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# VIDEO GAMES BASED ON ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING: NEW PATHS FOR MEANING MAKING

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores how Dark Souls (2011), a video game that employs environmental storytelling, particularly can serve as fertile ground for meaning-making processes. Drawing from the theory of multiliteracies, especially the notion of meaning as a process of design in multimodal contexts, the research focuses on how players construct narrative understanding through interaction with visual, auditory, spatial, textual, and mechanical modes. The methodology consists of a qualitative analysis based on the Five Elements of Design (Cloonan; Kalantzis; Cope, 2010): Reference, Dialogue, Structure, Situation, and Intention. These elements guide the interpretation of how multimodal cues in Dark Souls support individual meaning construction. The study argues that environmental storytelling fosters player agency, inviting them to build narrative coherence using their own experiences, ideologies, and interpretative paths. In doing so, games like Dark Souls not only deepen immersion but also encourage authentic, contextualized engagement with the English language, and multimodal literacy development.

Keywords: Environmental storytelling. Meaning-making. Video games.

**RESUMO**

Este estudo explora como *Dark Souls* (2011), um videogame que utiliza a técnica de *environmental storytelling* (narrativa ambiental), pode servir como terreno fértil para processos de construção de sentido. Com base na teoria dos multiletramentos, especialmente na noção de sentido como um processo de design em contextos multimodais, a pesquisa foca em como os jogadores constroem a compreensão narrativa por meio da interação com modos visuais, auditivos, espaciais, textuais e mecânicos. A metodologia consiste em uma análise qualitativa baseada nos Cinco Elementos do Design (Cloonan, Kalantzis; Cope, 2010): Referência, Diálogo, Estrutura, Situação e Intenção. Esses elementos orientam a interpretação de como pistas multimodais em *Dark Souls* sustentam a construção individual de sentido. O estudo argumenta que a narrativa ambiental promove a agência do jogador, convidando-o a construir coerência narrativa com base em suas próprias experiências, ideologias e caminhos interpretativos. Ao fazer isso, jogos como *Dark Souls* não apenas aprofundam a imersão, mas também incentivam um engajamento autêntico e contextualizado com a língua inglesa, e o desenvolvimento do letramento multimodal.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa Ambiental., Construção de Sentido., Videogames.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s onwards, as the different media avenues developed and the world became more and more globalized, the ways in which individuals from non-English-speaking countries came into contact with the English language, then established as the world's lingua franca, grew increasingly fast. Video games are one of these ways.

Currently considered one of the largest media entertainments in the world, along with books and cinema, it is undeniable their impact in the shaping of contemporary society. Along with that, videogames are one of the most prominent avenues for contact with English for an increasing percentage of the population, given that they "are environments that require players to both decode and create meaning in ways that extend beyond the written word" (Gee, 2003).

One prominent narrative technique that is growing in usage is environmental storytelling, which is a narrative technique used in video games where the setting, objects, and spatial design convey a story without relying heavily on explicit dialogue or exposition. In recent years, environmental storytelling is becoming one of the most recognizable and complex techniques being adopted to tell stories that are more open than ever for a direct and personal analysis from their readers, and due to this, they are creating a deeper and better-developed relationship between English and the "readers[1]" based on a set of meanings constructed in a nonconventional way by educational standards but that shows great promise nonetheless.

This research will analyze not only the plot of the video game in question but also other relevant aspects of its composition, such as character dialogues, music elements, item descriptions, and the locations in which the game takes place. This analysis is necessary because these elements work together to provide the reader with a unique array of experiences, be they mechanical, such as developing the skill to defeat a hard boss (the final enemy of an area), or interpretative, for example, reading the large number of item descriptions to try and puzzle out what happened in an area according to the "reader's" interpretation.

The research is based on the analysis of the semiotic elements of environmental storytelling present in the video game Dark Souls (2011) as well as the story and relevance of its creator, Hidetaka Miyazaki, responsible for the spread of this technique. The relevance of this research is based on the rapid evolution of digital technology and the increasing role of video games as

[1] The terms Player/Reader will be used interchangeably due to the analysis considering Dark Souls as a game and a text, following Gee's understanding of video games as forms of literacy (Gee, 2004).

platforms for environmental storytelling as a method of meaning-making that cannot be implemented by other media to such an extent. Unlike traditional media such as books and films, video videogames offer immersive, interactive environments where the "reader" is not a passive agent but an active participant whose actions and interpretations directly influence the narrative, this unique capacity for deep immersion presents a significant gap in existing research, as most studies have yet to fully understand how environmental storytelling in games can expand meaning-making and enhance learning outcomes.

In this sense, the main objective of this research is to analyze the meaning-making resources present in the video game Dark Souls (2011) and to investigate how these elements create opportunities for interpretation and meaning construction. To achieve this, the study seeks to identify and describe the semiotic elements that compose the game, analyze how aspects such as characters, narrative, sound, visuals, and dialogues contribute to the construction of meaning, and finally, examine whether these resources effectively expand the interpretative possibilities available to players.

