Wanderer Above the Sea of Desolation: The Romantic Ruin in Contemporary Dark Fantasy

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WANDERER ABOVE THE SEA OF DESOLATION: THE ROMANTIC RUIN IN CONTEMPORARY DARK FANTASY

What is Worldbuilding?

Of all the subsets belonging to the speculative genre of literature -- among them science fiction, horror, alternate history, and fantasy -- the latter has attained the unfortunate reputation of being the least seriously-taken in the realm of scholarship. It is deemed too unrealistic, too unlike the real world; the definition of the word “fantasy,” after all, is equated to not only the non-real, but also the impossible.

But if this is true, then why are fantasy authors so fixated on creating fictional universes possessing sensibility-- fantastical worlds whose conventions aim to be comprehensible despite being so distinctly removed from the physical laws of the real world?

This illustrates the motivation behind the practice of worldbuilding. Worldbuilding, as utilized in literature, is defined as the creative exercise of designing a fully-realized fictional universe from which stories may operate. From grand cosmological and mythological histories to the political rivalries of fabricated national entities, worldbuilding encompasses every facet of a story’s setting. Due to this all-encompassing nature, worldbuilding is most commonly utilized in the genre of speculative literature, especially sci-fi and fantasy, where the establishment of a fantastical yet sensible world is a necessary step in creating stories that can feasibly exist in that world.

The term “sensible,” however, may potentially be reductive to the character of speculative literature’s most extraordinary form: Fantasy, particularly high fantasy, where the physical laws of the real world are often forgone and authors are pushed to their creative extremes, seeking fantastical solutions for both fantastical and real-world problems. Oftentimes,
these fantastical worldbuilding conventions are expressed through languid, heavy-handed exposition and colorful, winding descriptions. As part of the high fantasy tradition, outlandish and otherworldly stories necessitate a well-developed and complex world; these worlds are then often presented to the reader in generous descriptions and copious amounts of text.

However, worldbuilding in works belonging to the dark fantasy subgenre of fantasy fiction complicates this notion of creating complex, living worlds by purposely presenting its settings as barren. These settings not only subvert the often superfluous high fantasy literary tradition; they refute it entirely. Dark fantasy settings are almost always depicted as abandoned, broken-down, and desolate-- a far cry from the wondrously bright, bustling worlds of classic high fantasy stories. Exposition through subtle imagery, somber ambiance, and little pieces of lore picked up organically throughout a story is the mode by which worldbuilding in dark fantasy settings is expressed.

This then poses the essential worldbuilding question, prompted by the desolated state of dark fantasy settings: Why create a grand civilization, only to desecrate it?

*The Legacy of Romanticism in Contemporary Fantasy Fiction*

In order to understand the underlying literary properties of novel forms of storytelling, we are inclined to look to the past. Within the grim and gritty elements of its setting, dark fantasy worlds contain echoes of the long-standing Romantic literary tradition. The Romantic fascination with ruins and fragmentation, founded by a philosophical and artistic interest in temporality, longing, and legacy, along with a deep reverence for the natural world is embedded into the infrastructure of dark fantasy settings-- settings that are markedly set in a present fixated on a long-lost past. Ruins, being a classic set piece in dark fantasy worlds, populate the background of
dark fantasy stories, while fragmentation, lapses in the reader’s knowledge of the setting, maintain a thematic undercurrent in the progression of dark fantasy narratives. Thus, in order to understand the effectiveness of worldbuilding facilitating narrative storytelling in dark fantasy settings, one must look to its individual components—impressions of Romantic imagery and iconography, painting the dismal background of dark fantasy worlds.

This marriage of Romantic scholarship and fantastical worldbuilding is emblematized in the setting of the 2016 dark fantasy role-playing video game *Dark Souls 3*, where players take on the mantle of an obscure hero, facing the challenges brought about by a world approaching its apocalypse. The added complication of the video game medium—a form of literature dependent on player participation and a combination of visual and literary media—may at first seem like a removal from the traditional literary mode of Romantic poetry. However, the video game medium’s emulation of real-life experiences facilitates a simulation of acts of perception thoroughly researched by the original Romantic scholars. This creates the possibility for narratives in dark fantasy settings to be evaluated from the lens of Romantic literary ideology.

In addition, the origin of worldbuilding has an interesting overlap with the history of the Romantic literary tradition. The use of the term began in the early 19th century when a growing interest in dramatic natural landscapes prompted the emergence of geology as a novel field of scientific study: “Our earliest evidence of it [worldbuilding] comes from 1805, when it appears to have been primarily used in describing the attempts of scientists to explain geologic formations” (“What is ‘World-Building’?”). Worldbuilding, as it was known in the early 19th century, began as a study of the real world and its geological history. However, as writers began to take interest in this growing field of study, the issue of temporality as induced by evidence of geologic time began to capture the imagination of the century’s creatives, and “By the late 19th
century, world-building had escaped from the confines of scientific jargon and was being used to describe the imaginative realm of novelists and poets” (“What is ‘World-Building’?”). Among the most prominent of these novelists and poets are members of the Romantic literary canon.

While this connection between the origins of the practice of worldbuilding and the imaginative muses of the Romantic writers is an interesting link (perhaps even an indication of Romanticism as an inherent part of contemporary fantasy’s DNA), my argument is not that literary Romanticism is a direct progenitor to contemporary fantasy fiction—although it, too, has an interesting link to the genre that allows for an intervention of fantasy literature evaluated from the lens of the Romantics. J. R. R. Tolkien, often regarded as the father of modern high fantasy fiction, established a connection to the Romantic movement with his worldbuilding theory of the Primary and Secondary World, a direct reiteration of prominent Romantic writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Primary and Secondary Imagination, adapted to fit the task of building a fictional world. Coleridge discusses this concept in his *Biographia Literaria*, writing:

> The imagination, then, I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. (172)

Coleridge’s Primary Imagination is commonly summarized as simply the day-to-day living perceptions of an individual, supplied by the finite human mind’s perpetual search for the infinite (likely supported by Edmund Burke’s theories on the infinite as a source of the Romantic sublime). The Secondary Imagination, then, is a series of reflections; as described by worldbuilding scholar Mark J. P. Wolf, it is the “imagination that uses and recombines ideas and concepts in order to create,” allowing for the artistic generation of things that do not exist in the real-world, as perceived by the Primary Imagination (381). Tolkien adapts this notion of the
Primary and Secondary Imagination through his Primary and Secondary Worlds with the notion that the Primary World is the one in which we live, while the Secondary World is the world that has been created to facilitate a work of fiction.

Moreover, this connection between the histories of worldbuilding, Romanticism, and the fantasy genre is not merely a coincidence of emergence, wherein these ideologies inevitably interacted with one another simply by virtue of simultaneously existing as a hot topic in the same 19th century intellectual circles. The underlying thematic goals of both Romanticism and fantasy fiction overlap in their relationship to the everyday, real world, as “Secondary worlds are, to some degree, versions or variations of our own world” (Wolf 63). Furthermore, “the main character in stories set in secondary worlds is often a very ordinary sort of person with whom an audience can easily relate, seeing as they are experiencing the new world vicariously through the main character,” creating narratives that may push the boundaries of real-world sensibility via its fantastical elements, yet still maintain that same sense of human imagination (Wolf 63). This experience of living in a “new world” is especially poignant in the video game medium, where the line between reader and character is blurred, combined to form a single entity: The real-world player as the in-game player-character, simultaneously participant-in and perceiver-of the simulated world in which they exist.

*An Added Complication: The Interactive Medium*

By nature, this is an interdisciplinary project, drawing upon multiple fields of study, each with varying degrees of scholarship. In the modern day, worldbuilding studies have attained a moderate degree of research interest; for example, compilations of essays like *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, and Industries* and more textbook-eseque works such as Mark J.P. Wolf’s
Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation provide foundational, encyclopedic content concerning the common terms and conventions utilized in worldbuilding.

High fantasy, while seemingly holding little serious scholarship among most literary circles, has some research dedicated to it, and a new resurgence of interest as one of the most popular genres of media in the 21st century. Little needs to be said about the long history of Romanticism and its consequent forms. The most novel aspect of this project is, indubitably, the emerging field of video game studies.

