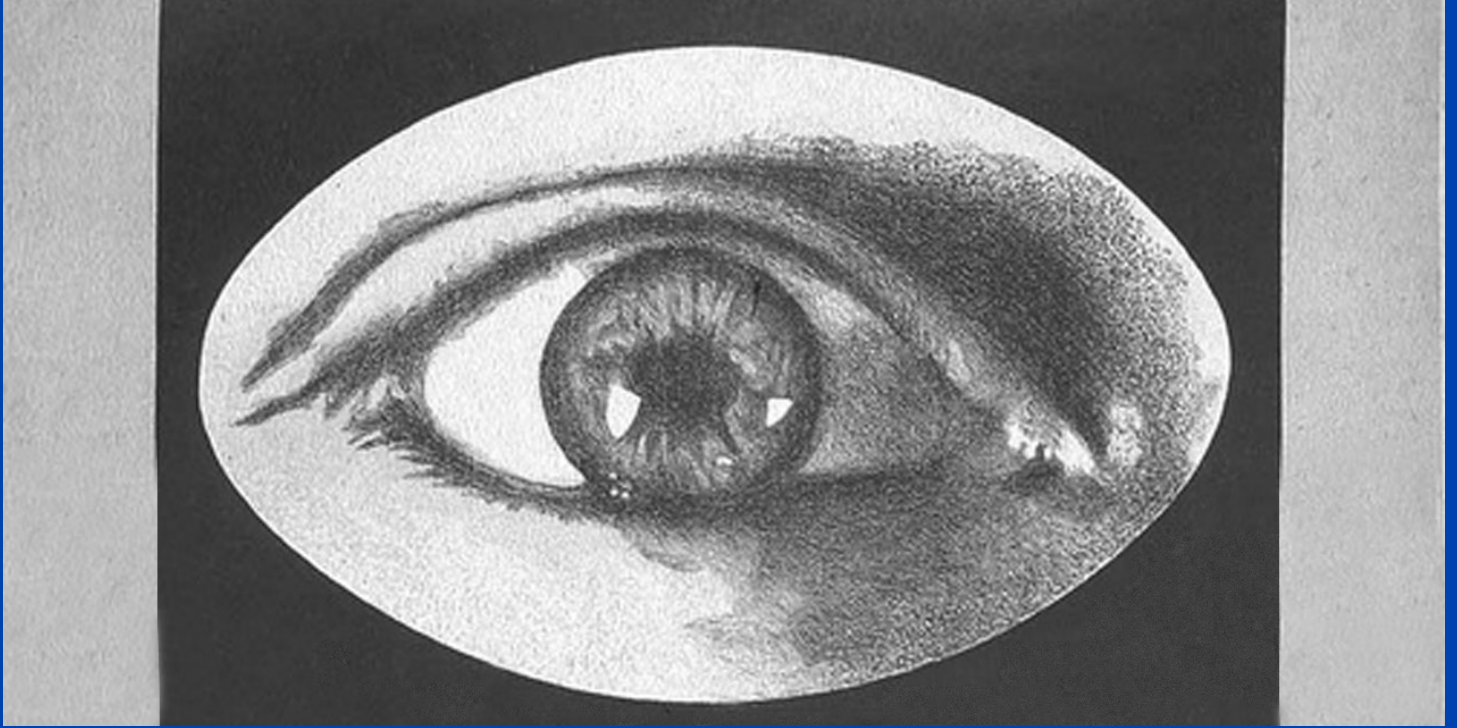


# FILMSZEM 2023



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## VIDEOGAMES



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## András Bach

### *The Video Game Auteur - Understanding grief and failure in Hidetaka Miyazaki's Souls series*

#### Preface

There are only a handful pieces of art that can be considered truly influential to their own respective artforms – still, certain works do possess the uncanny ability to spark an entire cultural reform or paradigm shift. In their infancy, most forms of art are much more prone to mold to their time period's respective wants and needs. As time passes and cultures change, different themes and aspects of life come into the limelight, and we see new artists emerge and old ones adapt. When this initial era of establishment is passed however, it becomes increasingly harder to introduce change. Through the method of conscious deconstruction, elements of an artform can be broken down into singular pieces, but whether this endeavor is fruitful or not is dependent on many factors, arguably the most elusive and coveted of them all – luck. As history would have it, luck, more elegantly known as “being in the right place at the right time”, has not usually been on the side of artistic visionaries when it comes to contemporary artforms.

In the 1970s, the term *cult classic* started to emerge, and was used to describe films that amassed a dedicated, cultlike following, even if they were not financially successful, and in certain cases, were generally inaccessible to, or completely misunderstood by contemporary audiences. Cult classics come in many forms. The 1988 movie *Heathers* is a perfect example of the above-mentioned cautious deconstruction of a genre, albeit it is still relatively unknown today. On the other hand, the early works of directors like Quentin Tarantino are basically universal experiences. Other than their cultlike following, cult classics are usually united by their delayed cultural significance.

Yet, as time passed, fans of these movies have not only developed their own subcultures, but also took major inspiration from them, and thus, a chain of influence was born. To this day, several artists of different mediums cite cult classics of their times as the most important pieces of art that propelled them further into exploring their vision. In my opinion, this phenomenon is not only due to the ever-evolving state of the world, but it can also be credited to a desire to explore the unknown. While the comfort provided by well-established writing and directing techniques is more accessible, breaking that norm can present the audience with such a sudden feeling of unrest, that

they may temporarily let go of their preconceived ideas and open themselves up to something new – or dismiss the experience entirely due to the rapidly overflowing anxiety and potentially never partake again. This uncertainty is the main reason why introducing change is so difficult, since even if an artist is ready to make such a leap (and in certain cases they may not comprehend this themselves), the reaction they will get from the other side of the screen is unpredictable.

I view the evolution of the movie industry and the introduction of purely art films as a great predecessor to the theme I want to explore in this thesis. While I was an advocate of the recognition of video games as art ever since I was first introduced to them, I felt that the uphill battle that I and many others had to fight just so they would even be considered as such, to be both arduous and stigmatizing. However, by examining the journey films had to go through, I find a lot of comfort in realizing that it is the same path all pieces of media must walk. Paolo Xavier Machado Menezes put this perfectly in his 2017 thesis, *The Downward Spiral: Postmodern Consciousness as Buddhist Metaphysics in the Dark Souls Video Game Series*.

*„New mediums tend to have a rough go at it in the university as each one must fight its way uphill past the arbiters of high-culture. It was true of film and photography at the outset of the twentieth century, and it is true of comics, television and video games today, but how impoverished would the Humanities be if we simply dismissed the works of Mizoguchi Kenji on the grounds that they belong to the wrong medium? What is there to gain by privileging the study of one medium over all others? This is prejudice of the worst sort, and we are all the poorer for such arbitrary judgements.”<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout the history of video games, due to the nature of the medium and its recent accessibility, even more works had to walk the very same path as *cult classics*. While an innumerable amount of essays and theses could be written about all the works that have contributed to the shift of focus from purely entertainment to art, in this thesis, I will focus on Hidetaka Miyazaki’s *Souls* series, starting with the 2009 game *Demon’s Souls*<sup>2</sup>, and making the 2011 game, *Dark Souls*<sup>3</sup> my focal point. I will examine how these works came into existence through both Miyazaki’s vision and the appreciation of contemporary audiences, its interpretation of both western and Japanese ethos, their way of processing and understanding grief and failure, and how they changed the modern outlook on the video game industry.

<sup>1</sup> MENEZES, P. *The Downward Spiral: Postmodern Consciousness as Buddhist Metaphysics in the Dark Souls Video Game Series*. Portland: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Demon’s Souls*. FromSoftware, Sony/Atlus/Namco Bandai, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Dark Souls*. FromSoftware, Namco Bandai, 2011.

## Chapter I: The Emergence of Video Games as Art

### *Limitations Will Set You Free*

The concept of a 'first video game' comes up quite often when discussing the history of the industry. Even though the roots of video games as an artforms are not as vast as those of film, photography or music – due to its relatively recent inception – William Higinbotham's laser-based tennis game in his Brookhaven radio laboratory in 1958<sup>4</sup> is usually considered to be the very first functional video game. Fitting, that it was not intentionally believed to be anything significant, other than an entertaining concept. As we know today, it grew into an industry that's 2022 total revenue is projected to be \$197 billion<sup>5</sup>, completely overtaking more mainstream industries like that of cinema.<sup>6</sup> This growth in both revenue and popularity accumulated quite slowly in the early years, and when video games became truly accessible to the public, they were usually relegated to arcades. With the popularity of home consoles such as the Atari 2600, video games slowly started to find their place in homes, but it was not until the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (from hereby NES) that their presence was cemented in both Japan and the west.<sup>7</sup> It would have been quite early to declare them a piece of art akin to the film industry of the time, but it was indeed art, nonetheless. As more companies ventured into the industry, basic, now commonplace concepts came to be established. While video games are an audio-visual medium, their mechanism bore more resemblance to that of tabletop games. Concepts such as life points, or more commonly known as health points, movement and level design all had to be conveyed through the systems' limited graphical abilities. These eventually became more abstract, and the average player could easily understand what the icons corresponded to on their screen. As technology advanced and limitations slowly came to be lifted, games started becoming more complex and were able to even introduce narrative elements. However, I am of the belief that without its initial period of experimentation, abstractions that we use today would not be as well established. This can be very easily seen with games of the 1980s and 1990s that were made by companies who had no prior video game experiences<sup>8-9</sup> – as many times before through different mediums, we can observe an attempt at outsiders trying to invent solutions to problems that did not exist in the target demographic of video game audiences,

<sup>4</sup> CHODOS, A., „This Month in Physics History”, *American Physical Society*, 2008, XVII/9, 1.

<sup>5</sup> STATISTA, Video Game Industry Projected Revenue [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

<sup>6</sup> STATISTA, Cinema Industry Projected Revenue [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)

<sup>7</sup> KOHLER, C., „Oct. 18, 1985: Nintendo Entertainment System Launches”, [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com)

<sup>8</sup> Color Games, later known as Wisdom Tree, became the first company to create games for the NES and SNES that were not officially approved by Nintendo

<sup>9</sup> BOGOST, I. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2007, 287–288.

like communicating the previously mentioned concepts through the home consoles' still limited visual fidelity, to even the basic narrative structure. The importance of the need for experimentation due to limitations will be a recurring theme of this thesis, as I believe it is fundamentally inseparable from the creative process that led to video games becoming a unique artform, not just interactive movies.

While home consoles of the time could produce sound, it was not until the release of the NES in the latter half of the 1980's that the concept of video game music became accepted. Songs, such as the main theme of the 1987 *The Legend of Zelda*<sup>10</sup> and *Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest*<sup>11</sup> became so iconic, that modern inceptions of the series still use the very same melodies. Though much simpler than the two aforementioned pieces, the soundtrack of the 1989 *Tetris*<sup>12</sup> is universally known both in- and outside of the subculture. As we see this evolution in artistic presentation, we can also perceive a similar change when it comes to general game design. In the days of arcade machines, games frequently employed a trial and error approach, as a means to get attendees to spend more money on extra lives, by putting coins into the machines, which then let the players try again. Due to this, it was generally expected that no matter how skilled someone might be, their initial experience with arcade games will usually end in failure, and should they learn from it, they would be able to eventually master the game. Leaderboards were quite popular, and this gave a competitive edge to the community, which has now grown itself into a highly profitable modern esports scene. Since home consoles did not have such a system in place, developers could actively make use of narrative techniques that required the player to spend more time with the game and encourage a more attentive approach. Since video games were quite expensive at the time, with brand new releases usually priced in the \$40-50 range, this was also a clever way to pad out game time, thus providing more hours of entertainment for the price. In certain cases, these attempts at inflating game time became quite notorious, most famously the 1993 *X-Men*<sup>13</sup> game, in which, after giving the written instruction "Reset the Computer", the player had to literally reset their game console in order to progress to the next level. Faced with such a situation now, one could easily look up the solution online, but since there was no such method at the time, all players could turn towards were their own communities, and the game's official strategy guide. This might seem like a developer oversight, but there are also examples where it could be argued that the player was never intended to find out the solution without looking up such a guide. In the example of *X-Men*, the player is at least given a clue, but in games like the previously mentioned *Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest*, to finish

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<sup>10</sup> The Legend of Zelda, Nintendo R&D4, Nintendo, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest, Konami, Konami, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Tetris, Nintendo R&D1, Nintendo, 1989.

<sup>13</sup> X-Men, Western Technologies, Inc., Sega, 1993.

one of the levels, the player had to equip a specific item, crouch down, lean towards a wall and wait a couple of seconds before a tornado took them away to the next stage. Whatever the intention of the developers was, these kind of challenges not only strengthened the cohesion of gaming communities, as there was simply no way to find out about something like this alone, it also raised an important question: if by doing something this specific, you can progress to the next level, just how many secrets could there have been inside other games, that were all yet to be discovered. Further and further experimentation led to the emergence of specific genres and gameplay loops, and as formulas cemented, video games became more alike. While this made games even more appealing to mainstream audiences, as having similar concepts throughout different games made getting into new ones much easier for gamers, it also led to oversaturation in the industry later on.

