearers' descent into decay and madness, and eventually succumb to a similar dehumanisation. In this sense, my (mis)steps and (mis)understandings are just as valuable, if not potentially more so, than my triumphs as a player.

The violent and volatile nature of play results in a messy but potent mode of meaning-making. Reader-response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser have attempted to stave off the author's dissolution illustrated by theories such as Barthes' and Foucault's by relocating the author's place in producing meaning. Iser attempts to salvage the role of the author by positioning them as literary cartographers, so that "as a rule we readers slip into the role mapped out by the text". His theory of the implied reader portrays the author's expectations of their readership as a force that shapes meaning and imbues readers with a sense of doubleness, where "on the one hand we are prepared to assume the role, and yet on the other we cannot completely cut ourselves off from what we are" (Iser 1993, p.63). In reading a text, individuals therefore motion between inhabiting the frameworks established for them by the author's expectations of them and falling back to their normal sensibilities. The key problem with this spectrum is that in emphasising a specific kind of doubleness, the self as conceived by the author and self as a real world individual, it overlooks the omnidirectional pull of possible meanings and fictions. The reader's recognition of numerous signs and signifiers can easily motion them toward multiple different modes of thinking and feeling.



As readers engage with fiction “what we are” (Iser 1993, p.63) becomes more volatile, warping like the fictions readers perceive. This is especially true in the context of videogames. *Dark Souls* provides a strong example of this, although even the most seemingly linear videogames can lead interpretations in a variety of directions. Videogame designer and scholar Ernest Adams outlines two key functions of level design when he suggests that it exists to support “gameplay through constraint, concealment and so on” and “to inform and entertain in its own right” (2003, p.12). The level design of *Dark Souls* resonates with the functions Adams lists by providing a material frame through which players can express their agency. More importantly, *Dark Souls* fuses this notion of level design with the spaces for meaning-making Foucault describes by presenting a landscape where the player can reach almost everything they can see. In the same way my interpretations could lead me to a diversity of meanings, *Dark Souls*’ level structure brings its vulnerability to player agency to the forefront. This highlights the nonlinear mode of generating meaning videogames offer and the player’s capacity to brutally rewrite videogame fictions.

Players’ interpretations manifest their agency in the process of generating meaning, illustrating the uniquely potent ways videogame violence allows them to engage with and rewrite fictions during the act of play. Problematically, my status as both player and scholar may risk falsely implying that radically transformative interpretations are limited to those that consciously deconstruct videogames. I challenged this misconception by arguing that simply thinking about how to play is a meaningful mode of engaging with and warping fiction, but this only touches on the medium’s unique degree of accessibility. To unpack the profound accessibility of videogame fictions, I will begin with *Dark Souls*’ tutorial, and the seemingly simple material actions that have intense ramifications for the generation of meaning.

## **Material Violence**

“...Traversing the dark? 'Tis but a fairy tale. Have thine own respect, go not yonder knocking for nothing, I say!” — Alvina

The player's first visit to the Undead Asylum functions as *Dark Souls'* tutorial and marks the first time players can control their character and navigate the videogame's material world. My character awoke in a dark cell to a corpse crashing down from above, holding the key to my escape. Despite the lengthy time I spent in the character creation menus, the avatar I took control of was a scorched husk of the person I created (From Software 2011). With foreknowledge of *Dark Souls'* brutal difficulty, I took my first steps out of the cell with trepidation. It opened to a series of fire-lit archways in an otherwise dark hallway, leading to a staircase ascending to black. The room appeared mostly still, except for a few passive Hollow quivering in despair and seemingly praying, and the incessant sound of heavy steps (From Software, 2011). Driven by the desire to survive, I killed the otherwise passive Hollow and my character automatically swallowed their souls. At the time, there seemed to be no negative consequences for my actions. The lasting repercussions would be found in the seeds of apathy I unwittingly planted within myself by so easily leveling my destructive power as a player against the human-like prisoners before me. I did not stop to appreciate the appropriateness of my setting.



Videogame violence fosters a deeply personal mode of engaging with fiction, offering the player the potential to experience, transform and etch themselves into the ludic and textual

dimensions of the videogames they play. Other mediums invite immersion, but the necessity of play mandates it. This sense of immersion does not refer to the subjective feeling of being immersed in fiction, but the practical necessity of functioning as an integral part of the process in which fictions and meanings are generated. This pragmatic sense of immersion emerges because, in the words of film and media critic Torben Grodal, "our experience of reality is linked not only to the possible salience of what we see and hear, but is also centrally linked to whether we are able to interact with such perceptions" (2000, p.197). Grodal acknowledges the audiovisual elements of videogames while reinforcing their key element, that is, interactivity. The potent fictions videogames generate only emerge through play, when players' choices conceptually and materially reshape the realities they navigate. The unique degree of material interactivity Grodal alludes to is what most clearly distinguishes videogame violence from the traditional modes of destabilising meaning that Barthes and Foucault describe.

Videogame violence transcends the boundaries of traditional forms of fiction by offering a uniquely accessible mode of engagement. Despite my usual aversion to the horror genre, I pressed deeper into *Dark Souls'* Undead Asylum, engaged by the interactive possibilities before me. Media critic Rob Cover frames the desire for interacting with fiction as a continuation of preexisting demands for textual control that have spanned over numerous mediums throughout history. Importantly, he reveals that recent technological developments have enabled heightened levels of interactivity (2003, pp.140, 144). Cover's argument is relevant to the materiality of player's interactions with videogames because it implicitly reinforces an obvious yet understated aspect of the medium; the materiality of play renders meaning accessible. The sights, sounds and spaces of *Dark Souls* were made all the more terrifying by the knowledge that if something happened, it would be in my hands to deal with it. My fears bled into the Undead Asylum, moving me to escape monsters I only imagined

pursued me, racing against a time limit never programmed into *Dark Souls*. The same agency that induced that added degree of horror also compelled me to keep playing, as my paranoia-fueled interactions rewrote the fictions and realities of *Dark Souls*.

Play enables players to violently reshape the virtual worlds they navigate. Play can present the player with seemingly countless choices. Every shift in camera, every movement of an avatar, every button input and every other choice made by the player shapes how fictions are generated. It is important to reinforce that these actions are triggered by the conscious and subconscious decisions the player makes during play. When Frasca argues that "simulation does not simply retain the... characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviours" and presents videogames as models that react "to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions" (2003, p.223) he implicitly dehumanises play. This characterisation of play oversimplifies meaning-making in the same way that appealing to an author figure does, except that it defers meaning to technology. While players are constrained by the programmed mechanics of videogames, the consequences of their decisions echo beyond the videogame's material reactions. Every material change the player enacts, no matter how seemingly minor, creates the potential for new interpretations and understandings of mechanics and fictions.

The materiality of play allows players to bypass the conceptual boundaries that might hinder individuals from meaningfully engaging with traditional forms of fiction. My experience of *Dark Souls*' tutorial morbidly manifests Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author, illustrating the ease in which players can radically and accidentally warp meanings and power structures through play. Underequipped and afraid, I chose to flee from the tutorial's boss, the Asylum Demon. Having eventually found my shield and axe, I sought to use them against the first Hollow in sight. The Hollow archer fled and I instinctively followed until, by sheer

accident, I angled myself to initiate a backstab animation. The Hollow froze in place as my character slowly hacked his axe into its neck, before jerking it free and cleaving it into its spine. I flung the Hollow violently to the floor, its execution accompanied by a sickening spraying sound (From Software 2011). The sudden grotesquery of this animation manifested my monstrous potential as a player. Shifting from disempowered victim to brutal slayer, my material actions, both intended and accidental, radically transformed the interactive fictions I experienced.

I previously argued that players' interpretations influence their material actions. The opposite also applies, as material actions function to reframe players' interpretations of a videogame. After concluding that videogame analyses that excessively focus on narrative elements offer limited representations of play, literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan conveys the "need to expand the catalog of narrative modalities beyond the diegetic and the dramatic" (2001). Doing so requires reaching beyond the narrative elements programmed into the videogame and homing in on the seemingly minor inputs that have potentially major consequences. The spontaneous input decisions players make during play alter their perceptions and influence how they interpret their experiences. Traditional techniques for portraying meaning, such as camera angles in films or repetition in text, take new and variable meanings when they are put in the hands of players and exposed to the violence and volatility of play. This unique degree of agency in warping fictions underscores the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction.