For the sake of this project, the outlook adopted on video game studies involves its unique reader interaction as a narrative to be experienced, with the additional “twist” of its multimedia, participatory form. This is not too far-fetched from the thematics of Romanticism, especially its subset, Dark Romanticism, otherwise known as Gothic literature: “Given that the Gothic is strongly thematic and often regarded as traversing and playing with boundaries, we should not be surprised by its propensity toward transmediality and its proliferation across and through generic divides” (Hughes 264). The same notions of transcendence, imagination, and metaphysical experiences that are often the subject of Romantic and Gothic works are encapsulated by the simple act of playing a video game: A simulated experience, relying on imagination and participation to facilitate a narrative.

The exercise of playing through a video game -- a series of aesthetic experiences -- can be evaluated in literature (read as a form of literature) as a mimicry of real-life experiences. The parameters of the video game medium -- as in, the actions that a player can take within the simulated world -- serve to tell a story by highlighting the facets of the in-game universe that a player can interact with. Subsequently, it is through the simulated participatory world of the
video game that the dark fantasy genre’s unique use of understatement as a form of storytelling is enunciated.

An article for the *Game Studies* journal highlights the significance of physical interactivity in creating an aesthetic experience, as opposed to non-participatory observation, as “Games obviously do not fit within a spectatorial framework” because they “are primarily to be played, not watched. If philosophy is to examine video games, it must make interactivity central to its theory of art” (Deen). This theory of art involves a transaction between the player (denoted as *agent*, an active participant in the development of a narrative) and the environment, simulated within the structure of the game’s design. It is through this framework that the unique experience of playing through a game facilitates an interesting form of narrative storytelling, created as a product of fictional worldbuilding.

*Project Scope*

Combining literary worldbuilding, Romantic ideology, and video game studies, this project presents three case studies utilizing different sub-regions in the world of *Souls*, each representing a unique form of ruin, and thus an application of Romantic principles in fantastical storytelling:

- The Classic Ruin, showcasing the history told within fantasy settings via physical ruins and its implications in a narrative concerned with temporal dissonance.
- The Reclaimed Ruin, serving as a form of symbolic storytelling achieved through images of natural reclamation calling back to the setting’s larger, mythic-scale worldbuilding.
- The Revisited Ruin, prompting narrative progression and character development parameterized by literary revisitation and fragmented temporalities.
Each of these three case studies highlights different facets of storytelling in narratives made possible by the game’s inherent worldbuilding. Utilizing various forms of the Romantic ruin, this project seeks to showcase the depth of worldbuilding in creating complex narrative possibilities in the unique literary experience of playing a video game.
CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORIC RUIN, THE PROFANED CAPITAL

The Historic Ruin

The classic vision of a ruin is an architectural monument-- a fortification large enough to delay the natural decay of time and disuse, yet bound to it nonetheless. The rate of decay of an architectural object is a function of time and maintenance. By this I mean: Architectural objects are inevitably subject to decay along the passage of time. However, the maintenance of these architectural objects works against natural decay, slowing it despite the passage of time; or, inversely, a lack of maintenance -- neglect -- accelerates decay. In the real world, the upkeep of architectural structures is maintained by humans, but the same concept can be applied to the fantasy-equivalent of whatever denizens populate the subject civilization.

Although nearly all of the regions in Dark Souls 3’s universe exist in the present as some form of ruin, the Profaned Capital, a physical region wherein the player must explore to progress through the game, embodies this classic idea of a ruin: It’s a sort of Parthenon, the skeletal remnants of what had once been home to a living civilization. Like the rest of the game’s setting, the Profaned Capital exhibits a clear European inspiration; tall columns and pillars connect roofs to floors lined with gray cobblestone, a fantastical hybrid of Greco-Roman temples and medieval keeps. However, the Capital’s architectural designs are notably rendered in less detail than other large-scale fortifications, such as the Lothric Castle region. While Lothric Castle exhibits clear Gothic iconography and luxuriously furnished, torchlit halls, the Profaned Capital is distinctly abandoned, thus appearing to be further along the state of ruin.
As part of the game’s premise, the player’s goal is to revert the world from the brink of apocalypse; however, the Profaned Capital differs from other regions in that it has *already* experienced its own collapse. Its place in the narrative’s timeline is interesting in that the moment of the Profaned Capital’s fall occurred as the world was in the progress of -- literally
and figuratively -- letting the fire die out. In the player’s present, the realm of Lothric as a whole is further along the path to apocalypse than it was when the Profaned Capital collapsed; it can be said that the Profaned Capital’s fall, triggered by its King Yhorm, one of the Lords tasked with maintaining the fire that keeps the world alive, has contributed to the dilapidated state of the world’s present. Thus, the narrative in this part of the game is not centered on the vast, transitory realm of Lothric, where all lands converge, but in a microcosm of the Souls universe: A small, human kingdom whose downfall is written within its own abandoned, crumbling walls. The Profaned Capital’s removal from the rest of the game -- both in terms of location and lore -- allows for an evaluation of its worldbuilding without the weight of other regions’ overlapping histories convoluting its own. Therefore, due to the region’s position as a ruin, the worldbuilding evident within the Profaned Capital is revealed almost solely through the use of environmental storytelling.

Romantic Fragmentation in Worldbuilding: Longing in the Player-World Relationship

Upon examining the physical background of the Profaned Capital region, aspects of Romantic imagery and aesthetic become increasingly clear, largely by virtue of its emphasis on ruins. Thomas McFarland writes in the introduction to Romanticism and the Form of Ruin that “Incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin [...] are at the very center of life” (5). Of course, this statement was meant to be understood from the context of phenomenology, with the “center of life” representing the perceiver, who sees the world as a series of incomplete objects. In the realm of the video game -- specifically Role-Playing Games like Souls whose inherent game design posits the real-world player into the role of a character -- the concept of phenomenology
can be applied to the player, who takes on the mantle of perceiver-of and participant-in the game’s narrative. Thus, by virtue of the player experiencing the game’s narrative in real-time, the purposeful fragmentation of the Profaned Capital’s setting -- its status as a *ruin* in the present world -- is perceivable to the player as a marker of purposeful worldbuilding. Upon encountering a ruin, one must ask, *How did it become this way?*

The importance of ruins in storytelling finds a deep history particularly within Romanticism. McFarland notes that the Romantic tradition, with the “cultural iconology of Wordsworth and Coleridge,” whose works were often found in a fragmented form, determined that the literary merit of fragmentation is that it evokes a “sense of longing-- which is an inner form of the perception of reality as diasparactive” (7). The word *diasparactive* or *diasparaction* is derived by McFarland from “Greek roots meaning ‘to rend in sunder or in pieces,’” and is meant to redefine the perception of life in terms of incompleteness (Furst). Literature that seeks to make sense of life also exists as a collection of fragments, an attempt to answer the longing that comes subsequent to experiencing incompleteness in one’s stream of perception.

Furthermore, Wordsworth attributes incompleteness in life and literature to the Romantic sublime: “The soul, / Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not, retains an obscure sense of possible sublimity” (“The Prelude,” lines 334-337). By maintaining sublimity, encountering fragmentation results in a relational dynamic between the external world -- the environment or aesthetic from which incompleteness exists and is presented -- and the internal world of the perceiver who experiences longing upon viewing these objects of incompleteness.

Real-world diasparaction can be simulated within the realm of the role-playing game. What McFarland calls the “diasparaction triad” of “incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin” is especially overt in *Souls’* dark fantasy setting; the entirety of Lothric has either recently
undergone or is currently undergoing some kind of ruination. Throughout the narrative, the player sees glimpses of the world that existed before the fires began going out. It is this world -- categorized as an “Age of Fire,” a time of prosperity -- that the player is asked to restore in the present. Although the player has no personal connection to the world that precedes the present in which the game takes place, there is still a desire to uncover it, largely due to the obligatory heroism imposed upon the player by the game’s narrative design. There is a recursion of Ages of Fire and Dark in the narrative cycle of Souls’ mythos, and with the game’s present positing the player’s narrative in the midst of an incoming Dark Age, fragmentation naturally comes with the distemporality of the player who exists uniquely as both an active agent in the game’s narrative, and an outsider -- a reader -- who is contextualizing the game’s present through the history evident in the presentation of its worldbuilding. Fragmentation as showcased by the environment thus works to further player interaction with worldbuilding in the modality of the video game narrative by prompting the aesthetic experience of longing: In Souls, this is a longing to uncover the world that the player is seeking to save.