Most styles came to be described by their gameplay, camera angle, or themes. In the NES and SNES<sup>14</sup> era, the most popular genre was the 'side-scroller'. These games had a parallel camera angle to the player character that followed their movement on a two-dimensional plane, usually from the left to the right. The gameplay centered around players performing precise jumps between platforms. To defeat enemies, the player either had some kind of attack that he could utilize with one of the face buttons of the NES controller, or they could deal with them through other means, most often by jumping on top of them. Arguably the most famous game of the decade – and possibly of all time – Nintendo's own *Super Mario Bros.*<sup>15</sup>, released in 1985 as the launch title of the NES, was the most influential of these platforming games. Ever since Mario, side-scrollers are associated with him, and in order to find their audience, other side-scrollers had to find something new and unique ways to add to the genre in order to set themselves apart from the Mario games. The *Metroid* and *Castlevania* series started to further add to this concept by making labyrinth-like stages that encouraged exploration, and the term 'metroidvania' was born. As we can see from its name, both players and developers associated the genres with their most standout games, and thus, certain games became benchmarks of the entire industry. Games under the metroidvania subgenre still exist today, albeit newer titles also had to adapt and further develop the gameplay loop into something memorable and outstanding. There were several other genres, like real-time strategy and fighting games, that also set themselves apart with their unique gameplay, and while these genres were all defined by their mechanics, as in its control and core gameplay loop, we can see that narrative similarities also start to arise.

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<sup>14</sup> The Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) was the 16bit successor to the NES, released in 1990 in Japan, 1991 in the United States, and 1992 in Europe

<sup>15</sup> Super Mario Bros., Nintendo R&D4, Nintendo, 1985

With the possibility of three-dimensional environments, in 1992, the first-person shooter (hereby FPS) emerged as the most revolutionary genre with the release of *Wolfenstein 3D*<sup>16</sup> by id Software. First-person shooters, as the name implies, had a camera perspective where the player saw the world through the eyes of the character, and carried a ranged weapon – usually a gun – that they could use to deal with enemies. This was a whole new level of immersion compared to everything else accessible to the general public before, and with the emergence of the fifth generation of video game home consoles, the ability to produce three-dimensional graphics became a top priority of the still competitive companies. The Nintendo 64, the Sony PlayStation, the Sega Saturn, the Atari Jaguar and the 3DO Interactive all focused their efforts on graphical fidelity, but the first two became the prominent leaders of the industry at the time. To keep up with the increase in file sizes, the PlayStation also opted to use CDs with its built-in CD-ROM instead of the traditional cartridge system that was employed by Nintendo and Sega in the previous generation.

The ever-increasing speed of technical development greatly contributed to video games not succumbing to the staleness that can be observed in most artforms after the initial establishment period. Between 1990 and 2000, it seemed like there was a new game that tried to reinvent the way a three-dimensional environment should be controlled almost every year. An unfortunate side effect of the nature of video games is that works that missed the mark on the fundamentals have aged ungracefully. Unlike a painting or a movie that can be experienced in the context of its time period, outdated game design usually asks far more leniency from the player. For people who regularly play modern games, it feels as if when attempting to raise their left arm, their right leg would move. Because of this, games that have stood the test of time like the 1996 *Super Mario 64*<sup>17</sup> or the 1998 *Banjo-Kazooie*<sup>18</sup> are much easier to revisit than something like the famous *GoldenEye64*<sup>19</sup>, which, while being one of the most influential FPS games of all time, feels completely outdated by modern standards.

As time passed, it became increasingly more important *why* and *how* something is happening, not just what it is exactly that the player has to do, and this was the perfect opportunity for artistic expression to shine. While it is impossible to pinpoint when exactly the focus on artistry became a conscious decision, the first three-dimensional installments of the Legend of Zelda series, namely *Ocarina of Time*<sup>20</sup> in 1998 and *Majora's Mask*<sup>21</sup> in 2000 mark a large shift in the way people interacted with video games. Being the singular title

<sup>16</sup> *Wolfenstein 3D*, id Software, Apogee Software, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> *Super Mario 64*, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> *Banjo-Kazooie*, Rare, Nintendo, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> *GoldenEye64*, Rare, Nintendo, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> *Legend of Zelda, Ocarina of Time*, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> *Legend of Zelda. Majora's Mask*, Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 2000.

to hold a 99/100 rating on Metacritic<sup>22</sup>, *Ocarina of Time* has been regarded as potentially the greatest game of all time – a bold title to hold for a game technically released in the 20th century. *Majora's Mask* on the other hand, is a perfect example of what I described in the preface of this thesis – a true cult classic. While being much less accessible than its previous installment, *Majora's Mask* explores particularly heavy subjects like grief, loss and mortality. Usually, games in the Zelda series revolve around the game's protagonist, Link, having to save Princess Zelda from the game's main antagonist Ganon. Here however, the plot revolves around Link trying to prevent the end of the World, as the Moon itself is about to fall onto the village the story is set in. This means that the game had to tackle a serious tonal shift, from a classic heroic adventure, to facing seemingly predetermined impending doom, while also being a Zelda game, accessible to its usual target demographic. Other than both being excellent games, the reason I chose to focus on them is that in my assessment, the Souls games continue the legacy set by games such as *Majora's Mask* in tackling topics of grief, loss, and the inevitable passage of time in the confines of its own medium, as well as something even more prominent – failure.

## Chapter II: Hidetaka Miyazaki's Vision

### Through the Looking Glass

In the previous chapter, I wanted to attentively focus on how innovation is done in the gaming industry. Through ingenuity, conscious risk-taking and the evolution of technology, leaps forward are made, and are followed and built upon by others. When it comes to the legacy of the greatest artists however, there is more to it than just sheer innovation. The term *auteur*<sup>23</sup> refers to artists whose influence over their work is paramount. In the realm of film, it usually means a director who qualifies as the work's author, even in cases when they may not be the writer themselves. When it comes video games, a very close parallel can be drawn to the above-mentioned definition. The Mario and Zelda games of the 1980's and 1990's are inseparable from the figure of Shigeru Miyamoto, usually considered to be the most influential video game director and producer of all time. The same could be said for then-Konami's<sup>24</sup> Hideo Kojima<sup>25</sup>, main developer of the game *Metal Gear Solid*<sup>26</sup>. Once games

<sup>22</sup> The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, [www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com)

<sup>23</sup> SANTAS, C., *Responding to Film: A Text Guide for Students of Cinema Art*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, 18.

<sup>24</sup> SAMIT, S., Konami's bitter, yearlong breakup with Hideo Kojima, explained, [www.polygon.com](http://www.polygon.com)

<sup>25</sup> Hideo Kojima's departure from Konami considerably lowered the company's public opinion, due to his status as an auteur

<sup>26</sup> Metal Gear Solid, Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Konami, 1998.

of these series have risen to popularity, imitation works also emerged, but since the works themselves were so immensely connected to the artistry and vision of their respective directors, these games usually misinterpreted what made the originals so beloved. This is true of almost every auteur, regardless of the medium they express themselves in. What sets Hidetaka Miyazaki's work apart, however, is that a great number of studios have been inspired by his games in such a way, that their creations feel much more like new interpretations and bows of respect, rather than sheer mimicry. This is so prevalent as of the second half of the 2010's, that an entirely new subgenre was born called 'souls-likes', named after Miyazaki's most influential work, the *Dark Souls* series. What makes a game a souls-like is not so easily defined, as the lines are blurred between genres of any medium. Games that resemble the *Souls* games in either their gameplay presentation, tone, or their portrayal of failure as a narrative tool can all be described as souls-like to a certain degree. As of the writing of this thesis, more than 600 titles have been labeled as souls-like on Steam, the most prominent digital PC game distributor service<sup>27</sup>, most of them paying homage to one sole visionary.

Hidetaka Miyazaki was born in 1974, in Shizouka, Japan.<sup>28</sup> Coincidentally, he only made the decision to become a video game developer later in his life, at the age of 29, after playing the 2001 game *ICO*<sup>29</sup>, by fellow auteur Fumito Ueda<sup>30</sup>. He was also greatly influenced by western literature, like *The Song of Ice and Fire* series of books by George R. R. Martin, as well as several works of H. P. Lovecraft<sup>31</sup>. He also greatly enjoyed the *Fighting Fantasy* role-playing gamebooks. These books were available to him thanks to his father, although as a child, he did not have a strong command of English just yet, which meant he frequently had to employ use of his imagination to fill in the gaps in these stories. The feeling of obscurity and mystery one might feel when reading a story in such a way is perfectly encapsulated in the *Souls* series' non-linear story structure – instead of conventional narrative tools, these games employ environmental and meta-communicated storytelling, therefore taking full advantage of the medium's every possibility. It speaks volumes of his talent and dedication that shortly after he started working at FromSoftware in 2004, he would become the director of the next installment of the *Armored Core* series, *Armored Core 4*<sup>32</sup>, and in 2009, would direct *Demon's Souls*, the first of the *Souls* games, establishing a series that's success resulted in him being awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual Golden Joystick Award

<sup>27</sup> Steam, Souls-like games, [www.store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Souls-like/](http://www.store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Souls-like/)

<sup>28</sup> PARKIN, S „Bloodborne creator Hidetaka Miyazaki: 'I didn't have a dream. I wasn't ambitious'", [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

<sup>29</sup> *ICO*, Japan Studio/Team Ico, Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> PARKIN, S., Hidetaka Miyazaki Sees Death as a Feature, Not a Bug, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)

<sup>31</sup> MIELKE, J., „Dark Souls' Creator Miyazaki on ‚Zelda,' Sequels and Starting Out", [www.rollingstone.com](http://www.rollingstone.com)

<sup>32</sup> *Armored Core 4*, FromSoftware, FromSoftware/Sega/505 Games, 2006

show in 2018<sup>33</sup>. (App. Fig. 1.) From my perspective, it is hard to imagine a more validating example of success than the one crowning Miyazaki's career – illustrated perfectly by the fact that the aforementioned award was given to him by Ian Livingston and Steve Jackson, authors of the *Fighting Fantasy* series, and his latest video game, *Elden Ring*<sup>34</sup> was written in a collaboration with none other than George R. R. Martin himself<sup>35</sup>.

When it comes to any field, innovation comes from people who can think outside the box, and because of that, innovators usually emerge from backgrounds that are not dominated by the zeitgeist of their specific realm of study. This might be the reason why Miyazaki was not afraid to put his personal experiences into the centerstage of his game design philosophy. However, a usual bane of these visionaries is that their ideas are not taken seriously by the industry before they prove themselves, which is not possible as a fresh entrant. In this regard, Miyazaki and *Demon's Souls* were not any different.

After *Armored Core 4*, Miyazaki directed the series' next installment, *Armored Core: For Answer*<sup>36</sup>. The game received mixed to unfavorable reviews from most publications<sup>37</sup>, and thus the need for something entirely new arose. Development of this new title, that would eventually become *Demon's Souls*, started with a team that was initially comprised of multiple veterans, as it was to be a cooperation between FromSoftware and Sony, in an attempt to create an action role-playing game rooted in a dark fantasy setting for the Sony Playstation 3, with the goal of also breaking the trends that were dominant in western games of the genre<sup>38</sup>. Most prominent of these trends was the gameplay loop associated with conventional role-playing games, where players would usually receive clear instructions as to what they have to achieve and were rewarded by the game through several means in succeeding in these pre-set challenges. The vision Miyazaki and the team wanted to revive was the sense of mystery and adventure associated with classic adventure games. As I mentioned before in this thesis, the lack of accessible information and general obscurity characterized by early arcade games of the past has greatly contributed to the establishment of gaming communities, as players felt like they must uncover a mystery together. This, however, was not easy to recreate in a modern setting, as due to the internet and the emergence of on-line publications, creating an aura of mystery was not only much harder, but also posed a great risk – if a game feels completely inaccessible to journalists

<sup>33</sup> SULLIVAN, L., "Dark Souls creator Hidetaka Miyazaki takes the Lifetime Achievement award at the Golden Joystick Awards 2018", [www.gamesradar.com](http://www.gamesradar.com)

<sup>34</sup> *Elden Ring*. FromSoftware, Namco Bandai, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> DINSDALE, R. „Miyazaki Explains Working With George R.R. Martin on Elden Ring: ‚It Was Like Speaking With an Old Friend‘”, [www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com)

<sup>36</sup> *Armored Core: For Answers*, FromSoftware, FromSoftware/Ubisoft, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> *Armored Core: For Answers*, [www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com)

<sup>38</sup> Interview: *Demon's Souls*, [www.edge-online.com](http://www.edge-online.com)

and reviewers, negative critical reception of a game can spread much faster, a lesson FromSoftware has already learned with their then-latest *Armored Core* release. The project was eventually taken over by Miyazaki himself as sole director, as no coherent vision was established for the game between members of the team. As I have stated before, the game was to be set in a dark fantasy setting, but unlike most Japanese role-playing games<sup>39</sup>, the fantasy setting was heavily influenced by European, as opposed to purely Japanese folklore. Other than simply being another way of breaking away from trends associated with the genre, this was also due to Miyazaki's interest and appreciation of western media. Signature areas of *Demon's Souls* like Boletaria Castle or the Tower of Latria all adapted a European medieval setting, and unlike most Japanese games of the time, it was voice acted exclusively in English. What elevates this English voice acting, is that none of the actors were American – in order to keep with the medieval immersion, Miyazaki and the team insisted on a crew of mostly Scottish actors<sup>40</sup>, a tradition they kept in all of the *Souls* games (with the exception of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*<sup>41</sup>, which is set in the Sengoku period of Japan).