## 2. CONTEXTUALIZATION

Released in 2011 by the Japanese studio FromSoftware, Dark Souls is widely regarded as one of the most influential video games of the 21st century. It is the spiritual successor to Demon's Souls (2009) and the first title in a trilogy that has changed the pattern in modern games. Unlike many games that rely heavily on cutscenes, exposition, or explicit narrative markers, Dark Souls is renowned for its fragmented storytelling. The reader must explore the game world "Lordran" without clear direction or explanation. Instead of being told what is happening, readers must piece together the story through exploration, item descriptions, visual cues in the environment, and cryptic dialogue. Due to this for the research three parts of the game were chosen for analysis, parts that are key to the major narrative and are present in all readers progressions. This narrative approach exemplifies the popularization of this use in games of environmental storytelling.

The first scene of the game introduces the world's creation myth: in the beginning, there was only darkness and the Everlasting Dragons. Then, the First Flame appeared, bringing disparity light and dark, life and death, heat and cold. From this Flame, powerful beings called the Lords emerged by discovering powerful Souls: Gwyn, the Lord of Sunlight; Nito, the First of the Dead; the Witch of Izalith; and the Furtive Pygmy, who found the Dark Soul, (A metaphysical object that represents humanity in people). These Lords challenged the dragons and helped shape the world, but the First Flame is fading, threatening the age of gods and fire. This sets the stage for the player's journey to decide whether to link the fire and preserve the Age of Fire or let it fade, ushering in darkness.

The creative mind behind Dark Souls is Hidetaka Miyazaki, a game director whose unique design philosophy has shaped how narrative can be written in Video Games. Miyazaki's approach was influenced not only by earlier video games but also by literature and personal experiences. He has mentioned during various interviews the relevance of the works of Western fantasy authors, such as H. P. Lovecraft, as well as his own childhood experiences with incomplete English

translations of novels, where he had to infer meaning from fragmented context as inspiration for his works. This idea of making sense through partial information is central to how players engage with Dark Souls. Miyazaki deliberately leaves gaps in the story, trusting the audience to become active participants in the construction of narrative.

Dark Souls is a rich case study of environmental storytelling in contemporary digital media. The game's world is carefully constructed to communicate history, and emotion without verbal narration. Architecture, lighting, enemy placement, and even silence is used to create a sense of mystery. Understanding Dark Souls as a storytelling system requires not only recognizing what is told but also how it is told using spaces, symbols, and design. The analysis of how Dark Souls redefines how the players create meaning through interaction with the game's world, rather than simply consuming a pre-constructed narrative. In doing so, it creates a unique connection between the version of the world each reader creates themselves and the strategies used by Miyazaki and his team to communicate through the environment itself. This contextual background is essential for understanding how Dark Souls operates as a site of storytelling and why it serves as a powerful example for discussing meaning- making in interactive, multimodal texts.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the concepts established by the research on the field of multiliteracies, especially in regard to meaning-making as a process of design in multimodal contexts such as the ones developed by James Paul Gee, also some of the terminology used to refer to specific parts were created by the online community that discusses the Videogame Online. This online community is understood as an "affinity space", a term coined by Gee (2004) to refer to informal learning communities where people gather around a shared interest. In the case of Dark Souls, affinity space includes online videos, Community built encyclopedias and reddit forums, where players exchange strategies, lore theories, and gameplay tips. These spaces promote collaboration and peer learning, while revealing shared meaning-making processes which contribute to this analysis. It is also the cornerstone of environmental storytelling as a whole for its non-linearity, but instead the capacity for an active participation by the reader on the construction of understanding not only of the narrative but also of the many possible interpretations that can be created based uniquely on the reader's background

As the object of the study, the research consists of analyzing the different iterations during the course of the game of environmental storytelling present in the video game "Dark Souls" and

identifying how the process of meaning-making can be observed during the progression of the story of the video game. The research is rooted in the works of Gee (2003) and seeks to fill the gap present in the academic landscape that is still in the process of better understanding the particularities of video videogames as a method of language learning and how the use of it can alter this process in comparison to more "traditional" methods of learning.

Building on this idea, it is crucial to understand this theory that seeks to point out how modern video games can create an active world using multimodality. Games like Dark Souls are intrinsically multimodal, going beyond text and images. The construction of meaning within Dark Souls is not derived from any single mode in isolation, but rather from the dynamic and non-explicit interaction and combination of these multiple modes. This idea is based on the concept that "meaning, thinking, and learning in video games are linked to multiple modalities (words, images, actions, sounds, etc.)" (Gee, 2003). This multimodal approach is central to how the game provides the designs for players to engage with and construct their own situated meanings.

Building upon the ideas of multimodality in video games, a key tool for analyzing how players construct meaning are the Five Elements of Design proposed within multiliteracies studies (Cloonan; Kalantzis; Cope, 2010). These elements provide structure specifically adapted for the complexities of multimodal texts and interactions found in games. By formulating five questions based it is possible to better aim the analysis of the game in question. Reference (what is being described?), Dialogue (how are participants connected?), Structure (how do meanings hold together?), Situation (how is meaning shaped by context?), and Intention (what purposes does the meaning serve?). This approach moves beyond simply decoding static information to understanding the dynamic process of designing and redesigning meaning through interaction with the available designs.