The use of fragmentation throughout the narrative may seem to completely undermine the concept of completeness, which is often regarded as an indicator for feasible worldbuilding. However, there are two reasons for fragmentation having legitimate use in Souls: First, fragmentation naturally comes with ruins; and second, by withholding information, players are prompted to spend more time exploring the world in order to make sense of its present devastation. This is one answer to the question posed by video game essayist Jason Hawreliak, who asks specifically how game “developers encourage me [the player] to explore?” (Hubbell).

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3 Wolf, Building Imaginary Worlds. See Glossary p.376
Further motivations for exploration are developed in real-time during the player’s actual progression through the region.

*The Exploratory Spirit: On Lighting*

The Profaned Capital is accessed by a crumbling stone bridge connected to the previous region: The dark, dank, and congested Irithyll Dungeon. Due to the maze-like layout and near-total darkness of the Dungeon, players often spend many frustrating hours within its enemy-patrolled, overlapping paths.

(Irithyll Dungeon, showcasing its dark, low halls, featuring a Jailer enemy at the far end of the hall)

Discovering the exit and entering the Capital evokes a sense of relief; its vast, empty space is a stark contrast to the tight, maze-like Dungeon, although both maintain elements of beneath-the-surface darkness. The Profaned Capital sits at the base of a mountain, nestled far below its high peaks; under the stone bridges of the Capital is a black, seemingly bottomless chasm, a recurring element in the game’s setting likely lending to the looming Age of Dark.
However, despite the dark ambiance maintained upon discovering the Profaned Capital, an important component of its setting is also unearthed: *Light*.

(Upon discovering a new region, their name is superimposed onto the game screen, as shown above)

Light is an extension of fire, the literal and proverbial source of life in the universe of *Souls*. Although dialogue and exposition is scant within the game’s narrative, fire and light are two recurring objects that are meticulously placed between swathes of darkness in the game’s environment; it is especially poignant within the Profaned Capital, a city appearing to slowly crumble into the infinite blackness below, but with pockets of fire and light illuminating what remains of its stone architecture. The effect of lighting in architectural spaces is detailed by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Under the section “On Lighting,” Burke lists two reasons why the sublime is evoked by “dark and gloomy” characteristics of the environment:

The first is, that darkness itself, on other occasions, is known by experience to have a greater effect on the passions than light. The second is that, to make an object very striking, we should make it as different as possible from the objects with which we have
been immediately conversant [...] but, to make the transition thoroughly striking, you ought to pass from the greatest light to as much darkness as is consistent with the uses of architecture. (102-103)

Burke’s first reason is simple: “Darkness” possesses a “greater effect on the passions than light” -- a testament to his conception of the sublime as producing elements of awe and terror. Although Burke does not detail the specific reason why the perception of darkness is a more powerful sublime than the perception of light, a study conducted by El-Nasr, et al., affirms this point. In their review of survival horror games, they found that emotional reactions such as fear, apprehension, and curiosity are created by “maintaining a state of player vulnerability, often by suspending the player in a state of incomplete knowledge.” Fear of the unknown is especially capitalized in survival horror games by making the “object of terror indistinct,” but it also finds a fitting spot among the horror elements of dark fantasy settings, such as *Souls*, wherein darkness and unknown places often house hostile populations, creating an image that suggests the possible state of the world during its Dark Age. This emotional reaction -- an aesthetic experience -- is further “enhanced through visual obscurity,” making it a prototypical aesthetic experience through a game’s visual design. Visual obscurity, an intentional part of worldbuilding and game design, is a purposeful implementation of literary fragmentation in the video game medium, forwarding the story as well as creating anticipation in gameplay. For dark fantasy media, it serves a dual purpose by also affirming classic characteristics of the genre; darkness within ruins creates a setting that suggests horror alongside melancholia.

Burke’s second reason affirms the purpose of this dark-light contrast in the natural environment: According to Burke’s aesthetic theory, contrast heightens the sublime, and within the aesthetic experience, it evokes emotional reactions out of its perceivers. In the case of the Irithyll Dungeon-to-Profaned Capital transition, this emotion is *relief*. The player is no longer
confined within the eerie, barely-lit Dungeon, but exiting into the relatively brighter, open-air Capital. These theories on lighting produce one desired outcome: A reinvigoration of the exploration spirit as clarity, recognition, and relief provide the emotional basis preceding the player’s delve into the Profaned Capital. *Souls* specifically utilizes prototypical aesthetic experiences as a method of driving not only the general narrative, but the *exploratory* one, subsequently using worldbuilding to drive game design. This is essential to understand the depth of the storytelling elements hidden in the Profaned Capital’s ruined spaces. Within the Profaned Capital, specifically, visual cues marked by lighting shifts introduce the Profaned Capital as a region meant to be explored after an escape from darkness, the path to be taken marked by pockets of fire and light.

*Population in Worldbuilding*

There is an immediate indication of the Profaned Capital being further along in a state of ruin than other places in the game: Its lack of a living populace. Save for the half-exposed tower that serves as one of the player’s checkpoints -- called “Bonfires” in *Souls* -- early in the region, filled with broken chairs and tables and ruined bookshelves, there are no remnants of homes or lived-in places; subsequently, there are no humanoid entities wandering about the place. Almost every region in the game hosts some kind of undead, skeleton-like population. Although hostile to the player, they are extremely weak, and serve more as reminders of the undead curse that has befallen the land than an actual combative challenge. This use of a recognizable population is an example of worldbuilding functioning as a storytelling device. Because the Profaned Capital hosts no such entities, it is immediately differentiated from other regions within the game; its emptiness is expressed both through its ruined setting and its population. The region -- notably, Yhorm’s palace -- is guarded by stone Gargoyles, strategically posted at bridges and entrances,
and Jailer Handmaids -- the only humanlike forms in the region, tall white-clad figures who quietly tend to the Capital’s single unruined facet: The Profaned Flame, hosted in a giant goblet at a dais in front of the palace.

The vast scene of ruination -- and emptiness, in terms of population -- creates contrast with the bright-burning Profaned Flame. From the other side of the chasm, the player can clearly see four Jailer Handmaids tending to the fire. Once the player is able to enter the palace, they find more Jailer Handmaids, all carrying lanterns containing the same bright fire. The populace’s dedication to maintaining the volatile fire, while simultaneously allowing the rest of the Capital to fall into ruin, raises worldbuilding questions on the Profaned Flame’s importance to the region’s history: Why is this the only element that escaped ruin?

The only method of answering this question is by Souls’ unique implementation of written text: The item description. In many video games, a player can interact with “items” that are used like tools; for a game like Souls, which emphasizes the development of a player’s combat skill, players can utilize various items as tools to help build their combative arsenal. This ability to open an inventory menu is one example of the complex system of player-narrative
interactions structured by game mechanics⁴, which determines how players interact with the game. In order to know what effect these items have on gameplay, they are always attached with a description of their use. However, in addition to a description of its gameplay, Souls utilizes the item description text box as a means of exposition by including a brief description of that item’s place in the universe. The Profaned Flame spell provides insight of this nature below:

This description thus reveals an important moment in the Profaned Capital’s history. After Yhorm the Giant became a Lord of Cinder, the Profaned Capital’s human population was incinerated. It can be argued that a gameplay mechanic like object descriptions can ruin the immersion of a game; especially with games like Souls that “can be understood as simulations of real-life situations” through its logical progression, the ability to simply read the backstory of the setting from an item can be viewed as reductive to the narrative (Domsch 16). Furthermore, it can even be considered a form of *encyclopedic impulse*⁵: “A tendency toward having explanatory interludes, during which the narrative of a work halts so that information about the world and its inhabitants can be given” (Wolf 376). An argument against this is that item descriptions, in cases like the Profaned Flame spell, do not disturb the narrative progression due to it being an *optional* mechanic in the game; a player must be motivated to open their Inventory, find the item, and read through the item description in order to find this information. Having this knowledge is not

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required for progressing along the game; it is simply a means to divulge details to interested players.

Despite the barebones, razed state of the Capital exterior, Yhorm’s palace is filled with signs of previous life-- however, its imagery does not show how the former denizens of the Profaned Capital lived, but rather how they died. Immediately upon entering its halls, the story told from within the Profaned Capital’s palace halls is clearly one of violence.