Although *Demon's Souls* finally started to find its own identity, supervisors and executives from Sony were highly disapproval of several aspects of the game's design choices. Shuhei Yoshida, president of Sony Interactive Entertainment at the time, called the game "unbelievably bad"<sup>42</sup>, after playing its demo for 2 hours. Various ideas of Miyazaki were rejected, so the team decided to keep quiet about the extent of certain mechanics.<sup>43</sup> Most notable of these is arguably the series' single most recognizable characteristic, a pose that would later be called by both fans and FromSoftware as 'Praise the Sun'. (App. Fig. 2.) In this pose, the character would stretch out their arms in the shape of a V, while looking up at the sky. The pose became much more involved with the series' legacy than originally thought, and it was only possible due to Miyazaki's willingness to go against the executives.

*„That pose actually carries some significance for me. During *Demon's Souls*, that was a holy sign. When I presented the game to the rest of the company, I showed them that pose and one of the higher ups told me it just wasn't cool enough. Of course I told him I'd get rid of it but I secretly kept it in the game. So naturally, with *Dark Souls* I was determined to use it.”<sup>44</sup>*

<sup>39</sup> Japanese RPG's (role-playing games) in this context simply refer to role-playing games made by Japanese developers, not to JRPG's (Japanese role-playing games), which are a genre of their own.

<sup>40</sup> MACDONALD, K., "Souls Survivor", [www.eurogamer.net](http://www.eurogamer.net)

<sup>41</sup> *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. FromSoftware, Activision, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> MACDONALD, K., *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> 梶田, なぜいまマゾゲーなの? ゲーマーの間で評判の“即死ゲー”「*Demon's Souls*」(デモンズソウル) 開発者インタビュー, [www.4gamer.net](http://www.4gamer.net)

<sup>44</sup> MORTON, L., "Why we praise the sun: the story of *Dark Souls*' most famous gesture", [www.pcgamer.com](http://www.pcgamer.com)

Even though Miyazaki was vigilant, due to Sony's low confidence in the game, *Demon's Souls* was only set to be published by Sony in Japan. The game received favorable to mixed reviews, however, when a number of European critics received imported copies, it seemed public opinion of the game in the west was very high.<sup>45</sup> Due to this, the game was later published overseas by Atlus in Northern America, and by Namco Bandai in Europe. *Demon's Souls* was heavily cited as one of the greatest games of the year, which sparked Namco Bandai's interest in a continued partnership with FromSoftware, which gave birth to the *Dark Souls* trilogy, a spiritual successor to *Demon's Souls*<sup>46</sup>. Since this was no longer a cooperating between Sony, instead of only releasing to Sony's own Playstation 3, the game came out on all modern platforms, and later on personal computers, and thus was most gamers first entry into the *Souls* series.

### Chapter III: The Souls Games

#### *Beyond the Deep Fog*

In order to properly understand the design philosophy of the enteries in the *Souls* series, it is important to separate developer intentions from game's eventual perception by consumers. Miyazaki and FromSoftware wanted to create a game that reintroduces all the virtues associated with classic role-playing games of the past – mystery stemming from realtive narrative obscurity, player specific, personal motivation instead of those defined by the games' reward system, and an experience that makes the player feel like they conquered a real challenge. I find this vital, as the general reception of these games slightly differed from these ideas in the beginning. The most notorious aspect of the *Souls* games were their immensely hard difficulty, which is not suprising, since in order for the above-mentioned virtues to materialize, the player had to feel like they really are pursuing near impossible adversities. This aspect alone was enough for the games to find their audiences, but it is only one of several reasons that contributed to their legacy. I would argue that the main reason these games became the new frontiers of game design, is how they complemented this core gameplay loop with a world that explores and gives meaning to concepts that are not generally associated with video games – more precisely, coming to terms with and embracing failure.

Even though *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*<sup>47</sup>, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* and *Elden Ring* are set in different universes, they all explore

<sup>45</sup> MACDONALD, K., "Demon's Souls: Fighting the impossible." [www.eurogamer.net](http://www.eurogamer.net)

<sup>46</sup> Since the intellectual rights of *Demon's Souls* were still held by Sony, creation of a true narrative sequel was not possible.

<sup>47</sup> *Bloodborne*. FromSoftware, Sony Computer Interactive, 2015.

these same themes. Set character archetypes can be found in all of them, representing their roles in however they can be contextualized within their respective worlds. The stories always center around a kingdom or realm that is facing an inevitable end. This 'end' can be defined in a number of ways - as an end of an age in the *Dark Souls* trilogy, a fall of a clan in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, or even as struggles of the subconscious in *Bloodborne*. The player character is always an outsider to the usual rules of the world, and they are eventually tasked with deciding whether to embrace, or renounce the natural cycle of change. To clearly exemplify how this is done in the series, I will examine the first entry of the *Dark Souls* trilogy, *Dark Souls*.

The plot of *Dark Souls* is set in the fictional land of Lordran. When starting the game, we are given a brief introduction into the world's lore and mythology. We are told that once, the world was roamed by everlasting dragons, existing outside the cycle of life and death, in an era called the Age of Ancients. This all changed when the First Flame came to be, and thus, distinctions between concepts like light and dark, or life and death emerged. The essence of these four aspects formed souls, which were claimed by beings that are known as the gods of Lordran. Light was claimed by Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, life by the Which of Izalith and death by Gravelord Nito. The fourth soul however, the Dark Soul, was forgotten, and claimed by the "furtive pygmy" in secret. It is alluded to that the Dark Soul is much less powerful than the other three souls, and unlike the other godly figures, we see a character with a human silhouette bending down next to a small, black flame. With power granted to them by the great souls, the three gods challenged the dragons of the Age of Ancients - in this they were aided by Seethe the Scaleless, a dragon that betrayed his fellow kin in order to assist Gwyn and his knights. Once the gods were victorious, a new era began, called the Age of Fire. We can see images of a prosperous kingdom, but soon after, the narrator immediately follows up with stating that the First Flame is soon to fade away, and only Dark will remain. This is complemented by a line that at first seems purely metaphorical.

*But soon, the flames will fade, and only Dark will remain. even now, there are only embers, and man sees not light, but only endless nights. And amongst the living are seen, carriers of the accursed Darksign. Yes, indeed. The Darksign brands the Undead. And in this land, the Undead are corralled and led to the north, where they are locked away, to await the end of the world. This is your fate. (App. Fig. 3.)*

The game then beings, and the player is soon to discover, that they are playing as an undead, something less than human. It is important to note that the game refers to these beings as both 'undead', and 'hollow', but never as 'zombie'. The undead of *Dark Souls* differ from the traditional portrayal of what

are commonly referred to as 'zombie' in traditional pop-culture significantly. Instead of purely rot, they seem to be decaying on a spiritual level. This is signified by the mark on their chest, that is of the same shape as "accursed Darksign" shown in the opening cinematic.

When writing any fantasy epic that follows the order of the hero's journey story structure, the main character is usually an outsider, which creates a strong similarity between the character and the reader (or in this case, player), as from their perspective, they are both experiencing a whole new world. This is no different in *Dark Souls*, or in any of the *Souls* games for that matter, as the player is tasked with breaking out of the Northern Undead Asylum, where they were locked up. This serves as the game's introduction to the player, and touches on what will be expected of them later. After the narration finishes, we see a small scene, where a knight throws a key to the protagonist, which opens their cell, then promptly disappears. The player is then left completely alone to figure out what they have to do, in which they are slightly assisted by written messages visible along their path. This already communicates that it is up to player to interpret the world, and they are free to do so at their own pace. This is further exemplified when the game's first major enemy, a demon shows up. In a conventional game, one might think that this obstacle is put there with the purpose of serving as their first major battle – however, since the main character has only just recently escaped their cell, they are completely stripped of any weapons. The game expects the player to realize that they are not strong enough to fight this enemy just yet, and they are supposed to run away. Most of the *Souls* games start out very similarly to this – in the example of *Demon's Souls*, the first major enemy the player faces, called the Vanguard, is made to be much stronger than the main character, and the player is expected to die. This reinforces the idea that failure will be a core aspect of the game, and in all entries of the *Souls* series, players will be given an opportunity to prove themselves to these early enemies again, once they have got more used to the game's mechanics. It is important to note that even though the developers' intention is for the player to fail, these challenges are not impossible to complete. This is a great example of how the game's difficulty is not arbitrary, but is instead based on patience and experience – experience of the player, not just the player character. Gameplay is based around the player accurately timing their character's dodges and attacks, while making sure they do not run out of their stamina, which takes time to recover, before they can strike or dodge again. Should the player run out of all their health points and die, they lose all their souls. Souls serve as the game's main currency and experience points, which are used to increase the protagonist's power. After death, the player character reawakes at the last bonfire they touched, which serve as the game's checkpoints. However hard the adventure may become, these bonfires always serve as safe points, free

of any adversaries. Should the player reach the same place they died, they are able to reclaim the lost souls – but if they die on their way there, those are lost forever. On a gameplay level, this is a great showcase of how the game expects the player to think about challenges. On a more subtextual level, it is already in perfect harmony with the lore established by the introduction, as it makes the player feel vulnerable in a world full of demons and controlled by gods. What is even more important is that it marks the beginning of a process that could only exist in the medium of video games. By experiencing failure in ample portion, the player slowly starts to take ownership of their character’s hardships. Identifying with characters is far from being a new thing in the realm of fiction, but it is only through the expressive nature of video games that such an intense relationship can form.

While the player is busy searching for a weapon to deal with the demon, they can find the knight who freed them, lying on the floor. It is not explicitly communicated to the player what happened to him, but by observing the room, a small crack in the ceiling can be seen, which suggests that he was fighting the demon on the roof, then fell, or got thrown to the ground. The knight introduces himself as Oscar and tells the player of a prophecy. In the prophecy it is stated, that an undead must leave the Northern Asylum, make their way to Lordran, and must ring the Bell of Awakening in order to learn their fate. Oscar succumbs to his wounds, and with his final words, says that he dies with hope in his heart that the protagonist might succeed. Once the player has finally tackled the guarding demon of the asylum, they are taken away to the land of Lordran by a giant raven, and the game formally begins. (App. Fig. 4.)

From here on, the player is free to explore the land of Lordran. Unlike a traditional role-playing video game, there is not a single instruction shown on the player’s screen, as to where they would need to go. By talking to a character nearby, the protagonist is given a hint, and is also told that they should not even dare to search for the Bell of Awakening, as the task itself is impossible. While it is a good way to motivate the player, it also makes the character, known as the ‘crestfallen warrior’, feel like a living part of the world. Just as the game contextualizes the failure of the player within the confines of the game and draws a parallel to the failures of the protagonist, it also shows how the player might end up if they give up – crestfallen, and unmotivated. It is also here that we learn more about what it means to be human inside the game’s world. We soon find out that the First Flame is indeed fading, but the Lord of Sunlight, Gwyn, in a desperate attempt to delay the inevitable, cast his own soul into the fire, and resides within a place known as the Kiln of the First Flame. This sacrilege resulted in a number of changes in the world of Lordran, most importantly causing humans to become unable to die – instead, like the First Flame itself, they slowly fade away and become ‘hollow’, just like the protagonist. This is significant, as it not only applies

to our player character, but to the other undead residing within Lordran. By meeting characters and exploring the world, we slowly start to understand how the process of “hollowing” manifests itself. New characters usually have a clear purpose when we first meet them – some want to find their relatives, others wish to pursue their knowledge of magic, and in the case of Oscar, he wanted to fulfill the prophecy that was passed down in his family, searching for a purpose that is worthy of him. Once they lose their purpose, they start to aimlessly wander the land, fixated on their failures, and eventually become hollow husks of their former selves. Other than being a strong narrative tool, this subconsciously also awakens a question in the player, regarding what it is they hope to gain from playing the game. While games focusing on artistry have existed beforehand, like the previously mentioned *Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* or *ICO*, it is not usual that a game presents a question like this to the player so unapologetically. Giving them such an existentialistic dilemma can seem counterproductive, since games, like other forms of entertainment, often serve as a form of escapism from reality, rather than a device to contemplate purpose and identity. This approach can alienate some players entirely, but it is highly effective in *Dark Souls*, since the game makes it evidently clear, that failure, in the context of the game, is a necessary step one must take to progress.