The potency of videogame violence is reinforced by the dynamic ways in which players influence meaning. In traditional media, signifiers are typically carefully controlled and presented to an audience. In videogames, players are inadvertently responsible for these signifiers. Having found my class equipment and experienced the Pyromancy Flame's power,

I confidently stepped through the fog door leading to a platform above the Asylum Demon (From Software 2011). I hungered for revenge. My downward tilted camera, elevated position and ranged pyromancies seemed to reinforce my newfound superiority over the creature. Then, in a moment's hesitation, the creature flew upwards and destroyed the platform beneath me, causing me to fall and be crushed beneath its hammer. The high angle that signified my power over the creature one moment reflected my baseless arrogance in the next. To see the demon up close I tilted the camera upwards, consequentially emphasising the demon's towering stature and my character's relative fragility. It decimated me. Every minor mechanical decision I made during the process of play shaped my interpretation of *Dark Souls*. This facilitates a mode of engaging with fiction that is at once deeply personal and almost endlessly variable.

The player's comprehension of the videogame fictions they inhabit is built on a self-reflexive awareness and appreciation of their agency. In contrast to traditional forms of engaging with fiction, a basic understanding of how to play videogames renders even complex narratives accessible. Whether it is a game studies academic rigorously deconstructing their experience of a videogame or a nonchalant player with a limited attention span and desire to 'just play', meaning is still constructed and understood in relation to the player. Sociologist Manuel Castells exemplifies popular subjectivist conceptions of the constructed nature of reality when he posits that "in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are somewhat displaced in relation to their assigned semantic meaning. In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived" (2010, p.404). Without veering into extreme subjectivism, it is reasonable to acknowledge that how we think and feel about reality shapes how we interact with and impact it. In Barthes' and Foucault's theories of authorship, this capacity to reconstruct reality is essential to comprehending the agency of the reader in making meaning. This reconstruction is both material and interpretative in videogames, as players' thoughts,

feelings and actions transform how and what meanings are generated. Through play, players implicitly embrace their agency and violently engrave themselves into videogames.

The deeply personal nature of play has the potential to permeate the fictions of others, manifesting as a socially transformative violence. During my time in the Undead Asylum basic tutorial messages, branded with blazing letters on the floor, guided me in how to control my character and interact with the world. These messages can be etched into the material world by the developers, player or, if connected online, other players (From Software 2011). In the Undead Asylum I treated these messages as beacons, guiding me toward progress. In his exploration of identity construction in massively multiplayer games, videogame academic Jeff Holmes emphasises that players "do not act within a vacuum but rather in a constellation of other objects and actors" and that "the specific interpretation of an individual identity is colored through the social institutions and other actors that populate the world of action" (2013, p.77). The messages are a limited form of social interaction, but signify the potential for a co-creation or collision of meaning as players' fictions bleed into one another. The interpretations and material progress of one individual may be branded into another's world, influencing how they choose to think, feel or act in *Dark Souls*. While I originally relied on these messages, as I became more accustomed to the combat system and ruthlessness of the enemies I abandoned the fictions left by others to forge onwards and carve my own way through the world.

Even the symbolic violence that underlies writing about play finds its material manifestation in the player's capacity to materially interact with and alter others' fictions. There is a large quantity of videogame research that focuses on the social elements of play, particularly in massively multiplayer videogames. While not a traditional massively multiplayer videogame, *Dark Souls* allows enough overlap between player experiences in its online features that much

of this body of work still applies. If connected online, players may brand messages into one another's worlds, invade others' worlds, support others' as phantoms, or engage in a formal duel in the Battle of Stoicism arena (From Software 2011). In addition to these features, there is also a wealth of fan-made content, walkthroughs and lore discussions to be found online. All of these options present avenues for players to interact with and violently reshape one another's fictions. Helping or hindering a player by materially altering their world and reshaping how they interpret their experiences thus functions as a sort of social violence. This can be understood as an almost literal manifestation of symbolic violence, as fictions are vulnerable to being forcefully rewritten by other players. Due to the necessarily specific focus of this paper, I can only scratch the surface of this social violence and its parallels to symbolic violence. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note that generating meaning through play is not an insular process and has the potential to transform others' fictions.

By engaging in play, players render themselves vulnerable to radical transformations. Understanding the multidimensional nature of this interaction requires delving into another essential aspect of play, the metaphorical masochism that underlies the interaction.



## Masochism

### From Murder to Masochism

“I ask just one thing. If I do go Hollow, then finish me off. I beg of you” — Rhea of Thorolund

In the previous chapter I focused on the metaphorical violence players enact through play to brutally rewrite videogame fictions. In this chapter, I shift the emphasis from how players rewrite videogame fictions and meanings into how they are violently rewritten by them. The agency players exhibit does not render them immune to videogames' transformative forces, nor do players rewrite videogames from a distance. Instead, players' modes of thinking, feeling and playing are constantly reshaped during the intimate act of play.

Adapting Foucault's concept of genealogy to game studies offers an intuitive method of delving into the player's transformations and embracing the violent and volatile nature of play. Expanding on Nietzsche's counter-historical philosophies, Foucault develops the idea of genealogy as an alternate mode of engaging with the past and examining the contingencies and power relationships that collide to form the present. He describes genealogy as “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (1987, p.76). Foucault immediately rejects any formalist conception of the past by embracing its messiness and indeterminacy through the metaphor of palimpsest. This metaphor aptly fits the player's experiences of videogames, as their thoughts, feelings and method of playing are constantly scrawled over as they are conditioned through play. By focusing on my played experiences of *Dark Souls* I am not recounting a static history so much as I am navigating the vague fictional genealogies that underlie my transformations as a player. In doing so, I

explore the metamorphic violence experienced by the player while still embracing the symbolic violence of writing about videogames.

The potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction manifests in its transformative effects on both the player and videogame. Attempting to trace these metamorphoses as linear progressions or attribute them with any sense of universality would neglect the violent and volatile nature of play. By adopting an approach that parallels Foucault's notion of genealogy I can avoid oversimplifying play and my experiences as a player. This involves framing my engagement with *Dark Souls* as an intimate look into a few of many transformative moments that altered, but did not holistically redefine, me. Foucault represents genealogy as geared to record

The singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles (1987, p.76).

Foucault dispels false notions of historical fact when he beckons genealogists away from absolutes and toward the human elements of the past. Following his lead, I extend my scope to seemingly arbitrary but personally important moments of play that are often overlooked or undervalued in formalist analyses of videogames. Rather than posit my played experiences as a distinct evolution or disintegration of the self, I explore them as important parts of a network of possible meanings.

Feminist ethnographer and genealogist Maria Tamboukou sets a precedent for the productive combination between Foucault's concept of genealogy and ethnographic writing. She argues that genealogy “turns the analyst's attention to specific regimes of truth that may elude the

knowledge terrain of the ethnographer”, yet to “stop asking why and start asking how, the analyst needs description both of the past and the present”. While genealogy “can offer glimpses of the past, ethnographic approaches can effectively illuminate the present” (2003, p.211). Tamboukou positions both methodologies as supplementary. Although she is overzealous in implying genealogy cannot make sense of the present, her argument rings especially true when applied to the realm of game studies. The evidence of played experiences lies not in citations or documents, but in the cacophony of changes etched into and by both the player and videogame. Reflecting on the messiness of past acts of play therefore requires exploring the messiness of the player.

The metaphor of masochism refers to the player's willingness to render themselves vulnerable to the transformative violence of videogames. This element of consent reinforces player agency but does not imply the player's full awareness or understanding of the metamorphoses they will undergo. Even the player's acknowledgement that they will need to learn how to interact with a videogame is enough to mark them as metaphorical masochists. To phrase it simply, my aim is not to position play as a transcendental experience. The radical metamorphoses I refer to do not occur in a singular instance, but in a multitude of moments throughout play which subtly reshape how the player thinks, feels and plays. In this sense, the individual who chooses to play a videogame is a person, player and palimpsest.

If we are to venture from Murder to Masochism, we must challenge prevalent conceptions of play that artificially divorce it from the real and implicitly deny its capacity to reshape players in fundamentally real ways. Understanding how videogame fictions and meanings transform players thus requires interrogating and dissolving the boundaries between ‘real’ and videogame worlds. It is essential to acknowledge that even the most fantastical of videogame fictions are real and have the potential to reshape the player in a diversity of meaningful ways.