Following this concept, analyzing a game like Dark Souls involves applying these five questions to its diverse multimodal elements. First, Reference asks what meanings are being described. In Dark Souls, this is related to identifying the concepts and mechanics represented across all these modes: the visual representations of environments and enemies, the hidden lore in item descriptions, and the sound design indicating threats or trying to point out to the reader a location. Environmental storytelling, using spatial and visual modes, describes the world's history and state without traditional narration. Secondly, Dialogue is supposed to examine how meanings connect interacting people and the interaction between the game's hard design and the player's

interpretation. This involves analyzing how multimodal cues (visual, auditory, spatial, and tactile) communicate information in an attempt to establish a responsive relationship as the player learns through his own actions and interprets the available designs. Third, structure is about the bigger picture created by the combination of meanings. In Dark Souls, this means analyzing its multimodal design, how the interconnected level layouts are organized, how visual design aligns with soundscapes, and how the lore pieces form a narrative. Fourth, Situation investigates how meanings are shaped by their context. The interpretation of a sign changes based on the player's location, progress, and immediate context. This requires the player to constantly think and rethink based on the multimodal cues in their specific situation. Finally, Intention asks about the purposes and interests meanings serve. This explores the design goals behind the game's characteristics, the difficulty aimed at incentivizing determination, the hidden lore[2] intended to encourage exploration, or the atmosphere created through specific sound and visual design.

## 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Environmental storytelling refers to the practice of conveying narrative through designed spaces, allowing players to piece together story elements by interacting with the game environment. Rather than relying on dialogue or cutscenes, this technique uses architecture, objects, and spatial arrangement to suggest narrative meaning. This practice in turn allows for a wide array of readers to build their own interpretation of the proposed narrative regardless of how well the language in question is understood, be it English or any other, given the fact that verbal texts are not the only semiotic ways employed.

Video games in particular can make a really immersive use of this practice due to the fact that the reader is able to experience the narrative in a way that encompasses more than only a spectator's point of view and instead in multiple cases such as Dark Souls (2011) and Bioshock (2007). These are games in which the environmental storytelling is always present, influencing the meaning each reader is creating for themselves. Other aspects of gaming, such as the mechanical part (the ability to coordinate eyes and hands to properly play said video game), are enhancing the experience by providing an additional layer to the proposed narrative.

Videogames as an avenue of communication can also operate as multimodal systems where meaning is constructed through a combination of visual, spatial, auditory, and textual modes. This logic is based on the assumption that, "meaning-making in multimodal texts involves the

[2] The term used in Videogame analysis to refer to the general narrative that can be inferred or not directly mentioned

interpretation of signs across various communicative modes, not just written language" (Kress,van Leeuwen, 2006). In this sense, games such as Dark Souls challenge the player to interpret a vast array of complex signs such as the eerie soundtrack, the placement of corpses, item descriptions, and environmental architecture. These elements all work together to communicate narrative fragments. This multiplicity of semiotic resources deepens immersion and broadens the spectrum of possible interpretations

This practice also demonstrates a live development of meaning-making, as it occurs when individuals organize different signifiers into a coherent system that reflects their lived experiences and the ways they make sense of the world, as discussed by Cloonan, Kalantzis, and Cope (2010).In the wider context of games, this involves the player's engagement with narrative and visual elements and interactive mechanics to build their own personal interpretations of the game world based on factors such as their own background, culture, language, political orientation as highlighted by Gee (2003). This process of personal analysis of the game also can be another factor that makes each interpretation of the narrative unique for each reader, given the situation that even though every different person is experiencing the same base concept for the narrative, to finish the game in Dark Souls (2011), all players will face the same enemies, solve the same puzzles, and explore the same areas, but the usage of environmental storytelling allows each reader to piece the different parts of the puzzle together in a different manner based on their own personal concepts.

Unlike traditional linear narratives, which follow a strict path predetermined by its author, games such as Dark Souls rely heavily on interpretative narrative. This means that the story closely accompanies the player's explorations of the game world, allowing the narrative to be shaped by exploration choices, missed clues, and discoveries. This is corroborated by the notion that "in video games, the story unfolds bit by bit as the player discovers information, and the player's actions are part of the story line, differing from books or movies where the author determines the order of events and sources of information" (Gee, 2003). The player's agency in exploring and interpreting scattered information results in a deeply personalized story experience that is never identical between two playthroughs.

One player may see a statue in an abandoned castle and imagine that it depicts a great king long gone, another may see it as a god from a bygone era, a third one may look at the statue and think nothing of it. This is a visible example that demonstrates that "narratives emerge from spaces that mobilize the audience to produce meanings that extrapolate beyond what is strictly denoted on the

screen." (Levy, 2021, p. 194). In video games, the player needs to go beyond the role of a passive actor of a narrative and is supposed to actively participate in the construction of meaning. They explore domains such as visual cues, spatial arrangements, and interactive mechanics that the player must engage with to build their own understanding of the narrative and game world.