Eventually, the player will meet one of two giant snakes, called Primordial Serpents. Whichever of these the player meets is dependent on their choices and in what order they chose to traverse Lordran. These serpents serve as guides throughout the remainder of the game, and they finally unveil the true meaning of the prophecy to the protagonist – however, their interpretation of the said prophecy varies greatly. Both tell the player, that they must become a being stronger than the gods themselves by defeating them and acquiring their souls. According to one of the serpents, Kingseeker Frampt, the protagonist, hereby proclaimed as the ‘Chosen Undead’, after acquiring all this power should make their way to the Kiln of the First Flame, defeat Gwyn, and like him, should cast their soul into the First Flame, so the Age of Fire may be prolonged, and dark may abate. The other serpent, Kaathe, tells the player that they should also defeat Lord Gwyn, after which they should snuff out the First Flame, and let the Age of Man begin. Since it is highly unlikely that a player should meet both snakes in a single playthrough of the game, different players can have a drastically different outlook on what they must do. It also sparks an interesting debate, since the serpent’s retelling of events of the past differ in key places, suggesting that they are both manipulating the protagonist, and thus the player, to further their own agenda. Whichever path the player chooses, they are free to make their own choice in the end – the game casts no judgment on whether the player’s actions are selfish or righteous, and neither of the game’s endings show enough of the world’s

changes that would evidently conclude what their actions resulted in.

While the game's central topic, communicated effortlessly through gameplay is overcoming challenges and accepting failure, thematically, it contemplates how people and the world react to change. While the exact plots points are different, *Demon's Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Elden Ring* and subsequent *Dark Souls* games all make the player choose between accepting or refusing change. This motif also shines through in the mythos and lore that inspired the game's art style.

The portrayal of the three gods bears similarity to several mythologies. Gwyn himself, with his long white beard, and the ability to hurl lightning spears, is strikingly similar to Zeus, the main god of Greek mythology. The state of the world and the death of gods also show resemblance to Ragnar k<sup>48</sup>, which refers to a series of events that result in a great battle, and thusly, the death of the gods in Icelandic mythos. In my opinion however, the most striking parallel can be drawn to Zoroastrianism. The "furtive pygmy", given life to by the Dark Soul itself and ancestor of humanity within the game's lore, in contrast with Gwyn, the all-father of the gods, perfectly encapsulate the cyclical nature of battles between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, as it also signifies humanity's inseparable nature from the gods.<sup>49</sup> This is not surprising, as Miyazaki himself took great inspiration from western mythologies and culture. The city of the gods, Anor Londo for example, was heavily influenced by both the Milan Cathedral and the Ch teau de Chambord. Ties can also be drawn to Shinto – one of the game's most signature characters, Solaire, is met at a balcony, profusely staring at the Sun. He tells the player of the Sun's magnificence and teaches the player the 'Praise the Sun' gesture, the pose which Miyazaki underwent great efforts to put into the game. (App. Fig. 5.) Worship of the Sun is prevalent in many cultures, but it is also strongly associated with the worship of Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun<sup>50</sup>. I am also of the belief that it has elements deeply rooted in other aspects Japanese culture. A great example of this is Artorias, one of the knights of Gwyn, who is tasked with venturing into the Abyss, to rescue the princess of another kingdom, Oolacile. The player, through the manipulation of time, can access these events, and witness the true fate of Artorias. Unlike the protagonist, Artorias, as a knight of Gwyn, was not a human. He was granted a part of Lord Gwyn's soul and in the game's lore, he could be considered a demigod. Since the Abyss itself is filled with darkness, he himself could not venture into the Abyss, and had to forge a covenant with one of the serpents, Kaathe to do so. When we get to Artorias, we see a shallow husk of a knight, who has succumbed to the corruption of

<sup>48</sup> ZO GA, G., *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1910., 345.

<sup>49</sup> DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, J., *Encyclopaedia Iranica, Vol 1.*, New York: Rouledge & Keagen Paul, 1982., 670-673.

<sup>50</sup> WHEELER, P., *The Sacred Scriptures of the Japanese*. New York: Henry Schumann. 1952, 393-395.

darkness that has stained the once great land of Oolacile. He represents one of *Dark Souls'* most tragic battles, since prior to this point, all the player has heard about Artorias is that he was a knight of outstanding valor and honor. His tragic fall perfectly showcases the meaning of *Hōgan-biiki*, the feeling of sympathy one feels for equally tragic figures of Japanese history like Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Amakusa Shiro<sup>51</sup>. The general theme of impending, inevitable change is also deeply rooted in Japanese ethos. Throughout history, Japan found itself in desperate situations, where the country quickly had to adapt to the outside world. This is most characteristic of the late Edo and Bakumatsu period, and even the events leading up to the Satsuma rebellion, where cultural and ideological debate regarding change was at its most significant<sup>52</sup>. I believe that this blend of western and Japanese ideals is what made the *Dark Souls* series' worldbuilding so cohesive, particularly in *Dark Souls*.

Another example of conscious contextualization of the game's world within its medium is its revolutionary multiplayer mode. In most games, multiplayer, as in, a game mode where players can play together with others, either through a network or locally, is presented in the game's menu as a separate option, disconnected from the game's story. In *Dark Souls* however, and in all of the *Souls* games, this is instead explain within the confines of the lore, and multiplayer functionality is accessible within the core game. In the story, we learn that there are ways to slow down the effects of 'hollowing' by claiming fragments of the original *Dark Soul*, referred inside the game as humanity. (App. Fig. 6.) The serpent Kaathe explains to the protagonist, that he once led a covenant, which function as a faction within the game, called Darkwraiths, who were able to take other people's humanity. Darkwraiths can be met inside the game, and they are signified by a red aura around them. The game even gives a warning to the player that their world has been invaded by a dark spirit, and that they must be dealt with. The player soon finds out however, that these red spirits are not just stronger enemies, but other players. This does not break the player's immersion in the story, yet still makes the experience communal. Another covenant, called the Warriors of Sunlight, led by Solaire, can also be found, who are intent on helping others traverse the land of Lordran. They can be found easily, as their signs radiate in a golden ray of sunlight, just like their auras. The player can choose to join any of these covenants, based on how they want to partake in the multiplayer aspect of the game. This concept, just like almost every gameplay decision, was also heavily influenced by Miyazaki's own experiences<sup>53</sup>. Miyazaki recalled an occurrence, where he was driving upwards on a hill in heavy snowfall, and he saw how cars slowly sliding downhill were deliberately, gently bumped into by cars behind them, helping them get

<sup>51</sup> MORRIS I., *Nobility of Failure*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1975. 82.

<sup>52</sup> GORDON, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2003, 126.

<sup>53</sup> MACDONALD, K., "Souls Survivor", [www.eurogamer.net](http://www.eurogamer.net)

to the top. He recalled how he could not give his appreciation to these silent helpers and wanted a multiplayer experience that showcases this feeling. This system has persisted in subsequent games, and other developers were also greatly inspired by the idea that the single player and multiplayer experience could be blended together.

What further helps the immersion is the series' sound design. The sound weapons, magic, and the souls themselves make have been carefully engineered to be recognizable, but still feel true to the world. This is also aided by the game's soundtrack, which in the case of *Dark Souls* was composed by Motoi Sakuraba. While each major battle is given its distinctive theme, all feel well rounded in the game's dark fantasy setting. Most notable of them is Lord Gwyn's theme, which is built around a solemn piano piece, making the fight feel more like a tragic end to the Lord of Sunlight's inevitable fate, than a validating experience for the player's hardships. While the soundtrack of *Dark Souls* perfectly balances feelings of heroic achievement with somber melancholy, the music of *Demon's Souls* could only be described as brave. Composed by Shunsuke Kida, the themes are all distinct, and offer an incredibly varied portrayal of the world the game is set in.

While *Demon's Souls* became a cult classic in the west, *Dark Souls* became a massive hit. Thanks to its multi-platform nature, the game was eventually available on all current platforms, and it received very high praise. This is most evidently indicated by the fact it won Game of the Decade in 2021 at the annual Golden Joystick Awards, forever cementing its legacy.<sup>54</sup> Several journalists and content creators have also cited *Dark Souls* as instrumental in their battle with depression<sup>55</sup> and processing grief<sup>56</sup>, mainly due to how the game recontextualized failure and letting go as natural parts of the human experience, rather than something to be prevented or avoided. Due to its success and influence, the gaming industry has undergone an irreversible change thanks to the *Souls* series, and it was a change that ushered in a completely new outlook on game design.

## Chapter IV: Legacy

### *So the World might be Mended*

As I have mentioned previously, Hidetaka Miyazaki as an auteur differed from most famous video game directors in the specific way he influenced

<sup>54</sup> MIDDLEL, J., 'Dark Souls' wins Ultimate Game of All Time at the Golden Joystick Awards, [www.nme.com](http://www.nme.com)

<sup>55</sup> NakeyJakey. "Dark Souls Saved Me", YouTube, 2018. January 20,

<sup>56</sup> COLLINS, D. L., "Dark Souls and Depression: How the series helps players with their mental health", [www.svg.com](http://www.svg.com)

subsequent artists. While games resembling Shigeru Miyamoto's *Legend of Zelda* have existed, they were seldom called 'zelda-like', in the way words like kafkaesque are used. When it comes to the *Souls* series however, the extent at which a game can be inspired came under closer inspection.

Unlike genre defining games of the past, like *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*<sup>57</sup> and *Super Metroid*<sup>58</sup>, which deepend a pre-existing genre with their more focused approach on exploration, the ways the *Souls* series' design philosophy and its collection of unique mechanics innovated the gaming industry are vast. The first notable souls-like was the 2014 game *Lords of the Fallen*<sup>59</sup>, which utalized many of the *Dark Souls* games' features. It had a combat system based on dodging at pivotal times to evade incoming attacks and also had to death mechanic based on checkpoints and the player's ability to reclaim their lost experience points, should they be able to get back to their last point of death. It also marketed itself as a game of immense difficulty, and was set in a dark fantasy world of dying gods. However, the main character of *Lords of the Fallen*, Harkyn, was an entirely separate being from the player. The *Souls* games employed the use of a 'silent protagonist', which meant that while other characters were able to understand the player through their choice of dialogue options, the player character did not have their own voice. This trope is usually used in games to increase the immersion between the player and their character, and it complemented the world of *Dark Souls*, a game where several other mechanics also focused on immersion perfectly. In *Lords of the Fallen* however, it alianted the player from having such an experience. It received mixed reviews<sup>60</sup>, and made it evidently clear, that the design philosophy behind *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* were much more complicated than what could be seen from the surface. With the release of *Bloodborne* in 2015, the term *Soulsborne* was coined, a portmanteau of *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne*. Even though *Bloodborne* was set in a world mainly inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker, and employed the usage of firearms, it was still considered to be a *Souls* game, rather than a souls-like. Because of this, discussion and debate arose in the industry as to what exactly constitutes as a souls-like.

In my opinion, what constitutes as a souls-like has much more to do with the principals behind its mechanics and storytelling than the borrowing precise gameplay elements. Two very good examples of this are the games *Salt and Sanctuary*<sup>61</sup> developed by Ska Studios, and *Hollow Knight*<sup>62</sup>, developed by Team Cherry. From a strictly mechanical standpoints, both of these games

<sup>57</sup> *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, Konami, 1997.

<sup>58</sup> *Super Metroid*, Nintendo R&D1, Nintendo, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> *Lords of the Fallen*, Deck13/Ci Games, Ci Games/BNE Entertainment, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> *Lords of the Fallen*, [www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com)

<sup>61</sup> *Salt and Sanctuary*, Ska Studios, Ska Studios/Leadman Games, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> *Hollow Knight*, Team Cherry, Team Cherry/Popeach, 2017.

are metroidvanias, meaning they are two-dimensional side-scrollers, with a heavy focus on exploration. They still had mechanics associated with *Souls* games, like their checkpoint based death mechanic with the possibility of reclaiming lost experience points, a focus on adequately timed dodges, and in the case of *Salt and Sanctuary*, a stamina bar. They were also marketed as difficult games, set in a dark fantasy world. Their stories also revolved around the same themes and plot points. In *Salt and Sanctuary*, the protagonist is stranded on a mystical island, where worshipers of current and old gods reside, and in order to escape, they have to make their way to the god of the island itself, and then make a choice, whether to truly escape, or take their place. In *Hollow Knight* the main character, only referred to as The Knight, has to mend the world that has been corrupted by an outer god, and decide whether to purge the corruption or to further delay its inevitable end. What sets these games apart however, is that they embraced the mechanics borrowed from the *Souls* series, and built upon them with their own ideas. *Hollow Knight*, for instance, had a new and intuitive healing system, which was not present in any of the *Souls* games, and both games focus much more heavily on platforming, rather than combat. What is albeit much more important, is that these games had their own identity – this is mainly due to the fact that they are, first and foremost, works of passion. Unlike the *Souls* games or *Lords of the Fallen*, both *Hollow Knight* and *Salt and Sanctuary* were made by small indie companies. With the entry into the gaming industry being much more accessible than ever before, the 2010’s gave birth to many works that were done by only a handful of people. In the case of these two games, the term ‘handful’ is an understatement – Team Cherry, the development studio behind *Hollow Knight* only consisted of three people, while *Salt and Sanctuary* was made exclusively by married couple James and Michelle Juett Silva.