Armor, helmets, and weaponry enough to accommodate an army are piled into large mounds -- reaching higher than even the tall, ghostly Handmaids -- throughout the interior of the palace. If the player chooses to look closer beneath these artifacts, they find that the dark foundations of the mounds are actually composed of human corpses, burnt to near incomprehensibility.

This scene of violence sets the stage for the fight against Yhorm the Giant. The fight begins immediately once the player enters his throne room at the center of the palace. His throne room depicts a similarly grisly scene as that outside it: The same kinds of armor and weaponry litter the room, serving as remnants of the confrontation that once transpired there. However, the player is only given so much time to look at the horror that surrounds them, before Yhorm’s gigantic figure rises from his throne and easily bounds across the vast room to reach them.
Although gigantism (a common concept in fantasy worlds) is a recurring element in the game -- with almost every boss easily dwarfing the player, as if it were a means to remind the player character of their insignificance against the true powers of the world -- Yhorm is the only named giant, and rightfully so, as he is the largest sentient being encountered in the game. The imposing sight of him, in addition to the brutality he’d presumably caused, is meant to strike fear, horror, and perhaps even hopelessness in a player in yet another display of prototypical aesthetic experience.

A reasonable reaction to an entity like Yhorm the Giant would be to run. Unfortunately, Souls’ game design prevents players from exiting a room upon triggering a major battle. Thus, the player has two choices: Fight immediately, or run for cover to stall the inevitable confrontation. Should the player choose to fight, they realize very quickly that defeating Yhorm is a monumental task; regardless of what weapons the player has equipped, Yhorm’s health (a numeric statistic in games meant to represent an entity’s life) is set to be so high that even the greatest weapons deal negligible damage-- not to mention, the hits from his giant machete are
absolutely devastating to the player’s exponentially smaller health pool. Thus, even the player who chooses to fight is forced to run exclusively to avoid their own demise.

This is the part where Souls’ gameplay mechanics and worldbuilding interestingly converge. Should the player run for momentary cover to the opposite end of the vast room, amidst the pile of corpses behind Yhorm’s throne, they will find an interesting unique item: A sword called Storm Ruler. Furthermore, should they enter their inventory to read the item description, they will find again a combination of its usability description and insight on its lore:

Thus, through gameplay-driven narrative discovery, the player finds the solution to defeating Yhorm: Simply equipping the Storm Ruler and utilizing its unique properties in combat makes the fight against Yhorm one of the easiest in the game. Regarding the storytelling aspect, the Storm Ruler exists as its own form of ruin; however, rather than a large-scale architectural feature, it acts as an artifact: A small, compartmentalized version of a ruin. It complicates the story of the Profaned Capital as perceived by the player by revealing indirectly
through its literature the complicated progression of events leading to the ruination of the
Profaned Capital. Yhorm the Giant is not the absolutely evil, vicious and tyrannical beast that the
setting suggests him to be, but the “lonely” -- as he is called in the game’s opening cinematic --
onece-ruler of a civilization faithless to him. Suddenly, Yhorm is not one of the active agents of
decay and corruption in the land, but a victim to the cruel cycle of fire and darkness that
corrupted him. This allows for the rescaling of Souls’ mythic premise into a more emotional,
human narrative.

**Conclusion**

These details in the gameplay design of Dark Souls 3 highlights the extent in which
worldbuilding plays a role in the development of the narrative. By implementing worldbuilding-
driven settings and interactive mechanics unique to the video game medium, players are able to
actively participate in the exploration of the game’s universe. Furthermore, it is through these
clever designs that both the larger and smaller narratives within the game’s universe are told. The
root of the effectiveness of the storytelling within these narratives is the game’s setting; its
complex worldbuilding modality, encouraging the player to gather elements in the ruined present
to build a narrative of the game’s past, showcases a brilliant display and execution of
worldbuilding within Souls. Particular to the foray into the Profaned Capital region, the narrative
experience of exploring this place showcases the degrees in the scale of worldbuilding, creating a
clearer illustration of the narrative microcosm of smaller civilizations in relation to the larger
thematic undercurrents of the game’s mythic-scale premise.
CHAPTER THREE: THE RECLAIMED RUIN, THE ROAD OF SACRIFICES

The Reclaimed Ruin

The reclaimed ruin subverts the traditional idea of a ruin by introducing a new element to its definition: The element of nature, as part and parcel of the architectural ruin itself. Both nature and architecture -- interestingly sharing the ending “-ure,” an Old French suffix used to designate abstract nouns resulting from actions or processes -- are things that have come into being. Thus, they are subject to temporality, coming into existence along the passage of time. Subsequently, the state of their existence also grows, decays, and transforms throughout the passage of time. The integration of nature as part of the architectural ruin provides another layer of complexity to the role of the ruin as a symptom of a place’s worldbuilding; we are not only thinking about the rise and fall of a civilization, but the decline, and eventual regrowth of the natural world that shares its space. Thus, the relationship between the natural environment and its local human population -- encapsulated by the reclaimed ruin -- becomes a mode of environmental storytelling, made possible by the active role given to nature in a place’s worldbuilding.

After completing the first region of the game, the High Wall of Lothric, the player travels to what appears to be a village right outside the city walls: The Undead Settlement. This progression, from a worldbuilding standpoint, showcases clear, simple, standard fantasy; following a feudal model, the grand city of Lothric, ruled by its mysterious monarchy, towers above the sprawling farmland below. The Undead Settlement looks like a medieval village, only populated by skeletal, zombie-like Undead. This transition from urban to rural is simultaneous to the emergence of nature within the game’s narrative. As players leave the city, the relationship
between people and nature becomes more closely intertwined as human settlements de-urbanize and begin to increase their proximity to the surrounding wilderness. The suggestion of nature’s reclamation begins here. While the entrance to the Settlement from the High Wall is populated by aggressive, pitchfork-armed farmhands, who seem indifferent to the surrounding wilderness, seeping into its dilapidated wooden bridges and mossy cobblestone outposts are creeping vines and floral blooms: Elements of the volatile woods beyond the Settlement’s outskirts, a transitory region known as the Road of Sacrifices.

It is within the Road of Sacrifices that the classic imagery of the Romantic picturesque truly comes to life. The forest’s entrance, alive but rotting, contains some remnants of outposts and fortifications not even mentioned in the game’s lore-- perhaps the only depiction of a ruin displaying some sense of normalcy, a natural decay rather than the violent, fantastical corruption that has overtaken the major fortifications of the land. The Road of Sacrifices is a transitory region; its primary purpose is to connect other regions, and as such it doesn’t maintain much of a story on its own. However, its long, winding paths are rife with imagery, its storytelling more experiential than it is historical. By focusing the narrative of the region in the present state of things -- although temporality is still evident in the ruins and the overgrowth -- the worldbuilding showcased in this region’s setting raises the importance of the player character as an active participant in the development of Souls’ larger narrative.

*Fragmentation within the Reclaimed Picturesque*

Fragmentation takes on an interesting form in this region. *Fragmentation*, designated by Thomas McFarland as one of three components of the “diasparaction triad” -- with the other two members being *incompleteness* and *ruin* -- evokes a sense of missing-ness; a lack of knowledge
or a lapse within the perception of the observer, which then causes discontinuity in the observer’s perception of an object. This sense of missing-ness -- of “longing,” as described by McFarland -- is inherent to the experience of playing Souls, as the player character is distinctly removed from the history of the game, playing as participant and perceiver in an already fragmented world (7).

In a standard ruin, pieces of the physical ruin are often inherently fragmented: A symptom of physical degradation and decay. However, the reclaimed ruin interestingly adds complexity to this natural degradation by having nature take on an active role as the fragmentor. Rather than emptiness in between the pieces of the ruin, these spaces are filled by nature. Thus, the integration of nature within the human ruin creates an image of variance: An essential characteristic of the Romantic picturesque.