## **The Reality of Play**

"If thou hast misstepped into this world, plunge down from the plank, and hurry home" — Crossbreed Priscilla

By entering the world of *Dark Souls* I implicitly agreed to lay my thoughts and feelings bare, exposing myself to its decay. My sentiments regarding the complex nature of humanness were tested and withered against my growing lust for souls, the essence of nearly everything in *Dark Souls*. Fearing death, I initially sought cooperation with human-like non-player characters and desperately devoured the souls of anything I registered as alien, hostile or not. I came to define creatures' values by their use. *Dark Souls* distils the value of life and other human aspects, such as faith, humanity and intelligence, into easily digestible numerical values (From Software 2011). In this sense, souls represent one aspect of the videogame's broader commodification of human values and beliefs, an inhuman perspective I adapted to with worrying ease. I killed less in areas that offered fewer souls, and spent excessive time reaping souls from areas that held more. I channeled souls into my intelligence statistic because I believed it would strengthen my pyromancies. I protected non-player characters because I suspected their information and assistance would be worth more than their souls. In failing to question this commodification of humanness, I became complicit in *Dark Souls*' deconstruction and dehumanisation of life, veering toward Hollowness.<sup>4</sup> By playing *Dark Souls* I inevitably allowed it to seep into me, as both player and person, and warp my understandings and behaviours.

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<sup>4</sup> I explore the concept of Hollowness and its centrality to my played experiences in the conclusion.



Critical discussions surrounding the real and virtual inevitably conjure references to the magic circle. The idea stems from cultural theorist Johan Huizinga's examination of play as a social force in *Homo Ludens*, where he lists the magic circle as one of many "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain", positioning it as a microcosm within the real world that is "dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (1980, p.10). Huizinga's theory is highly contested in game studies yet often serves as a cornerstone to discussions concerning the realness of playing videogames. The magic circle, as an example applied to game studies, clinically extracts play from its broader contexts, erecting artificial boundaries that oversimplify the nature of play and are outdated by modern interactive technologies. It is tempting to join many game studies scholars in dispelling the magic circle (Copier 2007; Malaby 2007; Consalvo 2009) as a way of reinforcing how play enmeshes, rather than divides, the real and virtual. Problematically, the magic circle is a weak target to mount a counterargument against. What began as an example scantily referenced by Huizinga has come to embody outdated rigid formalist binaries between 'real' and played experiences in game studies. Whether this conception is accurate or, as many formalists have argued, a straw man (Juul 2009; Zimmerman 2012), it is clear that the term has failed to clearly capture the relationship between players and videogames. Some game studies critics have sought to clarify and modernise the magic circle for the digital age (Harviainen 2012; Huynh, Lim & Skoric 2013), but the player-videogame relationship is too volatile to be contained by any definite term.

While the magic circle has proven to be an inadequate theoretical lens for understanding the realness of play, the questions it has encouraged about reality and the virtual are nevertheless

critical in comprehending the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction. In his exploration of massively multiplayer online videogames and their convergence with the real, economic sociologist Vill Lehdonvirta revitalises the discourse surrounding the magic circle by offering a new question in its place: "Where does virtual space end and real world begin?" (2010). Satisfactorily answering Lehdonvirta's question depends on adopting a genealogical perspective. Foucault conceives of genealogy as a way of retelling the past that rejects "ideal significations and indefinite teleologies" and the "search for 'origins'" (1987, p.77). I parallel this approach by looking at play as a necessarily indeterminate process where the real and virtual converge in violent and messy ways. This enables us to shift from questioning whether play overlaps with the real to what extent it does, creating a malleable space for exploring how players are reshaped through the act of play.

Foucault's rejection of their being an origin point for the past in genealogical analysis creates the foundations for a mode of exploring play, not as a self-contained process, but as an expansive and indeterminate experience. As a role-playing game enthusiast, I initially equated souls with 'experience', the currency conventionally rewarded to players to allow them to enhance their character's statistics. My preconceptions and (mis)understandings informed how I played *Dark Souls*. The language and metrics I used to articulate and comprehend my experiences were drawn from other videogames and conversations with players (Waggoner 2013, pp.1-2). My previous experiences with the genre had fundamentally reshaped the language and concepts I used to recognise and engage with *Dark Souls*. My preconceptions alluded to the blurred boundary between the real and virtual that allowed past played experiences to scrawl themselves into my modes of thinking. To begin to respond to Lehdonvirta's question, the real and virtual collided during my played experiences, the proof of their convergence etched into my understandings of the genre. As I ventured further into *Dark Souls* and its community, I began to grasp the vile implications of souls as the object of

lust and addiction for all monstrous Hollow in Lordran. Importantly, I began to question the habits that led me down that very same path and, in doing so, peered into my fictional genealogy as both a player and palimpsest.

### **The Double Consequences of Play**

“They failed me, every last one of them... I am certain that you will prove different” — Darkstalker Kaathe

The representational violence that enveloped my character bled beyond the screen, warping into a transformative violence geared to reshape me as the player. Each time I died I would lose all of my unspent souls and humanity, with only a single chance to reclaim them by touching the green mote at the site of my last death. If I failed to do so before dying they, with the material evidence of my most recent achievements, would disappear. With no ability to manually save and constant forced automatic saves, every death had the potential to permanently erase part of me. The nuance of this system became apparent in my confrontations with the Taurus Demon, a hulking Minotaur boss that ambushed me on a narrow bridge, savaging me repeatedly and mercilessly. I took the images of my character being stomped under hoof, cut down to his knees and cast into the mists below as obvious signs of my failure (From Software 2011). More importantly, I internalised this violent imagery as a double violence, destroying my character and condemning my thoughts and actions as a player. Death rippled beyond the temporary destruction of my character into a potent transformative violence targeted at me, the player witnessing and in no small part responsible for the horrifying consequences of my failure.



The intimacy between players and videogames renders individuals vulnerable to reconditioning through play. Of the multitude of methods videogames use to condition players, reward and punishment mechanics are of the most prominent. Typically, these are designed to motion players toward or away from certain modes of play to ensure they succeed at the videogame's challenges. Drawing on behaviour theory, game designers and theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman capture the mechanics' essence when they argue that it is within videogames' "artificial boundaries that rewards and punishments are interpreted as positive or negative and gain force to shape player behavior", guiding designers to "pay attention to the way a game encourages or discourages certain behaviors" (2004, p.345). Commonly, rewards come in the form of praise, progress and increased abilities or statistical benefits. Adversely, punishments are dealt as violence against the player and their character, discouraging players by illustrating the painful repercussions of their actions, restricting rewards and generally inconveniencing them. Echoing Huizinga's separation of play from the real, Salen and Zimmerman's reference to artificial boundaries divides players from the videogame's world, and implicitly undercuts the medium's capacity to shape players beyond the immediate act of play.

The consequences of play bleed from videogames' ludic and textual elements into the player. My fictional genealogy as a player of *Dark Souls* is stained with a multiplicity of gory and brutal death animations, my character's deadening moans, and the recurring image of his body fading or falling into nothingness. Foucault argues that a "genealogy of values, morality, asceticism, and knowledge will... cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence,



once unmasked, as the face of the other” (1987, p.80). Foucault refers to the way genealogy challenges the historical biases and judgments that relegate the pasts of numerous cultures to irrelevance by engaging with the other. He locates their realities in the set of contingencies that comprise their past and underpin their present. Where this proves meaningful for game studies is in guiding scholars to assess the often unspoken consequences of play for the player. Traditional conceptions of death portray it as a temporary negative consequence designed to teach the player through punishment (Klastrup 2007), but in *Dark Souls* death engraved itself into my very being. I remembered the excessive violence that represented my character's brutal demises, suffering from what media and cultural theorist Diane Carr frames as meaningful overkill (2014). In essence, the needlessly violent nature of death served a double purpose beyond mere punishment and spectacle, scrawling itself into me as a player.

The repercussions players experience during play double as a critique of the individual. The networked imagination, a concept proposed by media theorists Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown to demonstrate the overlaps between players and their avatars (2009, p.42), represents a productive shift into understanding videogame consequences as real consequences. Praising or condemning a player's behaviour within a videogame necessarily involves affirming or questioning the thought processes behind their actions, conditioning them by guiding how they play. Salen and Zimmerman's reward-punishment binary is useful for succinctly conveying the medium's capacity to alter player behaviour, but represents only one aspect of the interactive re-education that underlies play. Game studies scholars and new media critics have explored the destructive and productive potential of videogame conditioning, ranging from the dangers of deskilling through the automation of play (De Paoli 2013) to the possibility for moral education through communal play (Khoo 2012). My focus lies on the ways videogame violence and player conditioning denies divisions between played and 'real' experiences to transform how players think, feel and play. The double nature of

videogame consequences reflects the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction, as it scrawls meanings into players' modes of functioning. This aspect of play becomes clear when examining the spectre of death that motivated and malformed me and my interactions with *Dark Souls*.