*Souls*-likes eventually made their way back into the mainstream, with the release of games such as *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*<sup>63</sup>, that enjoyed a favorable critical reception<sup>64</sup>, but it is my assertion, that *souls*-likes that truly carry the *Souls* series’ design philosophy are mainly found within indie games. I arrive to this conclusion based on the way the series themselves came into existence – with the determination of an auteur, unafraid to experiment, and to take inspiration from their own lives. An approach like this is much more prone to be present in a small, dedicated and independent team.

The legacy of the *Dark Souls* series is present in the gaming industry, even outside the realm of the *souls*-like genre. Both *Demon’s Souls* and *Dark Souls* are also full of secrets, that players are not expected to figure out easily. In the case of *Dark Souls*, a number of illusionary walls can be found, which hide extra bonfires and items, that only perceptive players can find. There is

<sup>63</sup> *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, Respawn Entertainment, Electronic Arts, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*, [www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com)

an entire area, called the Painted World of Ariamis, that can only be accessed by returning to the game's starting prison cell and finding a small doll, which acts as a key to a painting the player can find much later in the game. This meant that just like in the era of arcade games, people formed communities to discuss their findings and hopefully uncover all the secrets together. Most notorious of these secrets was one associated with a pendant that players could choose as one of their starting items when beginning their adventure. The pendant's description stated that it had no purpose or any special effect, but this did not stop the newly forming community to begin the hunt for something incredible. Only after a year was it confirmed by Miyazaki himself, that the pendant was not hiding any big secret, and it truly had no effect<sup>65</sup>.

With the release of *Dark Souls* on personal computers in 2012, Namco Bandai focused on advertising the game with its signature difficulty, calling the release *Dark Souls: Prepare to Die Edition*. While completely understandable from a marketing standpoint, this made the impression, that there was nothing else to it besides its strenuous challenges. Once the game achieved critical acclaim, developers soon started following the trend, and made increasingly more difficult games. If a particularly challenging game of any genre was made, it was usually called the "Dark Souls of" that specific genre. Thankfully the perception of these games are now much clearer than ever, and it resulted in new discussions opening up when it comes to difficulty in games. The *Souls* series have proved, that it is not talent, but instead patience and perseverance that is required of players, which are skills anyone can develop. This way, the cathartic feeling one can experience when conquering these challenges, which was the original intention of the series<sup>66</sup>, have become accessible to everyone.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out with the goal to accurately showcase the effect Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Souls* series had on the gaming industry as a whole, both in the way it revived the sense of community and mystery associated with classic video games of the 1980's and 1990's, and in the way it contextualized how grief and failure could be interpreted in the confines of video games. I also wanted to examine how Miyazaki's work takes inspiration from both European and Japanese culture, creating a world that is able to grasp the essence of chivalric virtues like honor and valor, while also exploring concepts like *hōgan-biiki*, the sympathy associated with tragic heroic figures. While the shift from pure entertainment to artistry has already begun, prior to the release of *Demon's Souls*, the success of *Dark Souls* and FromSoftware's subsequent

<sup>65</sup> MATULEF J. "Dark Souls' director reveals the pendant's true purpose", [www.eurogamer.net](http://www.eurogamer.net)

<sup>66</sup> KAMEN M., "Dark Souls 3 director: it's about 'accomplishment by overcoming tremendous odds'", [www.wired.co.uk](http://www.wired.co.uk)

games in the series have had a tremendous effect in understanding how immersion can be created within the medium. The fact that *Demon's Souls*, a game that could only be made due to Miyazaki's unwillingness to sacrifice his vision, against all odds, paved the way to a series that has been crowned game of the decade, speaks volumes of the influence these games had in how video game development is approached. It is also vindicating, that Shuhei Yoshida himself, who once called *Demon's Souls* "unbelievably bad", chose to showcase FromSoftware's next game made in a partnership with Sony, *Bloodborne* in 2015<sup>67</sup>. It is quite rare that a work like this leads to the creation of an entire series of games, strongly united in tone and theme, yet still different in their world and story. Emergence of the souls-like genre is further evidence of its reach, and is a trend that is set to continue in the upcoming years, even without a new *Souls* game being on the horizon. Hidetaka Miyazaki, highly awarded as game director, rightfully takes his place next to auteurs like Shigeru Miyamoto and Fumito Ueda, cementing his legacy as a visionary, who was not afraid to innovate.

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<sup>67</sup> PlayStation. "Bloodborne - PlayStation Underground: Shuhei Yoshida Gameplay Video | PS4", YouTube, 2015. July 1.

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# DARK SOULS™

with ARTORIAS OF THE ABYSS EDITION

*Appendix*

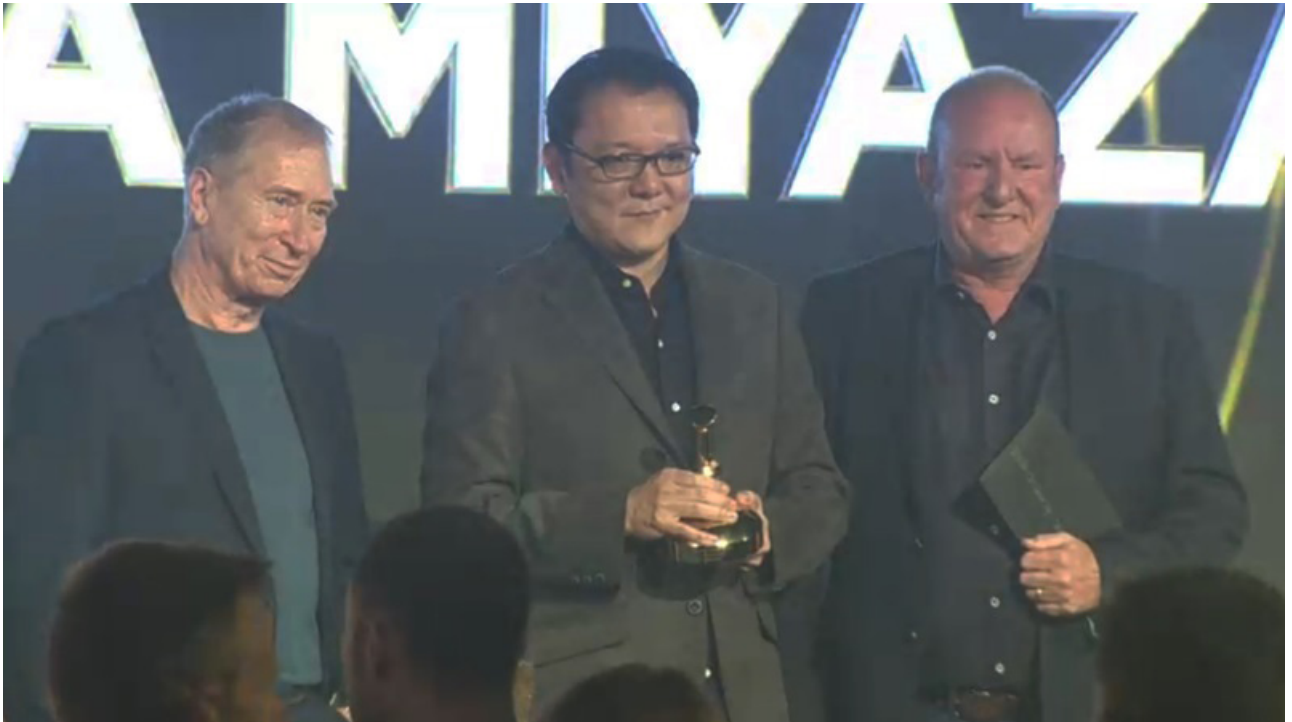


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.





## András Bach

### *The Enigmatic Figure of the King in Yellow - Interpreting intertextuality in the game Signalis*

#### Preface

*Death and the awful abode of lost souls, whither my weakness long ago had sent him, and had changed him for every other eye but mine. And now I heard his voice, rising, swelling, thundering through the flaring light, and as I fell, the radiance increasing, increasing, poured over me in waves in flame. Then I sank into the depths, and I heard the King in Yellow whispering to my soul: „It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”<sup>1</sup>*

These are the final lines uttered in the third short story of *The King in Yellow* written by Robert W. Chambers, *In the Court of the Dragon*. It is one of the few times when the reader is given an account of how the presence of the enigmatic Yellow King manifests itself through the perception of any of its protagonists, without the usual vagueness of its figure. Even though it serves as the purest description of the Yellow King within the book, it still leaves the image of both him and the island where he hails from – Carcosa – shrouded in mystery. Initially in the form of eerie organ music and subsequently through all perceivable means, his dreadful nature is made progressively more evident and by this fierce conclusion, we are shown how he can manifest physically, in the moment of death. However, this is only one such way his influence is felt.

The stories within Chambers' book are all connected through a fictional play of the same name, which all its protagonists encounter by different means. The play itself is said to be cursed by several characters, and reading its second act marks a point of no return, making all who peer into it act as if they saw through a veil they should never have. While this makes for a compelling narrative device, the play itself is not the only thing that is present in all the stories. Complementing the nature of the haunted play, the overarching motif of *The King in Yellow* is one of profound longing. This motif is often portrayed in the form of romantic yearning, most prominently in the stories *The Mask* and *The Yellow Sign*, but sometimes also through ambition and the pursuit of something meaningful in the offset of the decadent setting the stories take place<sup>2</sup> in, mainly in *The Repairer of Reputations*, which is set in the dystopian future of the United States of the 1920's.

<sup>1</sup> CHAMBERS, 66.

<sup>2</sup> SCOTT, 40.

While Chambers himself is only seldom cited in the pantheon of American gothic horror fiction writers, his work is much influenced by both Edgar Allen Poe and Ambrose Bierce<sup>3</sup>, the latter of whom the name of Carcosa is borrowed from. Furthermore, the haunting of *The King in Yellow* is also felt in the background of the works of H. P. Lovecraft<sup>4</sup> and countless contemporary horror writers. From the perspective of this thesis however, the most important of such pieces is the 2022 video games *Signalis*<sup>5</sup>, developed by rose-engine. *Signalis*, being a video game, utilizes several methods of artistic expression that are inherently unique to the medium of video games, and thus, can portray both the horror and dread associated with the Yellow King, and the theme of inextinguishable longing in a manner that elevates the meaning of both the mythos of Carcosa and the story of the game itself. Since it also features both Chambers' book and the excerpts of the cursed play within it, *Signalis* makes for a distinctive example of intertextuality, as it not only bridges the distance between the two mediums, but also expands the mystery surrounding the figure of the Yellow King, acting as if it were – an albeit much longer – eleventh story of Chambers.

In this thesis, I seek to examine how the themes represented by the enigmatic King in Yellow and the stories surrounding his presence are written both in *The King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers and in the game *Signalis*, as well as to present an argument for how intertextuality in the two works created 127 years apart enhance one another. To do so, I will focus on how *Signalis* uses the unique aspects of the medium of video games to interpret and express the themes of both Chambers' book and of its fictional play of the same name. Furthermore, I will also interpret the motif of the 'Promise', which is the main narrative anchor point of *Signalis*.

## **Chapter I: Artistic Expression in Video Games**

Due to its relatively recent inception compared to other artforms, storytelling techniques used in the medium of video games vary greatly. While the academic discussion regarding the acceptance of video games as art – rather than purely entertainment – has thankfully received a more favorable reception in recent years, I find it important to analyze the way *Signalis* handles its own plot, as it is quite different from what could be considered a 'conventional video game'.

Ever since the technological developments of the latter half of the 20th century, video games have had the luxury of being able to utilize several

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<sup>3</sup> PUNTER, 33.

<sup>4</sup> PUNTER, 38.

<sup>5</sup> SIGNALIS, rose-engine, Humble Games/PLAYISM, 2022.

different mediums to tell their stories<sup>6</sup>. As both the visual and auditory fidelity of gaming consoles and personal computers grew, certain aspects of video games could slowly be separated from the medium itself and were even able to become part of mainstream culture. This is exemplified most clearly in the popularity of certain video game soundtracks, perhaps most notably that of *Tetris*<sup>7</sup>. While this greatly helped in mending the stigmatized nature of video games, I believe it also resulted in a loss of meaning due to the removal of the context in which either their music or visual elements are shown. The severity of this loss of meaning differs depending on the games themselves, but it is mostly dependent on how closely a specific game utilizes the most important aspect of its medium – interactivity.

Interactivity in video games can be observed in many ways. While certain games allow the player to feel more connected to their protagonists than others, interactivity is also present on a more subtextual level. When to start a new section, when to stop, whether to save progress or to take risks and explore, these are all decisions made instinctively by the player in any game, almost independent of its genre. Due to how recent games have aimed for visual realism, it may be easy to think of a video game as a kind of interactive movie. A good example of this can be found in the works of video game director David Cage, whose entire gameography consist of games both made and marketed as interactive movies, most prominently the 2018 hit, *Detroit: Become Human*<sup>8</sup>. While these games present the player with a number of choices that greatly affect the plot of several characters<sup>9</sup>, it ironically results in less interactivity from the perspective of the player, as they are only given the choice of experiencing different paths on a flowchart of possibilities, as if they were a train conductor picking railway tracks. While this form of movie-like storytelling has enjoyed popularity due to its accessibility, it is hardly the only way story and atmosphere can be communicated in the medium, and in my view, it is a very reductive interpretation of the expressive power of video games. Even though movies and video games share a lot of similarities on the surface, the unique aspect of interactivity serves as a great reminder as to where exactly the medium hails from – found within the subculture of tabletop role-playing games<sup>10</sup>.