The picturesque is an aesthetic concept often applied to nature. Coined by Uvedale Price in his Essay on the Picturesque, the idea of the picturesque is a direct response to Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry. While Burke maintained that objects possessing regularity, uniformity, and smoothness (characteristics often possessed by human architectural design) are sublime and beautiful, consequently, his views on the “inordinate thirst for variety [in aesthetics]” are that such variances possess “very little true taste” and take away from beauty and sublimity (94-96). This immediately rules out most images of nature -- much less fantastical nature -- as organic materials naturally don’t abide by the rules of human geometric ideals. However, Price interestingly posits the natural picturesque as neither analogous, nor oppositional to the sublime and beautiful; rather, the picturesque, by containing elements of both beauty and sublimity and their characteristic opposites, exists between beauty and sublimity:

Picturesqueness, therefore, appears to hold a station between beauty and sublimity; and on that account, perhaps, is more frequently and more happily blended with them both than they are with each other. It is, however, perfectly distinct from either; and first, with respect to beauty, it is evident, from all that has been said, that they are founded on very
opposite qualities; the one on smoothness, the other on roughness; - the one on gradual, the other on sudden variation; - the one on ideas of youth and freshness, the other on that of age, and even of decay. (Price 82-83)

Price’s definition of the picturesque is characterized by variation—although discontinuity and disjointment is markedly barred by Burke in the introduction to his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Price argues that dramatic scenery wherein contrasting ideas blend together in variation are not entirely separate from the sublime and the beautiful, and thus constitutes the picturesque. Notable, however, is the last part of the above quotation, where Price specifically lists “ideas of youth and freshness” in contrast to “age” and “decay” as “opposite qualities” as one example of a beautiful picturesque. These contrasting elements are a perfect description of the reclaimed ruin: An aged and decaying physical object facilitating life and new growth.

The contrasting imagery of youth against age and freshness against decay is embodied by the illustration of nature's reclamation. Nature, being a thing that comes into being, is always the result of growth. Although elements of decay are a part of the natural cycle and thus can be found even amongst elements of growth, from the skeletons of animals to the husks of fallen leaves, the “reclamation” aspect comes about when nature grows among objects or beings foreign to itself: Specifically, human objects. Human ruins, when abandoned by humans and exposed to nature, often become reintegrated into the growth processes of the latter. Although this may result in the violent deconstruction of the ruined object, elements of the ruin become tied to the nature that is reclaiming its space—literally, with vines, moss, and even animals utilizing the solid material of human ruins to facilitate new growth. Inevitably, this results in a physical fragmentation of the original ruined object, but also its transformation into a new artifact composed of both nature and the original ruin.
Player as Perceiver

Within literature, this form of the picturesque -- a snapshot of a setting from which stories are derived -- can serve as a medium for narrative storytelling. The original scholars of the picturesque, William Giplin and Uvedale Price, even “regarded natural objects and artifacts as dynamic visual texts undergoing the universal changes of aging and decay that viewers could locally scrutinize and record,” thus creating a perceiver who derives narratives from forms of ruin (Kostelnick 20). Nature’s reclamation, then, became a subject of interest for the Romantic writers due to its unique complication of the common ruin: “It was this aspect of the picturesque, encompassing the study of ruins and decaying objects, that Wordsworth became interested in and that he cultivated and transformed” (Kostelnick 20). Moreover, it is this “cultivation” and “transformation” of the natural picturesque from the lens of a human perceiver that human narratives become further interconnected with the onset of nature’s reclamation.

Wordsworth’s iterations of natural decay imagery, found in works like “Ruined Cottage,” illustrate not only the new growth of nature as it appears in the present, but also contemplates how this new growth transforms the human objects reclaimed by nature; moreover, this transformation then creates new implications on the relationship between humans and nature. Since nature is no longer cultivated by humans, becoming an active agent in the fragmentation of human objects, the expected dynamic between nature and human settlements -- wherein the human settler is the oppressor -- is inverted. Usually, as in “Ruined Cottage,” this relationship involves the people who were originally tied to the now-reclaimed object. However, because the Road of Sacrifices has an ambiguous history, the nature-human relationship is instead viewed from the lens of an outside perceiver: The player character.
Thus, it is important to note that Price’s definition of the picturesque suggests a viewing of the picturesque not as “prescription displays of taste,” but as “exploratory exercises in perception” (Kostelnick 20). Applied to the literary tradition, the picturesque is not a matter of opinion or feeling, but of analysis. This lends well to the Road of Sacrifices. Unlike other regions in the game, its worldbuilding does not lend back to a deeper lore as it has no human history to behold. Rather, the region’s depiction of nature’s reclamation is a tool meant to illustrate the game’s larger apocalyptic narrative, utilizing the characterization of nature as a great force that is distinctly anti-human. The character of nature is then pushed to the extreme via the game’s dark fantasy setting, where nature’s element of “otherness,” as in wildness placed opposite to human civility, is substantiated by fantastical forms of antagonistic entities, embodied by the Road of Sacrifices’ hostile residents (Johnston 24). In the case of the Road of Sacrifices (and other general examples of nature’s reclamation), fragmentation in nature is interestingly convoluted by notions of consumption, transformation, and reformation, as there is both an element of real-world nature simply reclaiming an abandoned space, and the fantastical, otherworldly dangers that lie in the Road of Sacrifice’s depths.

Descent to Nature: Fantastical Sociopolitics in the Volatile Picturesque

Entering the Road of Sacrifices is marked as a descent from the heights of Lothric Castle. The player begins the game in Lothric, the centerpiece of the narrative’s main events and the largest urban center within the known world of Souls. However, after descending down from the High Wall and into the ramshackle Undead Settlement, the player is bound for yet another descent: The forested Road of Sacrifices.
In his introduction to *Essay on the Picturesque*, Price breaks down each individual thought and action taken by the perceiver (in this case, the player) during the act of perceiving a setting:

In every style, from the most simple and rural to the grandest and most ornamental: many of those objects, that are scarcely marked as they lie scattered over the face of nature, when brought together in the compass of a small space of canvas, are forcibly impressed upon the eye, which by that means learns how to separate, to select, and combine. (6)

Such action -- *reducing* the scope of a setting down to a single canvas, as if selecting a section of landscape to paint -- is an exercise in evaluating the picturesque, which in turn leads to the unpacking of a narrative contained within that picturesque image. In a landscape like the Road of Sacrifices, where environmental storytelling expresses worldbuilding through symbolism and association rather than a legible history, looking at specific elements of its setting is essential to realizing this particular expression of the game’s worldbuilding. We need not understand exactly who made these ruined fortifications and why, but we can instead look at where and how nature has reclaimed them, and consider how these portrayals of nature’s reclamation interact with the player perceiver.

Widespread throughout the Road of Sacrifices is the image of sinking into the earth. While the Road is initially a hilly area, composed of steep drops and winding paths, the latter half of the Road lies sunken, as if overtaken by the swamp at its core. Even the growth of the trees themselves are violent; roots stick out of the soil in jagged patterns, creating a terrain volatile to the explorer. Inherently, the game design in this region overtly suggests a relationship of nature against humans, as traversing through the overgrowth becomes a physical challenge for the player. In addition to the various hostiles in this region, many of which are in the form of fauna like giant crabs, rabid dogs, and poisonous snails, nature itself seems to actively interfere with the player’s progress; running away from a strong enemy is nearly impossible here, as the
Road’s twisting and turning paths and various obstacles seem to entangle the player. The notion of consumption is suggested by this interaction. Much like how the forest and swamp have consumed the Road once taken to and from the city of Lothric, nature seems to aid in the consumption of the player character in their attempt to survive the journey through the Road. This notion of consumption lends back to the larger scale concept of Souls’ premise: Upon entering the Age of Dark, the fire keeping humanity of life dies out, literally consumed by its antithetical darkness.

At first, it seems as if nature here is the cause of such malevolence. However, studies in environmental storytelling suggest that environments that are depicted as volatile without a biological reason for being that way are indicative of some kind of anthropogenic violence. In studying Percy Shelley’s use of miasma in his literary work, Timothy Morton writes that “Forms of excessive domination of humans generate oppression and pollution of the environment. Social ecology proposes ‘that major ecological problems have their roots in social problems’” (413). Though this concept of social ecology is applicable to all forms of literature, it is complicated in the dark fantasy setting. Because dark fantasy works inherently break down the sociopolitical structures of its settings, it becomes more difficult to trace exactly what elements of the ecological world are symptoms of social problems.

Although one of the few instances of governance, the monarchy of Lothric, is referenced during the game as one of the contributors to the current near-apocalyptic state of the world, there is very little written about the exact sociopolitical state of Souls’ universe. It seems that, upon the coming of the Age of Dark and the subsequent large-scale deterioration of the entire world, the specifics of sociopolitical systems (usually an important facet of fantasy worldbuilding) has become irrelevant, and a more pressing antagonistic entity exists in the form
of the large-scale corruption of life prompted by halting the Age of Fire. However, while the political aspect of sociopolitics has little relevance during the actual progression of the game, the Age of Dark’s social effects are much more prominent. The undead, skeletal humanoids that were evidently once human, populate the land in droves-- they are the most common hostile entities encountered in the game, and are littered throughout the land where one expects humans to populate: Soldiers and citizens in the city, farmers in the outskirts, and weary travelers along the Road. Similarly, nature has fallen to the same kind of corruption, as even the flora and fauna of the Road of Sacrifices are a deterrent in the player’s progress.