*Dark Souls* conditions players into a cycle of death and rebirth, where they must reclaim the souls lost upon death by essentially rewriting their failed journey. Death had a dual presence as I played *Dark Souls*. Its first form condemned me for my failures, robbing me of my souls and casting me back to the last bonfire I visited, *Dark Soul's* version of checkpoints. The second appeared as an incandescent green light above my rippling bloodstain, seducing me to revisit my most recent tragedy. To recollect my souls I would have to carve through the resurrected forms of most, if not all, of the dangers that initially destroyed me. Every time I desperately fought to reclaim my souls I was inevitably fighting to reclaim a part of myself, the material evidence of my progress. The first form of death taught me how to play, but it was the second that kept me playing. Despite the sheer dread I quickly came to associate with the Taurus Demon, I kept returning, driven by the compulsion to reclaim my progress. I succeeded in collecting my lost souls every time, but died swiftly afterward. As I repeated the cycle the stakes became higher, with the souls of enemies I slew again and again with each return added to the pot. This seemingly simple mechanic conditioned me to rewrite new fictions over old failures with every attempt, reshaping me through the continual destruction and resurrection of my character.

Despite my attention to videogame mechanics as key to issuing player consequences, it is important to comprehend interactive technologies as enabling but not wholly defining fundamentally human acts of play. Mechanistic theorisations of videogames fail to account for how manipulating or inspiring feelings can constitute a powerful form of conditioning.

Veering on the edge of technological determinism, formalist game studies scholar Ian Bogost argues that "the common material and functional basis of games made from the same engines collapses literary critical notions of metaphor and analogy into encapsulated unit operations" (2006, p.62). Bogost overstates the technological aspects of videogames when he implies that they can erase the ambiguities associated with literature. His interpretation of videogames' functionality dehumanises play and consequentially underplays videogames' storytelling potential. Numerous game studies scholars have challenged the agency of technology through analyses of player-made modifications (Kücklich 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf 2008; Sotamaa 2010) and videogame glitches (Moeller, Esplin & Conway 2009; Leino 2012), but the more direct counter to Bogost's argument is that videogames are geared toward generating experiences for players. The evidence of the medium's potency does not lie in its mechanical aspects but in the unquantifiable feelings that comprise players' fictional genealogies during the act of play. Videogames generate uniquely engaging fictions by transcending their technological foundations and conditioning players toward new modes of playing, thinking and feeling.

In a similar vein to Foucault's rejection of historical absolutes, my analysis of *Dark Souls* actively resists the dehumanisation of human experiences that underpins formalist and mechanist conceptions of play. To recall my counter to Huizinga, my experiences are not "an act apart" (1980, p.10) from anything so much as they are an act that emerges and reforms parts of me, as both player and palimpsest. *Dark Souls'* primary world is Lordran, a land filled with endless amounts of souls and yet paradoxically defined by their absence. Despite the prevalence of soul-starved Hollow, I occasionally came across the itemised forgotten souls of lost Undead civilians, soldiers and heroes littering the world. They appeared as motes of light over maimed corpses, nestled among material evidence implying their previous owners' brutal deaths (From Software 2011). Each itemised soul implied a personal fiction that had

faded into oblivion, and marked a world that was cruelly indifferent to those that navigated it. Neither punishment nor reward, this realisation led me to question my purpose in the already deeply decayed realm of *Dark Souls*. It is here that Foucault's theory of genealogy inspired me to find meaning in the accidents, coincidences and tangents that comprise every player's experiences of videogames. In light of Lordran's apathy, I would eventually learn to find meaning in the unscripted moments that scrawled themselves onto me and the fictions and meanings I rewrote.

In examining the double nature of the consequences players experience through play, and how these condition them into new modes of thinking, feeling and playing, I have mostly represented the process as one-directional. I have alluded to, but not explicitly revealed, the ways in which my experiences and (mis)conceptions led me to discipline myself into certain modes of functioning. While the symbolic violence of academic writing offers me the critical distance to translate and recontextualise my experiences within theoretical frameworks, engaging with this process of self-disciplining is essential in comprehending the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction. Appropriately adapting Foucault's concept of genealogy to play thus requires delving into my fallibility as a player, and exploring the ways I unknowingly disciplined myself into specific modes of thinking, feeling and playing. Before I even considered analytically deconstructing *Dark Souls* through a formal thesis, I feared my irrelevance in the face of the apathetic Lordran. As I did with every monstrosity that threatened to annihilate me, I sought solace and resolution in the flames.

## Self-Disciplining

"Tis a terrible pity. Like a moth fluttering towards a flame" — Knight Lautrec of Carim

The centrality of fire in my experience of *Dark Souls* exemplifies how players' material actions and interpretations coalesce with the conditioning forces of videogames to create a violent and potent form of self-conditioning. I found sanctuary in the bonfires, the respawn points where players can restore their health, equipment and upgrade themselves. With no way to pause *Dark Souls*, the fiery glow of the bonfires became synonymous with relative safety. When venturing forward the Pyromancy Flame's limited but powerful fire spells felt like a safeguard against Lordran's most severe cruelties. I began to interpret and gauge the horrors of *Dark Souls* in relation to bonfire locations and how necessary I felt it was to involve my pyromancies. Fire underpinned my safety, power and purpose in *Dark Souls*, branding itself into my being and allowing me to brand my agency into the world. In becoming attached to and reshaped by pyromancy, I forgot how unnecessary and elusive it is. Those that do not begin as pyromancers must be gifted the flame by the pyromancer Laurentius, the parasite infected Eingyi or trade for it with Snuggly the Crow (From Software 2011). Each of these non-player characters can be easily missed or killed, rendering the Pyromancy Flame missable. Through play I became conditioned to rely on the elusive art of pyromancy as the heart of my fictions, effectively disciplining myself into a pyro-centric mode of thinking, feeling and playing.



Videogame designers and scholars have discussed challenge as an effective method of engaging players (Vorderer, Hartmann & Klimmt 2003; Sweetser & Wyeth 2005; Schell 2008; Koster 2013) but relatively few have examined its potential to function as a mode of self-disciplining. Cultural theorist Sara Mosberg Iversen hints at this potential when she locates videogame challenge "in the specific relationships between a given subject and the surroundings... hence, any actual challenge is a subjective phenomenon and it may differ greatly among individuals what they find challenging or not" (2012). The skills, knowledge and adaptability of a player contribute to the degree of difficulty they experience. At its surface, the subjectivity of difficulty seems obvious, but the problem lies in the lack of specificity in discussing it. Videogame theorists Barbaros Bostant and Sertaç Öğüt are right to argue that different players require different difficulty levels (2009, p.1), but they overlook the seemingly minor decisions that personalise challenge beyond tiers. For example, the player's preference for certain fantasy archetypes and expectations for how they should be played could result in self-imposed restrictions that bleed into their material actions. Similarly, personal fears and phobias could transform areas and creatures intended to be easy into personal nightmares. Every decision brings with it game altering consequences, all of which change the reality of the videogame players are conditioned to adapt to.

Every instance of play occurs within the player's fictional genealogy. The symbolic violence of writing about videogames allows me to discuss *Dark Souls* in isolation from the multitude of other videogame fictions I have experienced, although the act of play cannot be so neatly divided. My initial decision to choose and develop my character as a pyromancer was born from a previous fascination with fire magic and 'glass cannon' high damage, low defence mage archetypes in other videogames. Ironically, my extensive experience with fire magic across other fictions misled me as I ignorantly spent vast quantities of precious souls on the "Intelligence" statistic without realising that it had no impact on the potency of pyromancies

(From Software 2011). I overlooked the itemised nature of the Pyromancy Flame, habitually assuming that the fire magic was intrinsic to my character rather than almost wholly dependent on a tool. Scholars such as videogame academic and philosopher Sarah Grey have advised resisting this kind of “thoughtless immersion” by focusing on ludonarrative dissonances<sup>5</sup> (2009, pp.3-4). Were playing *Dark Souls* an isolated act, distinct from previous experiences, perhaps I could have recognised the impracticality of my assumption. The problem with Grey's argument is that all acts of play are thoughtful, as individuals' fictional genealogies and familiarity with ludic and textual conventions inform how they play videogames. As evidenced by my unintelligent error, players can subconsciously reinforce the patterns and behaviours they have been conditioned to adhere to.