Tabletop games, other than being the cornerstone of the gaming community, also demonstrate the creativity found in the interactive nature of the medium. Games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* required the storyteller – known as the ‘dungeon master’ – to come up with intriguing scenarios for their players, thus making for a personalized experience for each participant.

<sup>6</sup> BACH, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Tetris, Nintendo R&D1, Nintendo, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Detroit: Become Human, Quantic Dream, Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> 1.1 in Appendix – Interactive choice system in Detroit Become Human.

<sup>10</sup> BOGOST, 55.

As the popularity of role-playing games have risen, series such as *Fighting Fantasy* also started to emerge, which were role-playing books made to be playable alone – all it required was a piece of paper, a pen, and a set of dice. The legacy of such games can easily be seen in the medium of video games, since immersion in such works comes not only from the interactivity in the choices made by their players, but also from the way they can imagine the stories within their own minds. This gave way to new forms of storytelling, most notably the device of ‘environmental storytelling’, one which *Signalis* primarily employs.

Environmental storytelling is a form of non-linear storytelling, in which a player or reader has to connect fragments of the plot piece by piece, through clues found both through exploration, and by gaining further insight into the story by witnessing the conclusion to multiple playthroughs, which often recontextualizes the meaning of previous events. Video games often had to rely on such methods in the golden age of the medium, as the games’ limited graphical fidelity frequently required the player to interpret abstract ideas in the context of the stories as much grander ideas<sup>11</sup>. However, as the medium developed, the use of environmental storytelling became a conscious choice, utilized mainly by games outside the spotlight of the mainstream. While the usage of the technique has risen in popularity due to the effects<sup>12</sup> of the 2011 game *Dark Souls*<sup>13</sup>, historically it was predominantly found in the horror genre, as it not only helped in building the atmosphere, but it also served as a form of increased immersion, in that the confusion that is integral in supernatural horror is felt by both the player and the games’ respective protagonist.

As I mentioned previously, *Signalis* utilizes such a storytelling device to a great extent, both in the way of immersing the player in the mind of the protagonist, Elster, and in the way it builds upon the supernatural aspects of its atmosphere. What makes *Signalis* an even more curious case, is that the way horror seeps into the plot is directly related to *The King in Yellow*, not only in its content, but also in the way the presence of the Yellow King is felt. Never directly shown, seen only through fragments like the appearance of the ‘Yellow Sign’ or the ‘Pallid Mask’ and by reading excerpts from the play are we ever made aware of the influence the King in Yellow has had on the world of *Signalis*. Every single area echoes a feeling of dread and decay, which is made even more prevalent when interacting with the characters within the story, some of them speaking to themselves, some to Elster, and some even to the player directly. This strong atmosphere is integral to *Signalis* in all aspects, but even in the shadow of the Yellow King, the plot itself is driven by the very motif found within Chambers’ book – one of eternal longing.

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<sup>11</sup> KOHLER, 3.

<sup>12</sup> BACH, 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Dark Souls*. FromSoftware, Namco Bandai, 2011.

## Chapter II: Influences and Storytelling

Released in 2022, *Signalis* is a survival horror game developed by rose-engine. Being an indie game<sup>14</sup>, the project was spearheaded by the duo Yuri Stern and Barbara Wittmann in 2014, who are the only two members of the company<sup>15</sup>. It is inspired by several Japanese survival horror games of the previous decade, but most prominently by *Silent Hill 2*<sup>16</sup>, both in its themes and presentation. It also bears a resemblance to Japanese media visually, with an art style reminiscent of famous manga and anime of the 1990's and 2000's. Furthermore, it frequently features European paintings, music, and architecture in its set design, which makes for an eclectic, yet still coherent visual experience entirely of its own. The game employs an isometric camera angle, and the gameplay mainly consists of exploration<sup>17</sup>, inventory management, puzzles, and fighting segments<sup>18</sup>.

*Signalis* is set in a dystopian future, where totalitarian governments seem to be at war with each other and are conducting space operations to find habitable lands and resources. Much like *The Repairer of Reputations*, the setting itself serves more so as the background of the decay prevalent in the game's atmosphere, rather than its primary focus. The plot follows Elster, a 'Replika' – an android copy of a human pilot. I find it important to mention that while the discussion surrounding the humanity of artificial lifeforms is a frequent topic in science fiction, the androids of *Signalis* – who make up most of the characters with a couple of exceptions – are treated very much like humans; they can feel, they have a concept of morality, can think autonomously and are also susceptible to emotional stress. What makes their being peculiar is that as long as their components (referred to as 'bio-components' within the game) are sufficiently replaced, they are functionally immortal. Thanks to this setting, the motif I previously introduced, that of eternal longing, can be explored even more thoroughly, since the semi-immortal androids have a higher understanding of the concept of eternity than we as humans have. The player is also introduced relatively early to the 'Gestalt-Replika' system, which is heavily inspired by the 2010 game *NieR*<sup>19</sup> and its sequel *NieR: Automata*<sup>20</sup>. While in *NieR*, such a system is used to initially separate the body and the soul of humans, in *Automata*, the spotlight is on androids and their struggle with their humanity. *Signalis* handles the idea of this dichotomy in the way

<sup>14</sup> Made by a smaller, independent studio for a smaller audience, as opposed to mainstream games backed by larger publishers.

<sup>15</sup> BROOKE, S. "Mini Review: Signalis (PS4) – Last-Gen Release Has Its Feet In the Future, [www.pushsquare.com](http://www.pushsquare.com)

<sup>16</sup> *Silent Hill 2*, Team Silent, Konami, 2001

<sup>17</sup> 2.1 in Appendix – Exploration in *Signalis*.

<sup>18</sup> 2.2 in Appendix – Combat in *Signalis*.

<sup>19</sup> *NieR*, Cavia, Square Enix, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> *NieR: Automata*, Platinum Games, Square Enix, 2017.

the Replika pilots are made, as they are all based on human (Gestalt) pilots, which gives them their humanity. Other than their facial features, they also inherit their desires and idiosyncrasies, and should they be under stress, they instinctively crave either objects or activities associated with their Gestalt counterparts. Furthermore, the player also learns that the ships in *Signalis* are piloted by exactly one Gestalt and one Replika, which ties into the greater narrative of human connection found within the game; neither a Replika nor a Gestalt is immune to decay, but while a Replika can live on indefinitely with new components, Gestalts are preserved in cryogenic pods through the longer sections of space travel.

While the setting is inspired by *NieR*, the storytelling itself is mainly built upon the foundation set by *Silent Hill 2*. The environment can change drastically in a matter of seconds, space and time itself is convoluted and the player frequently finds themselves transported into areas that do not seem to be connected to where they came from. The confusion caused by this greatly helps the unease of the atmosphere take over the player, and while at first this seems like the only function of the non-linear structure of the story, by playing the game multiple times it becomes evidently clear that the fragmented manner in which the story is told is in perfect harmony with the inner decay that Elster is experiencing – the reason why the player is subjugated to inexplicable leaps in scenery is due to the worsening condition of Elster throughout the game. This is exemplified even more so in the final scene of the second act, in which Elster is in such a critical state that after struggling to open the hatch of her spaceship, she collapses and seemingly dies. What follows this is a segment where the game prematurely ends, showing the credits and putting the player back into the main menu. However, while the player was previously greeted to Elster watching the player make their selection in the menu screen, now it has changed to her dead, expressionless eyes<sup>21</sup>. Through the change in menu, the game expects the player to continue, after which the story picks up where it left off, with Elster waking up and beginning the penultimate act of her journey.

*Signalis* makes excellent use of the narrative leaps and twists made possible by the non-linear storytelling structure, a technique that is even more common in the likes of ballads, but most importantly, in gothic fiction. A good example of such a twist can be found in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Ambrose Bierce, whom Chambers borrows several ideas from in *The King in Yellow*<sup>22</sup>.

*He stands at the gate of his own home. All is as he left it, and all bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. He must have travelled*

<sup>21</sup> Appendix 2.3 – Menu change.

<sup>22</sup> PUNTER, 29.

*the entire night. As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon - then all is darkness and silence! Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge.*<sup>23</sup>

A similar use of the narrative leap and twist is present in the final scene of the *Yellow Sign*, the fourth story in *The King in Yellow*, which occurs after the painter, Mr. Scott and his model turned lover, Tesse stumble upon the cursed play, and thus their short-lived romance takes a horrific turn.

*I could tell more, but I cannot see what help it will be to the world. As for me I am past human help or hope. As I lie here, writing, careless even whether or not I die before I finish, I can see the doctor gathering up his powders and phials with a vague gesture to the good priest beside me, which I understand. They will be very curious to know the tragedy they of the outside world who write books and print millions of newspapers, but I shall write no more, and the father confessor will seal my last words with the seal of sanctity when his holy office is done. They of the outside world may send their creatures into wrecked homes and death-smitten firesides, and their newspapers will batten on blood and tears, but with me their spies must halt before the confessional. They know that Tessie is dead and that I am dying. They know how the people of the house, aroused by an infernal scream, rushed into my rooms and found one living and two dead, but they do not know what I shall tell them now; they do not know that the doctor said as he pointed to a horrible decomposed heap on the floor the livid corpse of the watchman from the church: "I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!"*

*I think I am dying. I wish the priest would-----* <sup>24</sup>

This conclusion to the *Yellow Sign* occurs quite suddenly, just moments after Mr. Scott has finally come to terms with his own romantic feelings, are more importantly his shame and selfloathing. Narratively, this is contextualized

<sup>23</sup> Found in E. F. BLEILER (Ed.) "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" in *Ghost and Horror Stories of Ambrose Bierce*, New York: Dover Publication. 1964.

<sup>24</sup> CHAMBERS, 88-89

within the confines of how the Yellow King manifests itself within Chambers' book, as the reader can clearly see how he holds dominion over those who come across the play. Hildred Castaigne, protagonist of *The Repairer of Reputations*, also faces such a grim end to his life after the climax of his story, who in contrast with Mr. Scott, is not led by the pursuit of love, but by ambition. What connects them in their feelings of inadequacy is their longing for something greater, which in the case of Mr. Scott is portrayed by the perceived purity of Tesse, while for Castaigne, it is his entitlement to the 'Imperial Dynasty of America', believing himself to be the heir to the lost kingdom in the distant stars of the Hyades, a place that like Carcosa, is part of the legacy of the Yellow King.

*I seized the tallow dip and sprang to the door. The cat passed me like a demon, and the tallow dip went out, but my long knife flew swifter than she, and I heard her screech, and I knew my knife had found her. For a moment I listened to her tumbling and thumping about in the darkness, and then when her frenzy ceased, I lighted a lamp and raised it over my head. Mr. Wilde lay on the floor with his throat torn open. At first I thought he was dead, but as I looked, a green sparkle came into his sunken eyes, his mutilated hand trembled, and then a spasm stretched his mouth from ear to ear. For a moment my terror and despair gave place to hope, but as I bent over him his eyeballs rolled clean around in his head, and he died. Then while I stood, transfixed with rage and despair, seeing my crown, my empire, every hope and every ambition, my very life, lying prostrate there with the dead master, they came, seized me from behind, and bound me until my veins stood out like cords, and my voice failed with the paroxysms of my frenzied screams. But I still raged, bleeding and infuriated among them, and more than one policeman felt my sharp teeth. Then when I could no longer move they came nearer; I saw old Hawberk, and behind him my cousin Louis' ghastly face, and farther away, in the corner, a woman, Constance, weeping softly. "Ah! I see it now!" I shrieked. "You have seized the throne and the empire. Woe! woe to you who are crowned with the crown of the King in Yellow!"*

*[EDITOR'S NOTE. Mr. Castaigne died yesterday in the Asylum for Criminal Insane.]<sup>25</sup>*

What sets Elster apart from the likes of Castaigne and Mr. Scott is that due to her being an android, her journey continues even after multiple deaths. On one hand, this can be seen in the last scene of the second act of the story as described above, but because of the nature of the medium of video games, Elster can die potentially an infinite number of times if the player is not careful with their decisions. However, just like in *Silent Hill 2*, these deaths are not made void on subsequent retries – instead, the game keeps an account

<sup>25</sup> CHAMBERS, 36-37.

of exactly how many times the player died, used items to repair themselves, even the number of enemies they killed. This is crucial, as Elster's story has multiple endings, and whichever the player is greeted to is directly related to how they traversed different areas, how long their journey took, and most importantly, how many times they died. This might seem like a subversion of the rules established in *The King in Yellow*, as Elster seemingly keeps escaping her fate, but because of the effect it has on the ending of the game, no choice is left without consequences. While this is only revealed to the player once they complete the game for the first time, it is clear that the game expects the player to experience *Signalis* multiple times, and thus experience more than one ending, effectively making all of them occur not just from the perspective of the player, but from the perspective of Elster as well.