Though Souls’ premise is rooted in a mythic-scale conflict that one could argue is representative of real-world politics, and the symbolism of the suffering of the Undead masses has its literary connotations, Morton’s “social problems,” in this case ought to be applied to the game’s overarching conflict: The coming Age of Dark, a cyclical, natural component inherent to the universe’s worldbuilding. Thus, the Road of Sacrifices finds an interesting role as a symptom of the game’s overarching narrative rather than a microcosm as seen in the Profaned Capital.

**Corruption, Paranoia, and Human Survival**

This large-scale corruption is further exemplified in another component of the Road’s varied setting: Human constructions. Amongst the overgrowth are small, man-made fortifications: Wooden stakes and effigies, stuck into the ground, further deterring player movement, and also emblematic of the title of this sub-region within the Road of Sacrifices, the Crucifixion Woods. Aesthetically, these wooden fixtures are distinctly different from those seen in the Undead Settlement. While the Settlement’s ramshackle wooden houses and bridges suggest the narrative of a poor farming community, these stakes and effigies seem almost
nonsensical, evoking a sense of Medieval paranoia as one must question what these stakes and effigies are for; though both human Undead and more monstrous entities share this region, they aren’t hostile to one another in the way that they’re hostile to the player, at least during the present.

(The Road of Sacrifices, swamp sub-region)

Immediately, one can assume that these fixtures are meant to deter outsiders. Within the larger transitory region of the Road of Sacrifices, the swamp sub-region is the crossroads. Importantly, it is the only means of accessing two important regions in the game: Farron Keep, stronghold of the Abyss Watchers, elite soldiers who once fought to keep the malevolent Abyss at bay but since fell to it, and the Cathedral of the Deep, an ancient church that was once a sanctuary for peace but again fell to the corruption of its prisoner, the god-eater Aldrich, upon the rising Age of Dark. These human-made obstacles may simply be the result of the Abyss’s influence.

However, there is a complication. Among the Road of Sacrifices’ most vicious residents are Lycanthropes, monstrous humanoids chained to wooden stakes-- much like the ones littering
the Road of Sacrifices’ twisting paths. The imprisonment of humans claimed to be supernatural beings like lycanthropes calls back to the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages; contextualized in *Souls*, perhaps they are a remnant of a time before the total corruption of the Road of Sacrifices, when pockets of the Abyss were just emerging, and were thus quickly subjugated. This complicates the initial idea that the Road’s stakes and effigies are the result of the Abyss, and instead may be a leftover facet of the Road before it fell to corruption-- a dark part of the Road’s human history, but a human ruin nonetheless.

(Lycanthrope enemy charging at the player)

This creates an interesting dynamic between the human ruins and the corrupted nature that has transformed and integrated with it. The presence of the stakes along with the volatile lycanthropes suggest a history of violence *preceding* the present corruption of the Abyss. Although there is no question that the current state of the Road is the result of the greater Age of Dark, the history of human activities within this region is not one of peace, but of violence. This creates a more complicated reconstruction of the past from the lens of larger-scale worldbuilding. While it is easy to comprehend the narrative of the player’s hero’s journey as one of valiance,
restoring peace to the land in an event literally known as the coming of the Age of Fire, the human violence conducted in the Road of Sacrifices suggests a more morally complex rendering of the world that the player aims to save. The majority of the player’s time spent in the Road of Sacrifices is disquieting--the landscape’s imagery is complex, messy, and disturbing, but it serves a purpose by juxtaposing with the few pockets of safety within the volatile woods.

**Ruins Facilitating the Thematic Narrative Braid**

Past the initial path, where fallen carriages and wild bird-monkey hybrids occupy the winding woods, the first checkpoint is found: The Halfway Fortress, a circular ruin, relatively large and strangely intact, hosting a bonfire for travelers along the Road of Sacrifices to gather and rest. Here, the player encounters one of few kind and welcoming characters: Anri of Astora, and their mute companion, Horace the Hushed. Although characters outside of the protagonist are another facet of worldbuilding purposefully underutilized in dark fantasy settings, moments where characters are actually present in the narrative feel more significant. In a rare interaction with other Unkindled, wandering warriors in search of a way to restore the Age of Fire, players are introduced to the notion that their narrative is not unique; they are among countless Unkindled tasked with the challenge of restoring the Age of Fire. In worldbuilding studies this is known as *thematic braiding*: The notion of multiple characters’ stories existing at the same time, in order to compare them to one another, and all contributing to the same larger narrative theme (Wolf 382). In *Souls*, this larger, grander narrative again ties back to its mythic premise: The world is in search of a hero to restore order, and the player stands among them.
(Anri of Astora and Horace the Hushed resting at the Halfway Fortress, greeting the player for the first time)

The idea of the valiant heroism inherent to the narrative of the player’s journey is further emphasized by the Halfway Fortress, specifically through its role as a safehouse for players, and subsequently, a safehouse for humanity. In the Halfway Fortress, nature is not depicted as a violent force. This instance of a reclaimed ruin is actually quite simple and demure; vines and moss grow along the walls of the exposed building, not dismantling the fortification, but simply sharing the space it occupies. This location, distinctly separate from the wild, endless woods of the Road of Sacrifices beyond, provides a sense of human comfort despite its state of ruin, emphasized by its role as a Bonfire -- a safe zone from the dangers outside. Like Wordsworth’s “Ruined Cottage,” there is an element of human survival here despite the emptiness of the ruin. While nature is on one side of the process of the reclaimed ruin, being the agent of fragmentation as well as the source of new growth, the human ruin stands on the other side; the human ruin, despite its forced transformation, still survives, however fragmented. While the onset of nature’s reclamation “brings the notion of survival [...] where wilderness reasserts itself there the spirit of humanity survives” (Bazregarzadeh 24). These glimpses in the human world’s potential for
survival allow the player to remember the premise of their journey and furthermore, reasserts the notion that *Souls* is a participatory world⁶. The player, by continuing on their journey, plays an integral role in the survival of this world.

![Image](link)

(The Halfway Fortress bonfire)

Within the nameless, historyless ruins of the Road of Sacrifices, *Souls* finds a reinvigoration of its own literary identity-- without the use of mythic-scale settings that often precede its grand localities. At the end of the day, *Souls* is a hero’s journey; only, by virtue of the dark fantasy tradition, the temporal scale of the protagonist’s narrative is stretched to accommodate the world’s long history. However, the player’s active role in the development of the game’s narrative -- even in the history of its world -- is marked in areas such as this, where the player is reminded that this world is a participatory one. The Halfway Fortress, regardless of what use it may have had historically, is now a safehouse for the player and other Unkindled warriors. This notion of belonging (of the hero’s story unfolding) is further attached to the

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unique world of *Souls* through its locality as a reclaimed ruin. Within this place of nature’s reclamation are “Decaying objects, absorbed by nature, and nature transformed into artifacts,” thus cementing the narrative of the player and their journey in this world’s history (Kostelnick 22). However, despite the relative normalcy of the Halfway Fortress ruin -- perhaps representing the normalcy of humans -- the narratives found in the volatile environment beyond its crumbling walls still serves as a representation of the world’s larger, mythical conflict.