Playing a videogame represents the individual's decision to surrender themselves to its influences while actively participating in their self-reconstruction. The paradoxical nature of this interaction is clarified by media theorist Henry Jenkins when he argues that "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed in resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives" (2008, pp.3-4). In videogames, not only do players interpret and interact with fictions through a vast network of meanings and understandings drawn from other media, but they essentially become a living part of these new mythologies. Every role they assume, every challenge they face and every videogame element they experience forms a part of each player's unique history. Videogames condition players by naturalising their fantastical experiences through play, rendering these experiences personally meaningful despite their superficially unreal appearance. By discussing conditioning to this extent I inevitably risk understating the player's agency, thus echoing Celia Pearce's dismissal of materially non-interactive videogame elements as a type of enforced passivity (2004, p.148). It is important

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<sup>5</sup> Ludonarrative dissonance refers to contradictions between the narrative and ludic aspects of a videogames (Hocking, 2007).

to acknowledge that even aspects of videogames that appear outside of direct player control contribute to the narratives and meanings players generate. As new media scholar Kevin Veale reminds us, even the most linear videogames have affective dimensions and gameplay mechanics that have meaning beyond the physical act of play (2012).

Videogames expose the fictive nature of the self by conditioning players to constantly reconstruct themselves. Traditional conceptions of role-play position it as either the statistical growth of the player character or the performative enactment of being someone or something else (Williams, Kennedy & Moore 2011, p.173). Many scholars have superficially used these qualities to justify their framing of role-playing games as tools for escapism (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2008). Discussing synthetic online worlds, Edward Castronova pushes aside ideas of transcending real life in favour of emphasising the "move toward a state in which there really is no barrier to a complete translation of every interpersonal human phenomenon on Earth into the digital space" (2005, p.48). In terms of the individual, this act of translation already occurs as videogames are as much about navigating fictions that comprise the self as those offered by the medium. This avenue of analysis has been pursued to some extent by psychologists and videogame academics Katherine Bessi re, Fleming Seay and Sara Kiesler in their assessment of the typical MMORPG player as "an amalgamation of their actual and ideal selves" (2007, pp.530-1), but their emphasis on the "ideal" is unnecessarily restrictive. Videogames confront players with their weaknesses by illustrating the consequences of their (in)actions and (mis)understandings. Importantly, videogames manifest these consequences in interactive spaces, where players are free to review, replay and rewrite the fictions they have generated. In doing so, they are imbued with the agency to reconstruct the fictions that shape them.



Videogame violence offers a potent mode of engaging with fiction, as videogames condition players into alternative modes of thinking, feeling and playing while players become complicit in this process through their material actions and interpretations. These violent metamorphoses are anchored in players' fictional genealogies, as their interactions with videogames bleed into the present to continually and brutally reshape them. While I have critiqued the necessity of abstracting this process from play and embraced the symbolic violence involved, I have neglected examining the body as a part of the transformative powers of play. The body is integral to play, but its degree of significance varies from moment to moment. This is not to deny its ever-presence during play, but to acknowledge that players' fictional genealogies are messy and indeterminate. It is thus necessary to extend my symbolic violence to the stories told and experienced by my and others' bodies, embracing the reality that no recount of played experiences can holistically encompass all its dimensions. My selective analysis of my embodied experience of play is therefore geared to explore the physicality of videogames' transformative violence by magnifying the moments when it was most potent in the process of generating meaning.

### **Embodiment**

"The sun is a wondrous body... If only I could be so grossly incandescent!" — Solaire of Astora

As I entered Chaos Witch Quelaag's Domain, a giant spider's nest, I found two Hollow praying on the ground, seemingly unaware of the mound of maggot eggs growing from their backs. Their prayers and the narrator's initial contextualisation of my journey as a pilgrimage led me to conclude that they were failed pilgrims, infected and malformed in the lands of the pyromancers. Only in retrospect have I come to understand that those mutilated figures were morbid reflections, foreshadowing my metaphorical and literal infection. The irony is, in order to 'ascend' or upgrade my pyromancies, I had to

descend through paths paved with blood, faeces, puss, slime, toxic bog, diseased rats, blighted townsfolk, giant leeches and other abominations. It was easy to forget my initial desire for survival and human connection in the face of my growing hunger for power and control. Like the half-spider Chaos Witch Quelaag, I maintained some semblance of a human visage but increasingly grew my identity on monstrous foundations. Like her infected servants, I became willing to forego any personal sense of humanity in favour of becoming more than human. In the words of the Blightpus infected pyromancer Eingyi, I would become "worse than Undead, we are diseased, and unwanted" (From Software 2011). The extent of my conditioning and monstrous reconstruction was clear when I intentionally allowed maggots to feed on my flesh and infect me with Blightpus so I could join and reap the rewards from the pyromantic Chaos Servant Covenant (From Software, 2011).



In conditioning how players interact with videogames, the medium necessarily shapes how players use their bodies. Postmodern literary academic Katherine Hayles conceives of the post-human individual as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (1999, p.3), creating a cybernetic frame that game studies scholars can comfortably adapt around the player. Hayles' description of the post-human individual inspires thoughts of players as increasingly artificial entities, veering further from the natural as they rebuild and modify themselves by interacting with technologies. Unsurprisingly, both she and videogame theorists have questioned the potentially dystopian loss of agency and identity this could bring (Hayles 1999, p.281; Schmeink 2009) but, as new media sports scholar Darcy Cree Plymire

argues, there is no reason to accept this destructive portrayal of the post-human (2009). Videogames condition players to physically control their experience through button inputs, control schemes, specific types of sensory awareness and other modes of functioning that allow the individual to navigate and interact with virtual spaces. Superficially, this implies the inhuman mechanisation of players, but a broader perspective reveals the fundamentally human consequence of conditioning players toward appropriate patterns of play. In short, the technological aspects of player control disappear in the face of their engagement with fiction (Farrow & Iacovides 2012, p.7). In learning how to physically interact with videogames, players' bodies are conditioned to access interactive fictions and the unique modes of self-exploration they enable.

In *Dark Souls*, my body's adherence to specific patterns of play began as the result of being conditioned to survive its brutality. I played with my left index finger firmly planted on the Xbox 360 controller's left bumper button, keeping my Eagle Shield between me and any potential danger. My left thumb habitually moved in a triangular formation from the left analogue stick to the left and right directional pad buttons, as I shifted between melee weapon, shield, sorcery and pyromancy as necessary. I adopted an inverted triangle formation for my right thumb, shifting between right analogue stick camera control, B button dodging and haphazard X button mashing when in need of healing. The back triggers, A button and Y button were luxuries, A being used only to collect items after danger had passed and the triggers and Y for the rare cases where I felt confident enough to unleash slow two-handed or heavy attacks. I treated these as luxuries because they unnecessarily exposed me to enemy attacks. As my character's statistics grew and I retread *Dark Souls'* earlier areas, I found my fingers breaking habit and shifting toward these buttons more frequently. This gradual transition was the precursor to my voluntary Blightpus infection, marking a shift from desperation and fear into apathy and greed. These patterns of play are not prewritten or

prescribed, but instead emerged naturally as I played and formed habits that suited my preferences, character's statistics and strengths as a *Dark Souls* player. Importantly, my body was conditioned through play without requiring my conscious acknowledgment of it.

The player's understandings of videogame fictions, both conscious and subconscious, are reflected in their embodied reactions to videogames' ludic and textual dimensions. While control schemes evidence the most obvious case of bodily conditioning, subtler responses to videogames demonstrate a more pervasive form of conditioning and engagement with fiction. Phenomenological approaches have fruitfully explored play in terms of the player's awareness and navigation of virtual spaces (Taylor 2003; Sommerseth 2007), but often fall short in their clinical discussions of immersion. Writing on the interactions between virtual bodies and embodied experiences of desire, autoethnographer Jenny Sunden recounts her encounter with another *World of Warcraft* (2004) player. She recalls a female player telling her how her heart raced at their meeting, describing their quickening heartbeat as "a collapse between the body of the player and that of the avatar", situating it within a constellation of "transmedia desires [that] are an intimate part of many people's everyday lives and media consumption" (2012, p.167). Sunden's exceptionally personal analysis of online desire is a refreshingly human account of the intimacy of play and exemplifies the potent conditioning powers of videogames that enable immersion. The final boss' blade may not pierce the screen and impale the player, but the experience lingers in the player's sweaty palms and short breaths. Videogames condition players' bodies to interact with their fictions, constituting a form of violence that warps the body without needing the player's consent.