This allows the reader to build a more natural sense of familiarity over time, as the rhythm of growth is established by the reader itself, not only with the narrative and the world proposed but also with the language used, even if they do not master it. This happens because "no two interpretations of a message will ever be considered the same, because two people will never have the same frame of reference" (Kalantzis; Cope; Pinheiro, 2020). The fragmented nature of environmental storytelling in Dark Souls compels players to engage in active participation, filling gaps in the story based on context, memory, and previous knowledge. This approach to storytelling incentivizes the reader to always adapt in a way that "the player has to be observant to find the little clues and put them together to construct the richnarrative." (Rijnders, 2023), The environment thus serves not just as a backdrop but as the primary source of information that players must diligently explore and make sense of to uncover the game's deeper narrative.

# 5. ANALYSIS

For this analysis, three key parts of the game were chosen to elaborate on the connection between meaning-making and environmental storytelling. 1) The main hub, “Firelink Shrine,” a central area of the world and initial area of the plot that connects multiple paths and provides a safe haven to the reader; 2) “Anor Londo,” the area responsible for the middle point of the story; 3) “The Kiln of the First Flame,” the final area of the game that leads to the confrontation with the final boss. These three points in the story are central to the experience of all readers since they cannot be avoided regardless of the players' chosen path of interpretation of the world. This analysis will be made using the five questions mentioned before in the concepts of design: reference (what is being described?), dialogue (how are participants connected?), structure (how do meanings hold together?), situation (how is meaning shaped by context?), and intention (what purposes does the meaning serve?).

## 5.1 Analysis 01: Firelink Shrine Part 1A - Reference

Firelink Shrine acts in the game as the reader’s main safe location and as a central hub where other NPCs[3] (non-playable characters) converge after their first interaction. The area is designed

[3] Term used in video games to refer to non-playable characters

as a starting point of many different pathways leading to different areas of the game; however, no instruction is given on which one the readers must or should follow, leaving it entirely to be explored at one's leisure. However, not all paths that can be followed are possible for every person, for some paths may feature enemies and traps much more difficult than others, pointing at a suggestion that can be interpreted or not as an indication that this is not the correct way, but once again, this is up to the readers.

Firelink Shrine serves as the main anchor to the reader in Dark Souls, establishing itself as a spatial and thematic reference point from the earliest moments of the game. Its geography is uniquely central, not in a literal topographical sense, but in how it connects multiple relevant are such as the Undead Burg, the Catacombs, and New Londo Ruins. The first is the intended path, and the other two are much more difficult areas that are meant to be visited later but can first be fully accessed at any given point if the readers wish to do so. This interconnectivity is mirrored in its circular, decayed architecture, which can possibly evoke in the reader an idea of life, death, and rebirth, themes that are central to the game's lore. The visual design reinforces this idea: stone arches, a sunlit sky, and the very important central bonfire evoke a sense of sanctuary amidst a world otherwise filled with decay and hostility. The environment, usually marked only by its soundtrack or the eventual chat with the NPCs, centers Firelink not just as a checkpoint but as a place of reflection and narrative grounding; it is the player's emotional and mechanical starting point.

**Figure 1 – Firelink Shrine**

Source: Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/. Accessed: 24 June 2025

**Part 1B – Dialogue**

Because this area is the main connection point in the game world, the reader starts their exploration and learning experiences with the game. Once this area provides pathways into other areas of varying difficulty, it is the readers' natural process of creating meaning with their experiences and, most of the time, deaths that builds Firelink as a unique location for each different person. One reader may explore each path only once, switching to a new one every time they fail at defeating an enemy or surpassing a trap because they understand that they are not supposed to venture into that area yet. Another player may try numerous times in these same locations even after failure because he made a mechanical mistake in his last attempt, and now he should be able to thrive and advance. Both approaches are possible since the narrative and, therefore, the game world do not push the reader into a passive position and instead incentivize them to explore not only the topological layout but also the extent of their own mechanical skills.

Another important aspect of the interaction between the player and NPCs lies in the design choice that most characters encountered throughout the journey eventually make their way to Firelink Shrine. These characters each have their own backstories and motivations, which may or may not align with the player's, and in some cases, may not even be entirely true. One example is the "Crestfallen Warrior," the first person we meet in Firelink. He exemplifies the game's use of fragmented dialogue and emotional tone to build environmental storytelling, visible in his first dialogue with the reader's character, "Well, what do we have here?" You must be a new arrival. Let me guess... Fate of the Undead, right? Well, you're not the first." His resigned attitude and cryptic comments subtly convey the hopelessness that pervades Lordran. As a passive observer, he reflects the player's own uncertainty and foreshadows potential failure. His eventual disappearance reinforces themes of despair, inertia, and the consequences of giving up.