*Conclusion*

The Road of Sacrifices is not a unique region by any means; long, forested roads and fetid swamps have countless iterations throughout the fantasy tradition. However, it is unique in the role it serves as an expression of social and ecological worldbuilding. Rather than revealing written histories that reach great depths in the world of *Souls*, the imagery and environmental storytelling within the Road of Sacrifices’ reclaimed ruins is symbolic; emblematic to the larger conflict of the game’s premise, hinting at the apocalyptic terror looming over the land, but still scaled down to the narrative of the player character. It is this connection -- from hosting the player’s rest from arduous travels to glimpses of the horrors to unfold by the mythic Age of Dark -- that allows the picturesque Road of Sacrifices to act as a bridge between the grand but distant cycling of Ages with the real-time narrative progression of the player, the perceiver.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE REVISITED RUIN, THE UNTENDED GRAVES

The Revisited Ruin

A revisited ruin possesses no physical differences from other ruins. Rather, its distinction lies in its role as an object of perception. Like the revisitation of any other literary setting, a revisited ruin is a setting viewed by a perceiver at two different instances of time. The Romantic fascination with ruins shares this key element with the literary concept of revisitation: Temporality. Similar to how a perceiver of ruins imagines life before its ruination, the revisitor can recall their experience during the initial viewing, the first instance of visitation, and compare it to the second experience, the revisitation. Thus, instead of focusing on the history of the ruin and what it represents on its own, the narrative told within the ruin, which possesses an internal temporality inherent to its definition as a ruin, is contextualized by the circumstances of the revisitation— an event that transpires in the “modern world” (as in, the perceiver’s present), although it too possesses its own temporal indexing.

The premise of the game is simple: Players take on the mantle of the unlikely hero and restore order to the world despite their seeming insignificance to the machinations of its universe. In classic fantasy tradition, the game begins with an opening cinematic revealing these larger thematic components of the story: A dying pilgrim seeking refuge in Lothric, a kingdom where the lands belonging to Lords of Cinder converge, only to find that the Lords have abandoned their duties and threaten to plunge the world into an Age of Dark. Here, the player is first introduced to their own character, the Unkindled, worth nothing more than ashes to feed humanity’s fire. Upon entering the game for the first time -- as in, the physical game where the
real-world player can physically control their simulation -- the player sees their own character rising out of a grave as the region’s name is superimposed on the screen: The Cemetery of Ash.

(The player character after the grave-rising cutscene)

The experience of playing through this region is a formative moment in the experience of playing Souls. Not only does it symbolize the beginning of the player’s journey in terms of story, the inherent game design further solidifies its significance by serving as the game’s “tutorial zone.” This is where players learn how to move and interact with the world for the first time, where the first instance of player agency and, subsequently, the worldbuilding-oriented notion of narrative immersion\(^7\) begins.

Thus, by establishing an attachment to this region, it becomes even more disorienting when towards the game’s end the player discovers the darker version of this familiar place. The Untended Graves are a tenebrous mirror of the player’s own origins, heavily implied to be a space existing at a point in time when the Age of Dark has already settled. This temporal dissonance not seen in any other part of the game-- although it may seem like a lapse in the

\(^7\) Wolf, Building Imaginary Worlds. See Glossary p. 378
continuity of the narrative and players’ immersion in the game’s setting, it serves a greater purpose in complicating the narrative by disrupting the game’s preconceived physical laws. The moment where the player gains access to another timeline raises an important implication: The player, once powerless, fit only to serve as ashes, acquires the ability to transcend the parameters of time, thus transcending their humanity. This results in an exciting marriage between the game’s narrative progression -- the player character’s transcendent rise from obscurity -- and the worldbuilding that allows these developments to transpire.

*Fragmentation Across Temporalities: The Narrative Infinite*

The very existence of the concept of fragmentation inexorably guarantees the existence of wholeness. Likewise, regarding ruins, the status of ruination can only exist conditionally with the notion that it was once whole. To the perceiver of ruins, imagining how these ruined spaces existed before their state of ruination is an exercise in seeking this state of wholeness; applied to the exploration of fantasy worlds, this act of piecing together fragments of a setting is also an exercise in unearthing the world’s history, and it is this combination of history and setting that lends to ruins as an expression of worldbuilding. This is one illustration of Thomas McFarland’s notion of fragmentation. Furthermore, it is also an illustration of fragmentation’s conceptual foil: Infinity, as a kind of wholeness.

In Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke pointedly deems the concept of infinity as an essential source of the sublime. Infinity, having the ability to “fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime,” is thus one of the most poignant sources of the sublime (Burke 92). Although the concept of infinity is a fairly simple one, actually achieving the perception of infinity is physically
impossible. McFarland addresses this in his introduction to *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, writing: “We see the same Romantic concern with infinity, and the attendant paradox whereby the perception of parts and fragments implies the hypothetical wholeness of infinity, but the impossibility of grasping that entity simultaneously witnesses the actual dominance of diasparactive forms” (29). According to McFarland, infinity is predominantly experienced through the perception of its parts, with the sum of these parts comprising an approximated infinite; therefore, moments of fragmentation, conceptually compared to the possibility of wholeness, is what constitutes the human experience -- furthermore, “the diasparactive condition of our existence” -- and is explicated by the observation of ruins (382). Applied to the video game medium, the diasparactive condition of playing a game is determined entirely by the game’s inherent design. The player’s limits in their actions and ability to experience the world drives the story by replicating the real-world diasparactive condition of human existence.

This lays the groundwork for the narrative capacity of a video game setting’s ruined objects in encapsulating the Romantic sublime / the Romantic infinite. When this concept is applied to temporality, we obtain the notion that parts of a narrative -- its temporal indices, as provided by the media presenting it -- tell a complete story, despite its fragmentation. In other words, fragmented modalities correspondingly encapsulate the *narrative* infinite. Furthermore, it is the placement of these fragmented parts, deliberate gaps in the narrative, that creates emphasis on absence. Absence is addressed by McFarland as follows: “In every emotional longing for the absent then, there is also a longing for wholeness,” creating an inalienable relationship between fragment and whole, as experienced by a perceiver (407).

Absence, especially the absence of information, is a core element in the literary composition of *Souls*; the withholding of knowledge, symptomatic of dark fantasy worldbuilding
conventions, is rampant in the series, but is almost always contextualized in the present. The feeling of absence in *Souls* often comes in relation to situations emerging from the player character’s narrative present-- with every encounter, we wonder where we are and how the current desolated state of the environment that surrounds us has come to be. This action of seeking worldbuilding answers as they’re encountered during the narrative is akin to the search for infinity, with infinity here being the wholeness of a completely fleshed-out world; in the dark fantasy tradition, this world is distinctly shrouded, creating an even greater sense of absence along with a more considerable possibility for questioning.

Revisitation complicates this two-fold: In one sense, revisitation helps in the search for wholeness by encouraging the re-evaluation and re-perception of familiar places; in another, revisitation creates more avenues for uncertainty when differences between each visitation arise. Revisiting the Cemetery of Ash in its Untended Graves form not only provides key insights on what appears to be a potential future, it also creates the possibility for that future to exist, in the hands of the previously powerless human protagonist.

*Information Absorption by Revisitation and the Ludic Sublime*

The Untended Graves are the only instance of *literal* temporal dissonance in the game. Although the game’s deliberate lack of exposition and encyclopedic impulse8 (along with insistence in the player character’s obscurity) generates a sense of discomfort in existing in its desolated world, the game’s progression is thoroughly fixed into its deliberate position in the larger timeline of *Souls*’ universe: The Age of Fire is coming to an end, and the world sits on the brink of an Age of Dark. This is the premise for a world necessitating a hero. However, the

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8 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*. See Glossary p. 376
Untended Graves makes this preconceived temporal constraint obsolete by taking the player to a world that has already plunged into the feared Age of Dark.

(The player character entering the Untended Graves, a dark mirror of the Cemetery of Ash)

From a worldbuilding standpoint, this may appear as a fault. Players receive no inclination of why they come across a dark version of such a familiar place. For many, this area may be forgone altogether as it is not a necessary region to progress through the game; it is discovered solely through a hidden passage in another optional area, the Consumed King’s Garden. Therefore, it may seem like this region in the game breaks immersion, at least in the narrative-gameplay sense. However, Souls’ use of information-withholding isn’t solely an inherited trait from the dark fantasy tradition; it is a deliberate utilization of the limitations of the video game medium (that is, its reliance on its preconstructed computational system) to create complications in its worldbuilding, allowing for the organic development of the universe with the player character having a central role in its transformation.
In an article for the *Game Studies* journal, Daniel Vella discusses what he calls the *ludic sublime*: a “crucial aesthetic moment,” akin to an aesthetic experience⁹, “in the player’s engagement with the game, defined by the player’s drive towards mastery of the game coming face-to-face with the impossibility of obtaining complete, direct knowledge of the underlying [computer game] system.” Player engagement with *Souls* is marked by a distinct motivation for gameplay and narrative triumph despite the impossibility of achieving perceptive wholeness:

In practice, however, *Dark Souls* sets out with the express purpose of unsettling these preconceptions, deploying a range of formal techniques and mechanisms designed to arrest the player’s judgment and prevent her from arriving at a stable cosmic understanding, preserving a sense of mystery and gesturing towards a whole that escapes the player’s conceptualizing grasp. In various ways, *Dark Souls* works to actively remind the player of the limits and the inadequacy of her perceptual opening onto the milieu of the gameworld, the computational systems underlying it, and the space of possibilities they structure. (Vella)

The “great cosmic understanding” discussed by Vella is a central part of *Souls’* worldbuilding. The notion of cycles, gods, and mythologic-scale entities always exists in the background of *Souls*; oftentimes, it is these larger, grander universal machinations that establish the constraints by which the player character must oblige to participate as an active agent in the world.