The physicality of play enables a necessarily violent yet accessible form of engaging with fiction. Obeying my usual ritual, I checked my equipment and, with stilled breath, stepped through the Demon Ruin's fog door. I found myself standing on a cliff peering at a molten

mass of tentacles. The mass remained motionless and lacked the usual boss' health bar. Leaning forward in my seat, I cautiously pushed the left analogue stick forward until I reached a witch's corpse beside an altar with a shiny item above her. I habitually grabbed the item, traditional Chaos Witch apparel, thinking nothing of it. My eyes widened and grip tightened as the boss music broke the silence and its health bar stretched across the screen. My anxiety intensified and the surge of adrenaline pushed me to flee as fire and tentacles rained down on me, each strike devouring most of my health. Before I knew that the ugly fiery mass was the deformed son of Izalith and the corpse I ransacked was his sister's (From Software 2011), my body knew that I had done something really wrong. My instinctive bodily reactions guided me through the battle, mixing virtual experiences with sweat, twitches and bated breaths to internalise the depths of monstrosity that I thought myself accustomed to. I did not need to consider the gravity of my misdeed when I could feel it in my body.

Play calls into question the individual's bodily relation to the videogame and the virtual bodies which they inhabit. By conditioning players to use their bodies in the process of generating meaning, videogames naturalise the connection between physical interaction and virtual reactions. For most players, there is nothing innately strange about having an inhuman body move in tandem with their inputs. The often overlooked nature of the body and the importance of acknowledging it become clear when examining Foucault's positioning of genealogy as a method of recounting the past that is "situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (1987, p.83). He characterises the body as both signifying and being eroded by history. In a similar sense, the player's body reflects the sets of contingencies that underlie their played experiences. The intimate encounter Sunden describes, for example, reinforces how the virtual becomes etched in the physical through play. Foucault's reference to the destruction of the body can be translated to the symbolic

violence of writing about videogames, as player bodies become marginalised the further played experiences are abstracted from the immediate embodied realities of play.

The dual bodies players often inhabit, both their physical form and virtual manifestation as avatars, further complicate explorations of the bodily transformations that underlie play. Videogames paradoxically emphasise the individual's body by demanding specific physical inputs while confronting players with fundamentally alien virtual bodies in the form of avatars or relatively abstract first-person shells. The virtual bodies players inhabit can function as vessels for immersion while simultaneously evoking issues of racism, sexism and other social inequalities by prioritising certain bodies over others (Leonard 2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory 2009). As a consequence, players encounter, inhabit and interrogate multiple bodies through play. The specificity of the player becomes vaguer as their embodied experiences extend into numerous virtual bodies. The role of a player therefore entails a degree of fluidity, where the boundaries of the body are constantly called into question and challenged in each play session. This multiplicity of self is uniquely fostered by videogame violence's potent form of engaging with fiction.

By using the body as a site for enacting and experiencing fantastical and superficially unreal fictions, players develop a degree of fluidity that can weaken rigid social preconceptions and effectively transform their bodies. I dismissed *Ceaseless Discharge* as just another fire demon before I found the Orange Charred Ring with the following description:

Since his sores were inflamed by lava  
from birth, his witch sisters gave him  
this special ring. But fool that he is,  
he readily dropped it... (From Software 2011)

In Ceaseless Discharge I found another monstrous mirror, reflecting the body behind the controller. As with my created character, Ceaseless Discharge was born a pyromancer. As with my character and I, he was inherently separated from the Chaos Witches by a retrospectively obvious quality, maleness. From the opening moments of *Dark Souls* I sought to join the Chaos Witches, mistaking their covenant as a refuge for the human, never once questioning the historically gendered implications of "witch". I found Ceaseless Discharge by his sister's corpse, vigilantly guarding it in the same way I attempted to preserve the thousand year old mythology of the Chaos Witches. It is not that my sex was meaningless during play, but that in the face of the countless metamorphoses I experienced it seemed less rigid in ludic space. Play is real but personal, allowing experiences in places that can undermine otherwise dominant social paradigms.<sup>6</sup> Just as Izalith's son's incompatibility with the female witches was mediated by a magic ring, mine was negotiated through the fictions I artificially generated and perpetuated through play.

The conditioning that occurs in the interaction between players and videogames thus extends to the physicality of the player's existence, radically transforming how they think, feel and play. It is easy to lose sight of the violent nature of this conditioning because it is so ingrained in the act of play that it does not require the player's conscious acknowledgment of it to function. Conditioning, as I have portrayed it, is not explicit brainwashing but a force that lurks on the borders of the self, seeping in and changing it gradually. At its most violent, it occupies a place similar to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. Articulating it in appropriately violent terminology, she explains its presence in relation to death: "A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death". Instead, the "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to recognise that as a white male playing a primarily single-player experience, there were much less obstacles before my embodiment than other players might experience. My eventual jarring realisation that males are historically incompatible with the Chaos Witches pales in comparison to the way harassment and alienation can violently jerk physical player bodies into virtual worlds (Chisholm 2006; Burgess, Stermer & Burgess 2007; Peck, Ketchum & Embrick 2011).

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands" (1982, p.3). The abject, in this context, is found within the necessary filth of existence that individuals compartmentalise to continue living. New media and film critic Bernard Perron cites horror videogames as spaces where players interface with the abject (2009, p.125), where it exists as a pervading sense of wrongness that haunts play (Spittle 2011, p.314). Videogame conditioning has the potential to lure the abject elements of the body and interior self into the open by providing players with seemingly safe spaces, superficially divorced from the real and seemingly immune from scrutiny.

I initially felt safe detaching myself from *Dark Souls*' decay, resigning all hints of my abject monstrosity to the periphery. As a Chaos Servant, I became part of a cult of Undead united by their worship of the daughters of Izalith. Having killed Quelaag, all they had left was her similarly half-spider sister, ambiguously referred to as the 'Fair Lady'. Recognising my Blightpus and mutilated flesh as a symbol of devotion, Eingyi confided in me that the Fair Lady became severely ill after swallowing the great Blightpus in what he perceived as an act of sympathy toward the infected (From Software 2011). I was disturbed by her half-grotesque figure and confused by the contradiction between Eingyi's narrative and the ease in which I became infected. The sickly spider-woman represented the pyromancy covenant, a pale shadow of the Chaos Witches I had hoped to find a sense of community with. Nonetheless, I followed Eingyi's instructions and fed her my itemised humanity in exchange for powerful pyromancies and in the vain hope of rendering her more human. Having defeated Ceaseless Discharge and recognised him as a cruel parody of my futile self-determined quest, I became keenly aware of my own degradation on the path to stronger pyromancy. In playing *Dark Souls* I have surrendered myself to it, allowing it into both flesh and mind to warp how I think, feel and play. I continued playing *Dark Souls* because I, like other players, enjoy the act of play. Like other players, I am a metaphorical masochist.



The symbolic violence involved in writing about *Dark Souls*' offers me a thin safeguard between my critical analysis of the videogame as a scholar and my dehumanisation as a player. Instead of eluding *Dark Souls*' decay by clinging to what I perceived as the transcendental quality of fire, I became enveloped by it and ingested it. The Blightpus infected body I temporarily chose to wear was but a glimpse of my developing dehumanisation. My hopeful fictions became increasingly burdened by my growing greed, apathy and morbid curiosity. As *Dark Souls* conditioned me toward metaphorical degeneration, my material actions and interpretations functioned as a form of self-disciplining that only accelerated this movement toward decay. The metaphorical murder I committed and the metaphorical masochism I exhibited bled into each other, underlying my mutually metamorphic interaction with *Dark Souls*. The potency of videogame violence was reflected in the heart of *Dark Souls*' decay, that is, me. It consciously and subconsciously conditioned me to weave my monstrosity into a deeply personal experience, signifying a unique mode of engaging with fiction mutually constructed between player and videogame. In other words, I was going Hollow.

## Conclusion

### Going Hollow

“No-one will sing thy praises, but yet thy greatness shall live on. For it shall be my purpose, to remember all thou hast done for us” — Elizabeth

My analytical deconstruction of *Dark Souls* and the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction, hinges on the fundamentally human interaction between player and videogame. I have avoided oversimplifying this interaction in a binary of good and bad, instead demonstrating the medium's unique power through the transformations both players and videogames undergo during play. Embracing the symbolic violence of writing about videogames, I fused heavily Foucauldian inspired post-structuralist theory with autoethnography to articulate and examine the changes I enacted and experienced as both player and scholar.