**Part 1C – Structure**

The elements in the area also serve as points where the reader will build their own meaning and symbology while being directed by the larger narrative. For example, the bonfire positioned in the very center of the area serves not only as the checkpoint for the reader, but the concept of fire as explained the larger narrative of the game, also called "Lore," states that fire is where life came from and where the living beings draw comfort. This concept, together with the soundtrack[2] [4]incentivizes the readers to build a sense of comfort in this location. Some may even call it their

[2] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL9dArwG5cE&ab_channel=KPlayz

home in this world, so that returning visits from other more chaotic locations evoke a sense of ease of tension, where one may sit down by the fire and let not only the main character created by the reader but also the reader recover mind and body from the journey so far and prepare for the next adventure.

**Part 1D - Situation**

Even a static location such as Firelink Shrine will change its meaning as the reader progresses in the game. In the beginning of the narrative, the so-called "early game," the player is intimidated by virtually everything around him/her. Exploration, enemies, traps, and even the mechanical aspect of the game are elements that must be mastered to some degree or at least understood in order for the experience, no matter how it would unfold, to happen. In the half part of the experience called the "Mid-Game," the player has achieved a certain level of control over the aspects of the game and has developed for himself/herself a meaningful sense of the story and world that s/he has experienced so far. In this moment Firelink stops being this safe haven and transforms into a means to an end. The path needed to take a short cut, the fastest way to a location that he had not explored yet or the location where he needed to speak with a certain NPC. The final moment of relevance for Firelink Shrine is when the player acquires the item called "The Lordvessel" that allows the readers to instantly teleport to a specific area that he has previously been to. This removes the need to backtrack to previous locations and diminishes the meaning the Firelink has as the main location that connects the world because at this point the reader is capable of taking this active approach of finding his way in the game world by himself.

**Part 1E - Intention**

While the entire premise behind the creation of Firelink Shrine was for it to be the central point in the game world, it is clear the desire by the developers to have this area be an initial experimentation of the game's larger structure design, having the necessary means to encourage, comfort, or even deceive the players. This idea that while playing in a predetermined area of a predetermined world, it is completely up to the reader to position itself in this situation to create its own meanings and interpretations of the many semiotic avenues presented, which in turn sets up this unique experience that even if countless people may experience through the same means, it is never for the same ends.

## 5.2 Analysis 02 – Anor Londo

**Part 2A – Reference**

Anor Londo is the central area in the halfway point of the game, also called the “Mid- Game,” and it differs greatly from the previous area that the readers were required to explore before being granted access to it. This area is inaccessible before some criteria are met (ringing the bells of awakening, this first and only objective that is clearly said to the reader in a dialogue). Some of the mandatory areas that were visited, such as Undead Burg, Blighttown, gave off a sense of decay and misery, being filled with environmental hazards such as poisonous swamps and falling pathways, as well as enemies like giant insects or lesser demons, that evoked in the reader most of the time the feeling that he was not supposed to be there or that these places were forgotten and cursed.

Everything changes the moment the readers arrive in Anor Londo and are greeted by a large-scale view of the golden city (see Figure 02), and immediately the architecture resembling that of a massive church and the lighting showing a glowing golden sun in the back will contrast with the dark and ruined locations seen so far and evoke in the readers an immediate interpretation of the area even before any exploration properly begins. And as the exploration begins, the player can see in the marble hall and grand statue all the magnitude that this area is meant to transmit, but the meaning of all of this is entirely up for the reader's own ideological conclusions, be it a massive church, a city to the god, or even the last bastion for light in a world so profoundly dark; all are possible and valid views.

**Figure 2 – Anor Londo.**

Source: Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/. Accessed: 24 June 2025

**Part 2B – Dialogue**

Unironically, one of, if not the most important dialogues, which happens in this area of the game is between the readers and the area itself. This is due to the fact that while traversing the area, one may notice that while this city is massive in scale and significance, it is surprisingly empty of life besides for the enemies, mostly the silver knights that are sworn to defend the city; the main bosses of this area, known for being harder than the final boss of the game for some readers, "Dragonslayer Ornstein and Executioner Smough"; and some NPCs that are exploring the city during the same time as yourself. Questions that might come up during this exploration are, where are all the regular inhabitants of this place? Why are all these knights guarding an empty city? Why does the sun only shine brightly here? The readers have all the tools to find their own answers to these questions in the environment around them, but once again, the task of creating and consolidating these different meanings and interpretations is subjective and entirely up to the reader's own pace and desire for further exploration.

Another important point of dialogue happens after the reader manages to defeat the main boss of the area, "Ornstein and Smough," and is granted access to the chambers of the goddess Gywnevere. It is here that not only the readers receive his second and final objective of the game, "gather the four lord souls and open the area of the final boss," but it is also here that "The Lordvessel" is acquired, an essential item not only for the plot due to it being the only entrance to the final area once the four lord souls are acquired but also mechanically, because after this moment the reader is granted the ability to "fast travel" to previous locations. This means that backtracking is no longer necessary, as the player can simply use a "bonfire" to transport itself to the desired location. This reopens exploration in previous areas and incentivizes the reader, if they so desire, to expand their knowledge of the game world.