### Chapter III: Intertextuality in *Signalis*

*Signalis* makes its connection to *The King in Yellow* and the mythos of Carcosa clear within the first few minutes of the game. Chambers' book starts off with an excerpt from the fictional play his protagonists all stumble upon. Other than being the only time where more than a few lines of the play are revealed to the reader, it serves as an introduction to the mystery of the Yellow King and sets the mood perfectly as to what is to come.

Along the shore the cloud waves break,  
The twin suns sink behind the lake,  
The shadows lengthen

In Carcosa.

Strange is the night where black stars rise,  
And strange moons circle through the skies,  
But stranger still is

Lost Carcosa.

Songs of the Hyades shall sing,  
Where flap the tatters of the King,  
Must die unheard in

Dim Carcosa.

Song of my Soul,  
my voice is dead Die thou,  
unsung, as tears unshed,  
Shall dry and die in

Lost Carcosa.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cassilda's Song in "The King in Yellow", Act 1. Scene 2.

While the stories themselves start off with their own plotlines, this opening carries with it the feeling of ‘in medias res’, as if we were dropped into a story that has already unfolded. *Signalis* does so similarly, with a cold open starting off with Elster waking up as we see her body perform a sort of system check, to make sure her vital functions are all intact. This playable prologue serves as an introduction to the game’s mechanics to the player, as they are tasked with escaping the Penrose-512 spaceship, in which Elster apparently crash landed onto a planet. While exploring the ship, Elster can find a several notes scattered around the cockpit and platform of the ship, all of them missing enough letters to make them indecipherable<sup>27</sup>. This is used both as a gameplay and narrative device, as it simultaneously teaches the player that they will have to explore thoroughly to understand their surroundings, as well as contributing to the feeling of confusion both Elster and the player should feel. After escaping the ship, Elster finds herself on a surface resembling a deserted tundra. This short scene is accompanied by the ‘Summer’ movement of *The Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi, making for a strong disconnect between the visual and auditory experience. The prologue is concluded with Elster crawling into a hole, finding herself in a small office room after surfacing on the other side. The room has an assortment of interactable items, like a national flag and a radio, but most importantly, it features the very book, *The King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers<sup>28</sup>. The only way to progress the story from hereon is to pick up the book, after which begins the final segment of the prologue. Elster hears a radio transmission, consisting of warnings and a twelve-digit code. This scene is accompanied by a musical track titled ‘The Promise’, which is a different arrangement of *Prelude, Op. 28, No. 15* known as the *Raindrop Prelude* by Fr d eric Chopin. While listening to the transmissions, a small montage of intercut scenes occurs, reminiscent of the opening of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a decade defining anime of the 1990’s, which shares a lot of thematic connections with *Signalis*. Most significant in this montage is its final scene, an image of a white-haired woman, and the phrase “Remember our Promise”. The segment concludes with the title of the game being shown, after which Elster and the player find themselves in the bathroom of a distant mining facility, and the first act of the game formally begins.

While this opening segment keeps the plot shrouded in relative obscurity, it serves as a great narrative and thematic setup. The player knows that there is a promise of immense importance they must keep, and that the enigmatic King in Yellow has to play an important role in it. While traversing the facility known as ‘Sierpinski-23’, the player soon finds themselves confronted with their first real enemy; an android, decaying and seemingly gone mad. It attacks Elster, and she is forced to defend herself with a gun the player is expected to find before the encounter. All the enemies being androids in *Signalis* have connotations for both Elster and the player once again – it shows clearly that these androids are no different from Elster herself, and as Elster’s

<sup>27</sup> 3.1 in Appendix – Indecipherable notes.

<sup>28</sup> 3.2 in Appendix – The King in Yellow.

condition progressively worsens throughout the game, we are left to contemplate whether or not this is the same fate that will befall her by the end of her journey.

Throughout the game, the player has to solve a number of puzzles to traverse the area, and to do so they are equipped with a radio. The radio itself plays a key role in *Signalis*, as by listening to transmissions, the player will not only gather clues for the puzzles they have to solve, but will also occasionally hear the sound of other androids – mostly incomprehensible, in the first act this phenomenon is used to further deepen the atmosphere of the game, but later on (more and more so as Elster is weakened) certain transmissions seem to carry meaning related to the degradation all androids are subjugated to throughout the story. One of the most significant moments of the first act happens in one such transmission, as listening to it transports Elster into one of the many ‘dream segments’ of the game. The camera perspective switches to a first-person view, and we are left to explore areas that initially have no connection to where we were before<sup>29</sup>.

The end of the first act marks a turning point in the plot of *Signalis*. In order to traverse to the next area, the player is forced to jump into a large hole, which leads to a place completely different to the previous mining facility. Instead of futuristic space technology, this area resembles the innards of some sort of living organism, and the buzzing and clicking of space equipment is replaced with haunting swiveling noises. To further disorient the player the game also takes away the map the player got accustomed to using, making for a large shift in not only tone but gameplay. Thematically, this is in direct connection with the cursed play of *The King in Yellow*, in which the second act marks a point of no return to anyone who reads it – here it signifies Elster’s commitment to her goal as succumbing deeper and deeper into uncharted territory leads her to revelations that she herself cannot comprehend yet. Marking the final challenge of this area is the next dream sequence, one which takes Elster to a murky island shore. The island itself bears a strong resemblance to Eugen Bracht’s *The Shore of Oblivion*<sup>30</sup>. Previously in the opening segment, we also saw an image of another painting, that of Arnold Böcklin’s *The Isle of the Dead*<sup>31</sup>, which is connected to the painting of Bracht both historically and thematically<sup>32</sup>. In the context of *Signalis* it depicts the island of Carcosa, finally made bare visually. The island is full of scattered notes all reciting lines from play, mainly the first four lines found in the preface of *The King in Yellow*.

While *Signalis* does not have a conventional antagonistic figure, the player is introduced to the character of Adler, who seems to hinder Elster’s progress on multiple occasions. He seems to be the only one aware of the chain of events that occurred before the start of the game. What makes Adler even more crucial regarding the intertextuality between the two works,

<sup>29</sup> 3.3 in Appendix – First person segment 1.

<sup>30</sup> 3.4 in Appendix – Carcosa.

<sup>31</sup> 3.5 in Appendix – The Isle of the Dead.

<sup>32</sup> Senses Atlas, *The Shore of Oblivion*, Eugen Bracht, [www.sensesatlas.com/](http://www.sensesatlas.com/)

is that he quotes *The King in Yellow* directly, reciting the line of the 'Stranger'; "I wear no mask"<sup>33</sup>. In Chambers' book, the line is used to set the theme of the second story, *The Mask*, in which the narrator Alec, his sculptor friend Boris Yvain and his wife Geneviève are caught in a love triangle. While the overarching theme of longing is also ever present in *The Mask*, it also deals with the struggles of deception. While Alec hides his love for Geneviève, even though both her and Boris are aware of it, Geneviève herself hides her true feelings for Alec even more so, those only being revealed after she reads the cursed play and succumbs to a mysterious illness. Boris also wears a mask of his own, since by using an alchemical liquid concocted by him to turn living beings into statues, he is mimicking the work of a perfect sculptor, masquerading as one. While the role of the 'Stranger' in the play is never made clear, in *Signalis* the role of Adler is something of a herald. He tries his best to influence the events of the story by hindering Elster's path, but by the end of the story he is unable to change the events that unfold.

Other than the purist of the 'Promise', Elster is given another reason to step deeper and deeper into the unknown. In the beginning of the game, she finds a blurred portrait<sup>34</sup> of a woman called Alina Seo, who bears a strong resemblance to Elster – the player can later learn that she is the Gestalt human Elster herself is based on. Initially this can lead the player to believe that the greater theme of *Signalis* is one of identity. While this is true to a certain extent, the importance of Alina Seo lessens with each act, and instead another woman by the name of Ariane Yeong takes her place<sup>35</sup>. This is because the 'Promise' is directly tied to the figure of Ariane Young, as she is the person Elster swore her promise to, her being the white-haired woman the player saw in the beginning montage of the game. By the second act, the portrait of Alina Seo changes to one of Ariana Yeong, signifying not just the importance of her figure, but also a change in Elster – starting from the second act, Elster starts to remember her promise, and as she is weakened by progressively difficult challenges, it is this singular motive that keeps her venturing forth.

#### **Chapter IV: Eternal Longing and the 'Promise'**

Influenced by and built upon *The King in Yellow*, there are several aspects in which *Signalis* references Chambers' book, but it is the concept of the 'Promise' that connects it to the motif of eternal longing found within the lines of the very work it interprets. As Chambers himself borrowed the name of the island of Carcosa from *The Inhabitants of Carcosa* by Bierce<sup>36</sup> to build up the legend of what Castaigne and Mr. Wilde have referred to as the

<sup>33</sup> *The King in Yellow* – Act 1, Scene 2d.

<sup>34</sup> 3.6 in Appendix – Photograph of Alina Seo.

<sup>35</sup> 3.7 in Appendix – Photograph of Ariana Yeong.

<sup>36</sup> Found in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, New York: Lovell Coryell & Company, <sup>3</sup>1895. (2<sup>1</sup>892, <sup>1</sup>1886)

“Imperial Dynasty of America”, so has *Signalis* utilized the same motif to tell its tale of a promise so terrible it corrupted all the inhabitants of its setting. The idea of the ‘Promise’ is found lingering in the background of every event in *Signalis* – the player is made aware of it since the very beginning of their adventure, both by the opening cinematic and the musical arrangement of the same name which is in perfect harmony with the Chopin piece it employs. Just as the characters of Chambers’ book peer through a veil of horror and dread by reading the accursed play, Elster herself is shackled by the weight of her promise, but due to her undying nature, she is unable to rest and must see it to its conclusion.

By the third act of *Signalis*, the player is able to piece together that whatever should the ‘Promise’ entail, it is most likely responsible for the degradation of life witnessed throughout the journey. In the dream sequences to follow, the player sees progressively more scenes including Ariane – at first her being picked on in school, followed by a scene of her sitting on a bench alone on a subway. Later, Elster is greeted to another dream that looks more like a memory; on the same platform the game started in, we can see Ariane greet Elster with a kiss, and the two dance to *Ständchen* by Franz Schubert. The importance of Ariane in Elster’s life is made clear with her increased presence in these scenes, but the severity of their relationship is only revealed here in this scene, close to the end of the game. The longing Elster feels towards Ariane has been the main driving force behind her actions this whole time, her recklessness and bravery in the face of the continuously increasing challenges made clear to both her and the player. Adler even mentions that she cannot let Elster be reunited with “her”, but it is not explicit up until this point who the “her” he mentions could be.

In the final area of the penultimate act, the player discovers the room of the android Falke, who is at the top of the chain of command. It is through her that the androids received their instructions through the radio transmissions Elster has been listening to, but while exploring throughout the game, the player can learn that when androids are distressed, they emit a signal called ‘bio-resonance’, which influences every other android on the same signal, making this phenomena the most likely reason for their decaying physical and mental state. Falke is considered to be a kind of holy figure by other androids, most prominently Adler, and this shows in her presentation as well – her radio antenna resembles a gloria, and she is also equipped with wings<sup>37</sup>. When Elster finally meets Falke, the player can see that she shares a face with Ariane, being the Replika that she was based on – making a direct connection between the two. Since Falke is the highest-ranking android within the Replikas, her ‘bio-resonance’ is audible to every other android, finally revealing the source of the decaying world of *Signalis* – the reason for its occurrence however is rooted in the relation between Elster and Ariane.

As Falke succumbs to the disease of her own radio transmission, she

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<sup>37</sup> 4.1 in Appendix – Falke.

turns hostile to Elster, and the final fight of the game formally begins. After defeating Falke, the player finds themselves back at the Penrose-512 spaceship where they began their story. What happens after this is dependent on the player's actions up until this point. If they played cautiously and ran away from most confrontations, Elster is overwhelmed by her fear and is unable to journey forward. She tries to walk away from the ship, only to succumb to her injuries inflicted on her by Adler before the fight. The game formally ends, the player is greeted with an ending titled "Leaving"<sup>38</sup> and they never learn exactly what the 'Promise' meant. Should the player have been more willing to fight, Elster will muster up the courage to get back onto the ship, and the player can finally read the notes that were scattered throughout the ship at the beginning of the game. Through the notes, the player can piece together the chain of events that lead to this point.

Elster and Ariane have been on the ship for three thousand 'cycles' (the in-universe name for years), as the land they found was deemed uninhabitable by humans and they were unable to board it. Since there was no protocol for such an occasion, they were abandoned and even before their resources ran out, Ariane suffered radiation poisoning due to the atmosphere of the planet they landed on. To try to mend her suffering, Elster put Ariane into a cryogenic pod and froze her, hoping to wake her up later once she can gather resources to help her. Before she could do so however, Ariane made Elster promise to kill her if she cannot find a way to ease her suffering. As time went on, Falke, who is now known to by the player to be the Replika of Ariane, started to experience this traumatic event through Elster, which started her, and subsequently every android's malfunction. Throughout the entire game, the cryptic radio transmissions and dreadful images that Elster and every android was forced to experience repeatedly were the echoes of the eternal, inextinguishable longing that Elster felt to be reunited with Ariane, amplified through Falke, and broadcasted eternally.