As part of my conclusion, I will embrace my symbolic violence and explicitly combine Foucauldian notions of genealogy with autoethnographic writing in a self-reflexive analysis of my dehumanisation in *Dark Souls*. It is not that my experiences are more valuable than any other, but that only by articulating them can I hope to build on the work of others and encourage a stronger turn into the human elements of videogames and play.



My thesis is punctuated with the echoes of the non-player characters that accompanied my experiences of *Dark Souls*. These characters were my touchstones for humanness in the

otherwise inhumane realm of Lordran, standing diametrically opposed to the vague notion of “Hollow” that haunted me. Neither they, nor Hollowness, can be adequately defined as purely ludic or textual in nature. I echoed Frasca's rejection of the ludology versus narratology debate, but found value in it as a symptom of ongoing conflicts between formalist and post-structuralist approaches to game studies. In both play and writing, I came to resist the formalist impulse toward dissecting and containing play in absolute categories demonstrated by scholars such as Juul and Lizardi. No gauge can accurately map the changing significance of non-player characters and the threat of Hollowness to me, as both player and scholar. Countering formalist assumptions about play allowed me to dismantle oversimplifications about play and reveal its violent and volatile nature. Humanness and Hollowness were elusive concepts, constantly rewritten as I played *Dark Souls*. Through a mixture of post-structuralism and autoethnography, I embraced and found meaning in the messiness of play, enabling a productive dialogue about videogame violence.

By adapting Barthes' rejection of authorial intentionality to game studies, I relocated meaning in the act of play. I made sense of humanness and Hollowness in *Dark Souls* through a dual process of destabilisation, where my material actions and interpretations altered what fictions and meanings were generated through play. I initially associated the human-like characters with safety, interpreting the Firelink Shrine where most of them resided as a bastion of safety (From Software 2011). These interpretations bled into my material actions, as I found myself retreating to the shrine whenever overwhelmed by *Dark Souls*' looming dangers. The representational violence I inflicted and suffered as a result of my material interactions with Hollow enemies fed into my interpretation of Hollowness as an inhuman and destructive force. In this sense, material actions and interpretations coalesced with the countless sources of influences that Barthes' describes as shaping texts (2014, p.4) to produce a uniquely violent and volatile mode of engaging with fiction. In this, I reinforced players' agency and their

centrality in play, highlighting a key aspect of the medium's unique potency. Lordran and its inhabitants gained meaning only in the context of my played experiences, as I carved myself into the very fabric of *Dark Souls*.

I tempered Barthes' destruction of the author by adapting Foucault's authorship theory to reveal the personal and productive play space left in the author's absence. In violently transforming the human and Hollow through my material actions and interpretations as a player, I enmeshed myself in an intimate act of play that I must necessarily defile as a scholar. In transcribing played experiences into text, I inevitably steal fictions and meanings from the processes and people who generate them. I embrace, but do not negate, this symbolic violence by delving into the personal fictions I experienced as a player and presenting them as possible permutations of play. By reframing videogame analysis as a form of violence, I simultaneously reveal the uniquely challenging reality of game studies and advocate a solution through the development of player-scholars. The division between human and Hollow eroded as I became conscious of the violent hunger for souls the Hollow and I shared. I came to understand Hollow as degenerative forms of me, separated only by their lack of agency in rewriting their fictions. I transgress against my experiences by abstracting my confrontation with Hollowness with theory and text, setting aside the multitude of (mis)steps and (mis)conceptions that led me to my degeneration in order to express the intimacy and transformative potential of play.

By embracing the symbolic violence that underlies my double role as both player and scholar, I laid bare the transformative violence that underpins play and the act of critically analysing it. The productive potential Barthes and Foucault attribute to the dissolution of the author figure manifests in videogames to satisfy what Cover describes as audiences' long-standing desires for interactivity (2003, pp.140, 144). The uniquely interactive nature of videogame fictions

mandates immersion and intimacy, as my material actions and interpretations were integral to *Dark Souls*' capacity to generate fictions and meanings. This practical sense of immersion doubled as a unique form of accessibility, as my thoughts, feelings and actions naturally bled into my understandings of humanness and Hollowness. Videogame violence is uniquely potent, both in its transformative potential and in the ease in which players' can engage in these metamorphoses.

Castells' theoretical musing on the constructed nature of reality is particularly relevant in the context of play. My agency as a player manifested in my violent reconstruction of *Dark Souls*, in lieu of the author figure erased by Barthes' and Foucault's theories. I strove to keep the human and Hollow distinct, protecting my bastion of safety from Lordran's cruelty. I interacted with Griggs of Vinhelm frequently. I had saved him from some mindless Hollow and he followed me to Firelink Shrine, where he swore to stay as long as he had spells to teach me (From Software 2011). He quickly became my favourite character. Giving into old habits as a role-playing game enthusiast and completionist, I purchased every spell he had to offer for its own sake. My excessive consumption devoured his purpose and sealed his fate. With nothing left to give me, he ventured into Sen's Fortress in search of his old master Big Hat Logan (From Software 2011). I found him there, a shambling husk weakly but desperately trying to kill me. My material actions and interpretations violently reshaped the ludic and textual dimensions of *Dark Souls* and rewrote its fictions and meanings. They also killed Griggs. The intimacy of play underlies the inescapability of its violence.

I touched on the potential for videogame violence to function as a socially transformative mode of engaging with fiction, drawing on Holmes' analysis of massively multiplayer spaces to reveal how online connectivity and interactions between players allow fictions and meanings to bleed into each other. Allowing your character to wear Hollow flesh disallows

this possibility, at least materially. This restriction largely refocused the scope of my analysis on my decay as a player. The ease at which I became disconnected from others by losing my body to Hollowness reinforced the violence and volatility of play. The potential to materially interact with others' experiences almost functions as a material manifestation of symbolic violence, as players gain the capacity to tangibly warp each other's fictions. While my expectations and understandings of *Dark Souls* were reshaped by conversations with other players, my solitude within the videogame focused my experience on the interaction between the videogame and I. I came to appreciate the violence I inflicted, and felt oddly compelled to experience the violence *Dark Souls* could inflict on me. In privileging my experiences as both player and scholar, I knowingly and necessarily commit symbolic violence, enacting a relatively subtle form of social violence.

Having confessed to metaphorical murder, I inverted the lens to explore the metaphorical masochism that led to me allowing *Dark Souls* to etch itself into me. In choosing to play *Dark Souls* I rendered myself vulnerable to being conditioned into alternative modes of thinking, feeling and playing. My emerging Hollowness was a by-product of the mutually metamorphic interaction between the videogame and I, as the player. I critically engaged with my violent transformation through an approach inspired by Foucault's concept of genealogy. I began by adapting his metaphorical description of the past as a palimpsest to individuals, reconfiguring their played experiences of videogames as personal fictions. In trying to stave off Hollowness, I sought in vain to define it. Many aspects of *Dark Souls* imply Hollowness, but none confirm it. Instead, the evidence of my descent into Hollowness is found in the seemingly minor instances during play that illustrate the erosion of my empathy, patience and morality. Adapting Foucault's theory to examine the human elements of play allowed me to explore its transformative effects. The potency of videogame violence was inscribed into me, repeatedly scrawling itself over my personal genealogy and rendering me both a player and palimpsest.

As I branded myself into *Dark Souls*, it engraved itself into me. The intimate and pervasive interaction between players and videogames signifies a messy collision between the 'real' and virtual. By acknowledging the misapplication and unproductive use of Huizinga's magic circle in game studies discourse, I shattered the illusionary walls that bracketed *Dark Souls'* decay from me as a player. In time, I grew accustomed to the language and metrics of *Dark Souls'* commodification of human values and aspects (From Software 2011). In doing so, I grew increasingly comfortable with the artificial deconstruction and oversimplification of humanness. My symbolic violence as a videogame scholar risks implying that, as a player-scholar, I consistently engaged with *Dark Souls* with an open mind and unwavering commitment to detail. In truth, during my roughly one hundred hour run, it eventually became easy to buy into *Dark Souls'* commodification of humanness. As I placed more value into enhancing statistics and collecting valuable items, I grew increasingly detached from Lordran's human-like inhabitants. I traded empathy for apathy and kindness for greed, unknowingly allowing myself to be conditioned toward a state of Hollowness.