**Part 2C - Structure**

The multi-layered structure of Anor Londo was inspired by that of Milan Cathedral "*Duomo di Milano*," which was visited in person by Dark Souls designer Masanori Waragai. This, together with Miyazaki's vision, created an area that seeks to evoke in the readers a sense of duality. The grand structures of the main cathedral contrast with the strict corridors that are present throughout its inner walls. The idea of a golden city as a bastion of light contrasts with the near absence of life in the area.

**Figure 3 Anor Londo. And Duomo di Milano**

Source: The Gamer. Dark Souls Locations You Can Visit In Real Life. Available at: https://www.thegamer.com/dark-souls-real-life-locations-inspirations/. Accessed on: 24 June 2025.

The area also has two other structural designs made with the intention of interacting with the reader only if they put themselves in the position to do so. One is the infamous “illusory walls.” Certain walls in the game world, when struck by the player using his weapons, spells, bombs, or whatever method is desired, will disappear and reveal a secret pathway or room. These special walls have no indication of such interaction and really rely on the player to have a meaning. In simple terms, once the players accidentally strike a wall and a whole new area opens up, they will have this hidden meaning engraved into the rest of their experience.

The other design is the presence of the entirely optional area “The Painted World of Ariamis.” Dark Souls has a number of areas that can be left unexplored if the readers do not desire to do so, and this will not compromise the main story in any way, but it will limit the reader’s understanding of the world as a whole. One of these areas can be entered through Anor Londo, but only if the player previously returned to the first area of the game, “Northern Undead Asylum,” and picked up an item called “The Peculiar Doll,” and after that interacted with a massive painting located in Anor Londo, will the area be accessible. Without this extra and optional active exploration by the reader, the entrance to the new area is not possible. The only tip to this interaction that is given is the item description of the peculiar doll given in game that reads, “Strange doll in strange dress. There once was an abomination who had no place in this world. She clutched this doll tightly and

eventually was drawn into a cold and lonely painted world". This example of subjective environmental storytelling is one of the “trademarks” of not only Dark Souls but also of its creator, Hidetaka Miyazaki.

**Figure 4 – The painted world of Ariamis**.

Source: Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/. Accessed: 24 June 2025

**Part 2D – Situation**

The most significant change in meaning during the exploration of Anor Londo is determined by what most people would classify as an intrusive thought: “What would happen if I attacked the goddess Gywnevere?” Although confusing, this otherwise weird decision is pivotal to the idea of challenging the meaning-making process that happened throughout the entire game so far. Why would I attack the goddess that gave me important items and the objective that will end the game? The reader may ask this itself but might remember what they learned so far in the game about how illusions are essential to the gods and their designs. Once attacked, it is revealed that not only the goddess but also the sun that lit up the city was an illusion created by the last deity present in the city, the dark moon god, and Gywnevere brother, Gywndolyn. The city is actually sunk in darkness, and the gods left the city ages ago. The dark moon god created this illusion to maintain the myth of the gods and the era of fire created by his father and final boss of the game, the sun god Gwyn. That is indirectly mentioned in item descriptions and dialogues so far.

Anor Londo’s initial presentation as a divine, untouched sanctuary contrasts sharply with the

ruins and faded hope of earlier areas like Firelink Shrine. From Firelink, players encounter fragmented information about the gods primarily through vague dialogue and cryptic item descriptions, setting up a mystique around figures like Gwyn and his children. However, this impression is later shattered by revelations such as the illusion of Gywnevere and the presence of Gywndolyn. Retrospectively, this forces players to reinterpret earlier hints as deliberate misdirection or mythologizing, reframing Anor Londo not as a divine bastion but as an elaborate lie upheld by illusion and denial.

As readers progress through the game, their perception of divine authority changes drastically, and Anor Londo is the key point in this evolution. Initially seen as the golden city, it encourages reverence and submission as in medieval societies. However, the exploration reveals its divine figures are either absent, dead, or deceptive. Gywnevere is an illusion (figure 06), Gywndolyn hides in the shadows, and Gwyn himself is reduced to a hollow shell. These revelations challenge the player's belief in the legitimacy of the gods' rule, seeing divine authority as fragile, manipulative, or tragically misguided. This shift in understanding highlights how Dark Souls uses situational context and environmental storytelling to deconstruct traditional heroic or religious narratives, placing the burden of interpretation and moral choice entirely on the player

**Figure 5 – Dark Anor Londo Source**


Source: Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/. Accessed: 24 June 2025

**Figure 6 – Illusion Of The Goddess Gywnevere**

Source: Ahmed Carrillo. Illusion of the goddess Gywnevere. Pinterest. Available at: https://br.pinterest.com/pin/660551470323652452/. Accessed on: 24 June 2025.

**Part 2E – Intention**

The whole point of Anor Londo's visual grandeur is not just to impress the reader but to make it believe something bigger is still holding the world together. At first, when the reader arrives, the glowing sky, massive cathedrals, and silver guards give the impression that the gods are still in control, that there is order and purpose left in the world. But the more you look around, the more you notice how empty it all feels. There's no one to greet you, only statues, lifeless giants, and hostile defenders. It's a performance, and you're the audience. The game wants the reader to buy into this illusion so it can later make you question why you ever believed it in the first place. Anor Londo isn't just a place; it's a massive bait. It lures you into a false sense of obedience and faith, only to tear it all down when you start asking questions.