These are the conditions that must precede the discovery of a region like the Untended Graves that disrupts the temporal structure of a setting’s worldbuilding. Additionally, to successfully create a moment of disruption, a perceiver must already have a well-established, intuitive understanding of the conventions of the fictional universe. This is described by worldbuilding scholar Mark J.P. Wolf, who defines the logical comprehension of a fictional universe following immersion into said universe as absorption¹⁰. The effectiveness of a setting’s

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worldbuilding in facilitating absorption is strongly dependent on the solidity of its internal infrastructure and how this infrastructure is presented in the narrative:

Thus, to ensure that absorption will follow immersion, world builders must introduce their worlds with the right balance of familiarity and strangeness, drawing audiences in with invention while not changing so many defaults that confusion or even alienation occurs. Glimpses of a world’s infrastructures, though they may be tantalizing, must still present a coherent picture, and should also convey a sense of the world’s underlying logic, so as to set up some framework into which the audience can mentally begin placing world information as they learn it. (Wolf 205)

Recreating the Cemetery of Ash ensures that the player already possesses this deep, intuitive understanding of the world that they’re revisiting, as the Cemetery of Ash is directly connected to the most frequently revisited location in the game: Firelink Shrine, the player character’s home base, where their allied Fire Keeper, blacksmith, and various merchants and instructors reside. The revisitation of this particular location allows for an emphasis on its aesthetic moment’s disruption of the natural cycles that govern the world of *Souls*—simultaneously disrupting, complexifying, and developing its worldbuilding into a participatory world\(^{11}\) that is further impacted by the actions of the player character.

*Notions of Cycle: Life and Death, Fire and Darkness*

A recurring theme in the *Souls* universe, across all its installments, is the concept of linking the fire. In the larger-scale worldbuilding of the universe, fire is equated to life, the fuel that keeps the universe running; in the smaller scale narrative of the player character’s journey, this is illustrated by Bonfires, checkpoints that allow the player to rest, recover, and travel to any previously discovered Bonfire, in addition to their home base, Firelink Shrine. Firelink is the first major location discovered by the player, encountered shortly after successfully exiting the

\(^{11}\) Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*. See Glossary p. 379
Cemetery of Ash. Its own name is a testament to its function in the logical framework of the game’s narrative, and subsequently its worldbuilding, literally being the place where the linking and continuation of fire is facilitated.

(A player character standing at the entrance of Firelink Shrine, observing the empty thrones where the Lords of Cinder must meet to link the fire)

These notions of cycles and cyclical processes are inherent to the larger mythos of the Souls’ universe. The very cosmology of the universe (as in, its physical structure) is driven by natural cycles. Discovering the Untended Graves is a marked disruption of these natural cycles and results in the disruption of the larger-scale worldbuilding that has been developed throughout the game prior to this moment. Firelink Shrine, once a place of safety despite its run-down state - - emphasized by the empty thrones belonging to the Lords of Cinder who abandoned their duty of linking the fire -- is rendered empty and abandoned in the Untended Graves, throwing it further along a state of ruin via a second abandonment.
The experience of revisiting the ruins of Firelink Shrine is also a return to the ludic sublime. At this point in the game, players are familiar enough with the conventions of *Souls* to have an intuitive understanding of the larger world that encompasses the game’s narrative; it is during this part of the late-game that instances of the ludic sublime are less likely to come about, simply due to a player’s experience and immersion. This is discussed by Timothy Welsh in his response to Daniel Vella’s initial essay on *Souls*:

Openness to the ludic sublime, then, is a gameplay style, one that is likely more prominent during earlier engagements with a game. Once a functional image is in place, gameplay can shift to pursue other purposes and encounters with a game’s sublime boundlessness may become less significant.

The narrative’s disruption in taking the player to the Untended Graves -- an experience of ludic sublimity -- thus creates questions regarding *possibility*. When the player enters a new game for the first time, they enter a realm of possibility regarding the capabilities of their character in influencing the simulated world they inhabit (however ironically, considering the video game medium imposes limitations on player action constructed inherently by its game design) and these questions of possibility then lead back to the narrative components of the game: How does
a player’s actions influence the world around them? Furthermore, how does a certain series of actions, decisions made within the parameters of gameplay design, influence the entire narrative of the game’s story, and thus cement itself in the history of the game’s universe?

Revisitiation and Melancholia in the Thematic Braid

Answers to these worldbuilding-scale questions are exemplified by the possibilities that arise by visiting the Untended Graves; however, before unearthing these possibilities in the dark version of Firelink Shrine, the player must spend a considerable amount of time exploring the entirety of the region, the empty mirror of their former home. That experience on its own creates implications relating to both the worldbuilding of the established universe and the player’s attachments to that universe, particularly to their own timeline.

Encountering the dark, empty version of Firelink Shrine evokes a sense of loss, and further, melancholy to those who have attained some sentiments to the only safe and welcoming part of the volatile, apocalypse-edged world of Souls. Sabrina Ferri discusses the concept of melancholy as inherent to the experience of perceiving ruined spaces, writing:

If the ruin is the thing that mediates man’s experience of nature and the place of the transaction between past, present, and future that defines modernity, then melancholy is the sentiment that accompanies such a transaction — the sentiment of modernity. Through the reflection on time caused by the ruin, modern man expresses melancholically the consciousness of a painful and ever-growing distance from nature and the past. (205)

This “sentiment of modernity” lends back to the player’s aesthetic experience. The game, being experienced in real-time, simulates a sense of presentness. Throughout the game, players encounter remnants of a once-grand past, but it is their relation to the desolated present that creates a sense of longing for this idealized past. Meeting other characters who long for a better
future instills in the player character a sense of heroism, pushing the mantle of hero onto the player despite the oppressive setting.

Although the Untended Graves itself is an alternate timeline separate from the player’s world, the player character can still interact with the environment. Doing so will lead to an important discovery: The Eyes of a Fire Keeper, found on a frozen corpse in one of the dark corners of the abandoned Shrine.

(Discovering the Eyes)
Giving the Eyes of a Fire Keeper to the player’s own Fire Keeper after returning to their timeline creates a unique ability: The player’s Fire Keeper offers to rid the world of fire, allowing the player to reject the heroism pushed by the game’s narrative. This ending allows the player the choice to remove fire from the world, triggering the Age of Dark represented fearfully throughout the entirety of the game. For the very first time, the player is in a position of power and can choose to reject the preordained narrative and find their own ending to the game. Thus, visiting the Untended Graves is not only a disruption in the literary narrative or the physical timeline; it is symptomatic of the disruption of the game’s universe. However, it is not a disruption in the sense of feasible worldbuilding. Rather, the player character, through a newfound agency, can make choices during the course of their narrative that directly influences
the trajectory of the universe’s future, thus cementing themselves as an active participant in the development of the larger universe.

Conclusion

A video review of the game published by popular gaming news site, GameSpot, refers to the experience of playing Souls as “a series of peaks and valleys,” where moments of despair and despondency eventually serve to heighten moments of victory and triumph over the course of the game (Mahardy). The actual progression of the game simulates this hero’s journey as the game is tailored around the player’s present. True to its genre, the game’s present, though fixated on the echoes of its glorious past, is meant to be the player’s own. The revisitation of familiar spaces attests to this notion, as the temporal dissonance created by the narrative at this part of the game creates the possibility for the player and player-character to influence the game’s narrative end, heightening the role of the protagonist in the game’s larger universe. This condition allows for the indubitable purpose of effective worldbuilding in fictional settings: Its allowance of narrative possibility, uniquely integrating player choices into its story, results in the active development of the game universe as a complex, reader-oriented form of literary experience.
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