I explored videogame conditioning through its double repercussions for the player to illustrate the real potency of play. I began with conventional understandings of reward and punishment mechanics detailed by Salen and Zimmerman, before extending every critique of players' as a challenge or reaffirmation of their thoughts, feelings and method of playing. The double nature of *Dark Souls'* consequences made slipping toward Hollowness seamless as, like Thomas and Brown argue (2009, p.42), my character and I overlapped. Keeping in line with *Dark Souls'* commodification of humanness, I strategically directed my violence toward easy targets with hefty quantities of souls on offer. I found a soothing sense of joy in the otherwise vicious Lordran by repeatedly separating and destroying the respawning protectors of Darkroot Garden. Despite their human visages, the protectors were not other players nor were

they named or communicative non-player characters (From Software 2011). I saw little reason to feel guilty and, with the vast quantity of souls I harvested, felt justified in my actions and interpretations. Where I once feared *Dark Souls*' ambiguous aura of decay and sought solace amongst the other human-like Undead, I now found peace in my ruthless efficiency. Ironically, my inhumane actions allowed me to grow my 'human' statistics, reinforcing my newly developing utilitarian outlook on *Dark Souls* and its denizens. Through the double repercussions of play, I was conditioned toward Hollowness. Through my material actions and interpretations, I subconsciously embraced this.

Where I became complicit in this conditioning process is in interpreting *Dark Souls*' world and characters through a utilitarian perspective. I denounced the mechanisation of game studies by formalists such as Bogost, instead acknowledging that players' genealogies reshape or reinforce specific modes of thinking, feeling and playing. I began to ignore my associations between *Dark Souls*' characters and my ideas of humanness in favour of efficiently gaining precious souls and tactically bolstering my character's statistical strength. Enamoured by greed, I started to reinterpret the friendly non-player characters based on their utility. With what I assumed was most of their dialogue exhausted, I started to weigh their use alive against the value of the unique items their corpses would drop. My interpretation of them warped, as they went from signifying safety to testing my inhibitions. The same pyromantic flame that guided me against *Dark Souls*' cruelty tempted me to burn and devour the other denizens of Lordran. Knowing that everyone would respawn and my items would persist in the "new game +" (From Software 2011), I became willing to kill my allies. Complicit in my inhuman conditioning, I allowed apathy and greed to intertwine and transform me from well-meaning but desperate survivor into a Hollow.

My material actions and interpretations fed into my conditioning to render me Hollow. My



adaption of Foucault's genealogy takes what Jenkins portrays as the everyday media mythologies individuals envelop themselves in and applies it to play, where players become living parts of their own mythologies. To me, being Hollow was less a definite state and more a malleable metaphor that I used to grapple with my dehumanisation through play. The voices of my allies in *Dark Souls* resound in the quotations beneath each sub-heading in this thesis. My memories of *Dark Souls* are filtered through the characters I engaged with, and my radical transformations are marked by my interactions with them. Each ally was once a fragment of humanness to me, offering me hope in an otherwise depressing and decaying world. When I killed the Crestfallen Warrior, the priestess Rhea of Thorolund, Griggs of Vinheim and his mentor Big Hat Logan, I was wracked with guilt. They died as mindless Hollow, and I mourned the loss of their humanity (From Software 2011). In my many hours of play, this guilt faded into apathy and greed. I sought to destroy my allies, half-convinced that their treasures would grant me a permanence that their fragile existences could not. Submitting to *Dark Souls'* decay, I attempted to embrace my degeneration.

Between the metaphors of murder and masochism, where how I think, feel and act as a player coalesces with what I am conditioned to think, feel and act during play, I wrestled with my dehumanisation. Drawing on Castronova's analysis of online social interactions, I positioned the connection between players and the fictional genealogies they create as a natural extension, rather than a transcendence of, their human behaviours, values and understandings. With hesitation, I severed the tail of and killed the unloved and abandoned Crossbreed Priscilla, an entirely optional boss. As she died, she asked: "Ah... But, why... What seeketh thee?" (From Software 2011). Her final question left me with a feeling of mild self-disgust. My answer was petty: items, for my collection.

By the time I faced the well-armed Shiva of the East, I was not bound by this same inhibition.

Having almost completely succumbed to apathy after my long hours of play, I killed him with little remorse and happily pocketed both his and his guardian's items. As he fell, he uttered: "you poor fool... You won't be able to run far enough..." (From Software 2011). Having defeated his allies, the guardians of the forest, I treated his threat lightly. I did not consider that the danger I could not outrun would be my Hollowness, that is, the cruel disconnect from my humanness as a person and player. I stained my once hopeful fictions with blood and perverted the meanings generated through my inhumane material actions and interpretations.

I situated Kristeva's theory of the abject in the context of play, locating it in the parts of themselves that player's compartmentalise in order to keep playing. It became rare for me to be reduced to my burnt and decayed Hollowed flesh, so I committed my most inhumane acts wearing my human visage. I did not find the abject in my character's body, but in the sudden revulsion to my inhumane mode of play. My final victim was the blind friendly giant, Hawkeye Gough, who helped me fell the Black Dragon Kalameet (From Software 2011). As he sat cross-legged, carving wooden figures, I struck him from behind. I took advantage of his blindness, changing position quietly, before hacking at his back. At the moment of his death, I recalled his earlier allusion to his friend, the mentally handicapped Giant Blacksmith. I was hit with a sudden feeling of wrongness as I contemplated the implications of my actions. I never confused the acts of violence I enacted within *Dark Souls* with literal violence, but I recoiled at my capacity to suppress my humanness in the face of the needless cruelty I was willing to commit for little gain. I did not play at being Hollow, I became it.

The threat of becoming Hollow illustrates the potency of videogame violence as a mode of engaging with fiction by offering a malleable metaphor for players' dehumanisation through play. Unsettled by my degeneration and frustrated by the inhumane material actions and interpretations I marred my fictions with, I chose to end my first play-through. The

pyromantic fictions and human connections that inspired me to press onward amidst the despair were devoured by my apathy and greed in the late hours of my play-through. Aware of my descent, I held tightly to the embers of my original motivation and fought my way to the site of the First Flame and final boss. Utilising my pyromancies, I defeated him and was presented with a final binary choice. Sacrifice myself to rekindle the First Flame and keep the Age of Fire going, or let all fall to darkness by simply walking away (From Software 2011). Recognising the centrality of flame to me and desiring to repent, I sacrificed myself. But this scripted choice and my conflagration are of little importance. What matters is that, moments after, I woke up in my cell at the start of a “new game +” (From Software 2011).

The cycles that motion players from one play-through to the next in *Dark Souls* reflect the individual’s capacity to always rewrite and be rewritten by the act of play. This metamorphic potential offers players a unique degree of agency in reshaping the fictions and meanings they interact with and, by extension, themselves. By playing *Dark Souls*, I became Hollow. By playing it again, I became something else. Through play, I have transformed into and experienced a multitude of things. I am not exceptional in this regard because all players, regardless of their mindsets or capabilities, undergo and enact radical metamorphoses through play. In other words, the intimate act of playing videogames makes it possible to simultaneously explore and transform fictions, meanings and the self while resisting institutional control. The symbolic violence I enacted to convey my experiences has been necessary to step beyond moral judgments and formalist structures to convey the mutually transformative potential of videogame violence.



While it is limited in scope, my exploration of videogame violence and the mutually metamorphic relationship between players and videogames opens many avenues for analysis. The diversity of the medium cries out for further exploration into how videogame violence manifests as a potent mode of engaging with fiction across a variety of videogames and genres. Further studies interconnecting the social violence involved in multiplayer videogames with the transformative violence of play would prove fruitful in understanding player agency within the context of others' played experiences. Another area which demands further investigation lies in analysing how the body affects and is affected by the transformative violence that underlies play.

The transformative violence of play is not a future possibility, but a present reality. With only a baseline mechanical literacy, players can skirt institutional control and their everyday contexts to interact with realms of possibilities and meanings that question or reaffirm who they are, how they feel and what they choose to do. Players' material actions and interpretations further complicate this process, as their agency allows them to navigate and rewrite both videogame and personal fictions. As the popularity of videogames grow, an increasing multitude of individuals are undergoing radical transformations offered by play. Through my analytical deconstruction of *Dark Souls* I have refined a language for articulating the possible meanings this mode of engaging with fiction generates. By interrogating play and how scholars write about it, I have bridged theoretical depth with everyday experiences of play to explore the mutual metamorphoses involved in the interaction between players and videogames. Ultimately, even in its relative youth, videogames offer a uniquely potent and violently transformative mode of engaging with fiction. Understanding and unpacking videogames' meanings to the individual relies on discarding notions of the absolute, enmeshing ourselves in play and embracing the violence and volatility of play.

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