And that is exactly the point. The moment the reader uncovers that Gywnevere is an illusion and the city is actually cloaked in darkness, it realizes that everything about divine authority might be a lie. But the game doesn't tell you this outright; they must have the initiative to push against the narrative itself, often by doing things you were told not to do, like attacking a goddess. That act of defiance reveals the city's true state and forces you to see the whole world differently. The illusion wasn't just there to fool you; it was there to test your willingness to look deeper and your activeness. The purpose isn't to give you a straight story; it's to make you question every piece of it and build

your own meaning from the ruins.

## 5.3 Analysis part 03 Kiln of the first flame

### Part 3A – Reference

The Kiln of the First Flame is the final mandatory area of the story, and it is at the same time the simplest point and the culmination of the narrative built until this moment by both the reader and the game itself. Only accessible after the defeat of the other four "Great Lords" and subsequent exploration of their respective areas, this final location sets up the confrontation between the player and the highest deity in the narrative, the so-called "responsible" one for all the problems encountered so far, the sun god Gwyn, or as the game calls him during said confrontation, "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder." This area is visually, the least complex of the entire game thus far, even simpler than the "Northern Undead Asylum," the tutorial area of the game, for there are no hidden corridors or enemies, no traps or occult bosses, and barely even a soundtrack is present to accompany the reader during the final moments of its journey, as the area is basically made only of an ash-covered landscape, broken architecture, and glowing white sky. Seeking to evoke in the reader the visual confirmation of one of the main facts that has been transmitted by not only the NPCs but also through all the locations that the reader tried to explore: the end of the Age of Fire.

The Age of Fire, or the Age of the Gods, as some characters refer to it, is the name given in the game to the period of prosperity where, after Gwyn and the other Lords defeated the everlasting dragons, as is shown in the very first scene of the game, they ruled the entire world and led many to a golden era. However, a prophecy was created stating that the Age of Fire would eventually and naturally end, and in its place would start the Age of Dark or the Age of Man. Gwyn, wishing to prevent this, used his own soul to unnaturally extend the Age of Fire, thus the reason for his title no longer being the God of the Sun but instead the Lord of Cinder, but this also destabilized the world, creating many of the problems witnessed by the reader in its experience.

The Kiln of the First Flame is the location where the first flame lies and where Gwyn did his sacrifice, one of the possible explanations for it being covered in ashes, but also this symbolizes the collapse of the age of fire, for there is no flame in this "kiln" of ashes. This is meant to be the reader's realization that his journey is in large part about burnt-out echoes of places and values once held.

**Figure 07 – Kiln of the first flame**

Source: Reddit. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/. Accessed: 24 June 2025

**Part 3B – Dialogue**

Unironically, even an area devoid of ninety-nine percent of all gameplay aspects seen thus far and remotely classifiable as dialogue still presents a reflection in this regard. This happens because, instead of interpreting and creating meaning using the elements laid out to it by the game so far in abundance, such as enemies, item descriptions, architecture, map layout, and the like, another kind of engagement is prompted. This location seeks a dialogue not directly with the player as if using an NPC to talk with their character, but, instead, it is the lack of NPCs, dialogue, or music in the area that seeks to reshape how meaning is exchanged. The reader has not only what their eyes can see but also the meaning constructed so far as the tool for understanding in their own way the message this area is trying to convey to them.

This nothingness is only broken the moment the player steps up for their final confrontation with Lord Gwyn, but even with the return of the soundtrack, the theme of melancholy and decay is not diminished but enhanced, and this concept of the mightiest of deities being afraid of the dark is so deep-seated that not only does the name Gwyn in Welsh means "white" or "holy," but the entire soundtrack of the final confrontation is played using white tiles on the piano. This is not a climactic showdown between hero and villain but more of a symbolic conversation about legacy, failure, and choice. It is the funeral of not only Gwyn but everything he stood for. Ideals such as power, godhood, and the age of fire are lost, burnt out, and reduced to ashes.

**Part 3C – Structure**

This area can be summarized as extremely minimalistic due to not only its physical layout of linear pathways but also its atmosphere being empty and silent, conveying a deeper meaning than first intended. This is not the apex of the journey, though it is the final area; it shows how not only the people but the world itself is exhausted, mainly due to the unnatural extension of the age of fire. The landscape looks decayed because these places were no longer meant to be. As previously mentioned, this can be interpreted as an allegory of holding on to concepts and ideas that are no longer possible, a meaning that will be different for every single person that passes through this area.

The presence of three enemies in the area needs to be mentioned, the Black Knights. These were Gwyn's personal guards and went together with the burnt god into the Kiln to guard their lord's ultimate sacrifice, but now they are merely husks or "hollows," as the game calls people who lose their humanity[3] and become either feral creatures or lifeless husks that follow something that was important in their lives. They are also part of the concept that is present in the structure of this area, holding on to something that was supposed to let go. Their lord is gone, their golden city has fallen into darkness, and even they are only a shadow of their former glory, but still the curse laid by Lord Gwyn condemns them to remain in their duties.

**Part 3D – Situation**

The arrival of the reader into the Kiln is meant to recontextualize the meanings set up by their exploration of earlier locations such as Firelink Shrine and Anor Londo. As the game progressed, the reader was told stories about the glory of the gods, the dangers of the dark, and how Gwyn's vision must be maintained at all costs, but instead, the final area shows how these ideals were long gone, the so-called dark are the humanity[3] in people and the ideal of the golden lord are but a long memory.

This leads up to a final confrontation where the "villain" does not speak a single word to the reader, no evil monologue, no attempt at a justification. Gwyn himself is long gone too, and the reader is there merely to put him out of his misery. But before the credits roll and the game properly ends, the readers still need to make a choice between one of the two possible endings to the game: you can either make the same choice as Lord Gwyn and link the first flame to give the age of fire some extra life but with the knowledge that eventually it will die out again, or you can walk away

[3] In the game described as a physical aspect of the soul of all humans

and let the flames die out, finishing the age of fire and starting the age of dark.

The meaning behind this choice and the consequences of it are never shown in the game and are left completely up to the reader's meaning-making. Some may choose to link the flame, hoping to succeed where Gwyn failed, while some may walk away from the flame with the hope that humanity is a safer choice than the gods. Regardless, the ending is unique to each person, heavily dependent on the process of making and remaking the many different meanings built throughout the game.

**Part 3E – Intention**

The Kiln of the First Flame is not built like a final video game level in the traditional sense. Instead, it feels like a grave. There is no music, no dialogue, and no buildup. Just ash, silence, and the burned-out remnants of a world that already ended. The concept is that the game gave up on trying to guide the reader, but instead it asks them to stop and think. Why are you here? What are you really fighting for? Even the boss, Gwyn, is no longer the triumphant god you expected, for he is a decayed husk clinging to a fading flame. Rather than making him feel like a villain, the game makes him feel tragic, pitiful. It is as if FromSoftware's intention is to strip away the last layer of myth and leave you alone with the question the game has been building from the start: what do you believe in now that everything has crumbled?

And what you do after that fight is more important than anything the game tells you directly. Do you link the fire and continue the cycle, or do you walk away and let the Age of Fire finally die? The game will never tell you which is right or wrong, and this is the central idea. There is no final cutscene to explain what your choice means or a narration to validate it. The Kiln was never meant to deliver closure; it was built to give the player authority. After spending the whole game interpreting ruins, illusions, and fragments of truth, the reader is left with one final symbolic act that reflects their own understanding of the world. In the end, the story will not resolve itself; the game hands it to you and says, "You decide what it means."

## 6. FINAL THOUGHTS

This study has explored Dark Souls (2011) as an example of how environmental storytelling redefines narrative engagement in video games, moving beyond depending on verbal input to empower readers as active participants in meaning-making. Through its designed spaces, the game communicates narrative context, allowing players to piece together story elements by interacting with the environment itself. This approach, popularized by Dark Souls, deliberately reduces the use

of traditional dialogue and cutscenes in favor of conveying meaning through architecture, objects, and spatial arrangements. The core of Dark Souls' narrative strategy lies in its function as a multimodal system, where meaning is not explicitly stated but dynamically constructed through a combination of visual, spatial, auditory, and textual modes. Dark Souls challenges players to interpret a vast array of complex signs, from soundtracks and corpse placement to intricate item descriptions and environmental architecture, all working together to communicate narrative fragments. This vastness of semiotic resources deepens immersion and broadens the spectrum of possible interpretations.

The theoretical framework of multiliteracies proves essential in understanding this process, as it explains meaning-making as an active process of design in multimodal contexts. Hidetaka Miyazaki's unique design philosophy, influenced by his personal experiences with incomplete information, is pivotal to Dark Souls' engagement model. The game intentionally leaves gaps in the story, trusting readers to become curious, interpretative, and reflective participants rather than passive consumers. Consequently, the narrative in Dark Souls is not predetermined but rather shaped by the player's explorations, discoveries, and even missed clues, resulting in a deeply personalized story experience that is never identical among different readers. This allows them to transcend the role of passive actors, actively participating in the construction of meaning by engaging with various semiotic domains like visual cues and spatial arrangements.

In conclusion, Dark Souls stands as a profound demonstration of the power of environmental storytelling and multimodal design in crafting deeply immersive and personally resonant narratives. By intentionally fragmenting its lore and providing multifaceted semiotic resources, the game compels players to actively participate in the construction of meaning, weaving together their own unique understanding of its peculiar world. This unique design philosophy redefines how players create meaning, demonstrating that the most impactful stories are often those that allow the player to decide what they mean. The legacy of Dark Souls is not just in its challenge or atmosphere, but in its pioneering approach to narrative, inviting every player to become a co- author of their own, singular journey through Lordran.

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