Once the player learns all of this, they can enter the final chamber of the spaceship, where they will find Ariane, frozen. Once the player frees Ariane from her slumber, Elster will greet her. If the player traversed through *Signalis* in a balanced manner, paying attention to their environment and picking their fights carefully, Ariane will not remember Elster. She sits next to her, holding her hand for the final time, and declares that this is truly hell. The game then ends, and the player is shown an ending titled "Memory"<sup>39</sup>. For the player to learn the entire context of the story, and to be awarded with the ending titled the 'Promise', *Signalis* wants them to play recklessly – by dying numerous times, not taking good care of Elster and spending more time completing the story, the bridge between the determination of Elster and the player truly blurs together, and it is through this experience that Elster is remembered by Ariane. She thanks Elster for keeping her promise,

<sup>38</sup> 4.2 in Appendix – Leaving.

<sup>39</sup> 4.3 in Appendix – Memory.

and through tears, Elster strangles Ariane, finally keeping her promise that kept her going all this time<sup>40</sup>. Having fulfilled her purpose, Elster dies.

The concept of multiple endings influenced by gameplay choices is a narrative device that was most famously utilized by *Silent Hill 2*, in a quite similar manner to *Signalis*. While both games make efforts through these means to blur the line between the protagonist and the player, it is only in *Signalis* that the motif is also tied back into a mythos like that of *The King in Yellow*. Just like in Chambers' book, the supernatural horror of the Yellow King is clearly complemented by the human struggle of yearning – this is prevalent in all its stories. By contextualizing it in such a setting, a fusion of science and horror fiction, *Signalis* has the uncanny ability to make the player experience the struggle from a much more personal point of view, through the eyes of Elster, with whom by the conclusion of the plot, they must share mutual determination through both gameplay and narrative means.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I wanted to explore how intertextuality can not only manifest in two seemingly different artforms, but also how it is not only *Signalis* that gains an additional layer of meaning through *The King in Yellow*, but also how the stories within Chambers' book are complemented by the journey of Elster and her longing for Ariane. For example, the last two endings of *Signalis*, "Memory" and "Promise" can also be interpreted as potential conclusions to *The Mask*, as neither the reader nor Alec can know in what condition Geneviève could wake from her slumber. The degree in which readers can empathize with either Alec, Castaigne or Mr. Scott is obviously dependent on several personal factors, and I would argue that it is not necessary in order to appreciate the atmosphere Chambers creates in *The King in Yellow*. However, the interactivity provided by the medium enables *Signalis* to create immersion on such a level that the line between its characters and the player is blurred almost completely. Through the usage of non-linear and environmental storytelling, frequently changing perspectives, thematic and narrative leaps in time, and by presenting an ending to its story based on the player's playstyle within the context of the story, *Signalis* shows a side of the Yellow King that is only possible in video games. Be it through Falke, Elster, Ariane or the numerous radio transmissions, the presence of the enigmatic King in Yellow feels omnipresent in *Signalis*, which perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy of love and dread that is felt in Chambers' book. Thus, it is my assertion that the motif of the 'Promise' is quintessentially inseparable from the covenant of the Yellow King, revealed only to those who dare read the cursed second act of the play. It is only through the eyes of Elster however that we can see the effects of the play to its conclusion.

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<sup>40</sup> 4.4 in Appendix – Promise.

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**Appendix: Pictures**



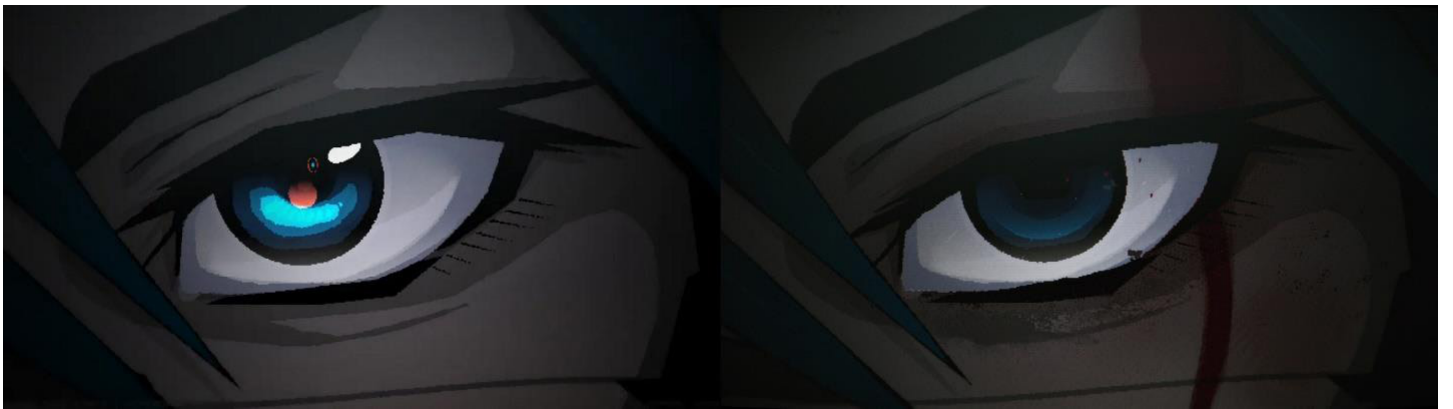
1.1: Interactive choice system in *Detroit: Become Human*.



2.1: Gameplay in *Signalis*.



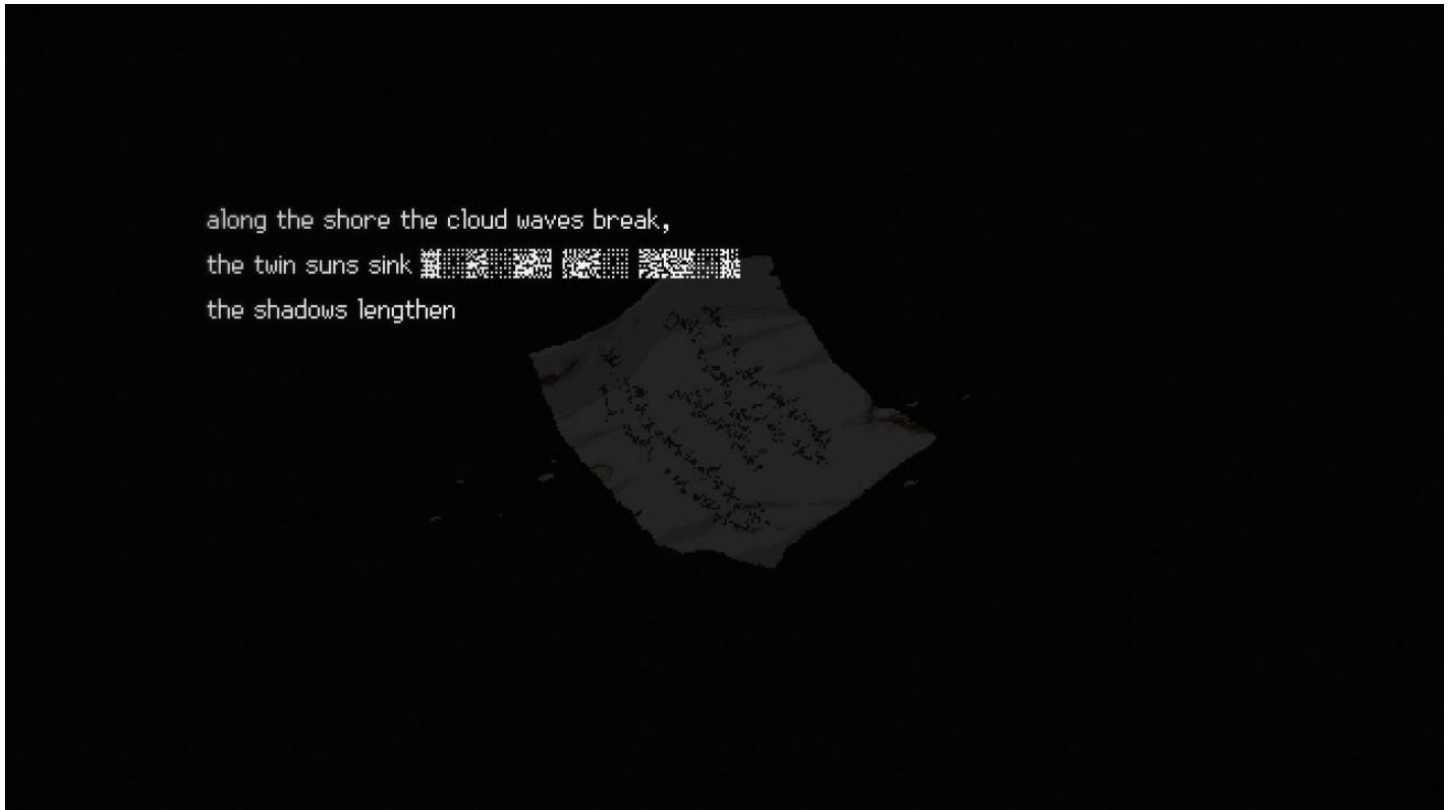
2.2: Combat in *Signalis*.



2.3: Menu change.

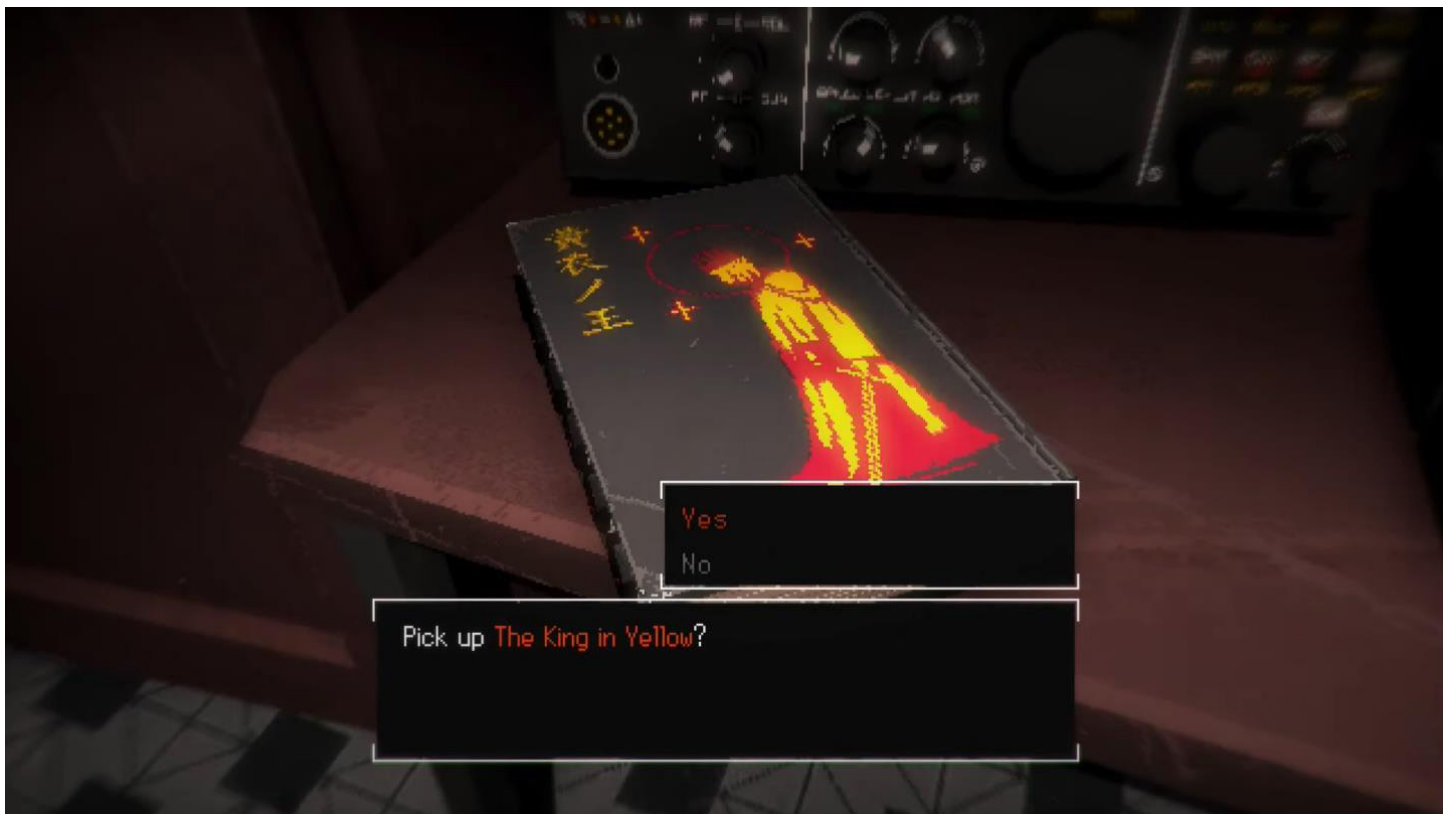
The Menu we are greeted to at the beginning of the game.

The Menu after the premature ending sequence



along the shore the cloud waves break,  
the twin suns sink  
the shadows lengthen

3.1: Indecipherable notes.



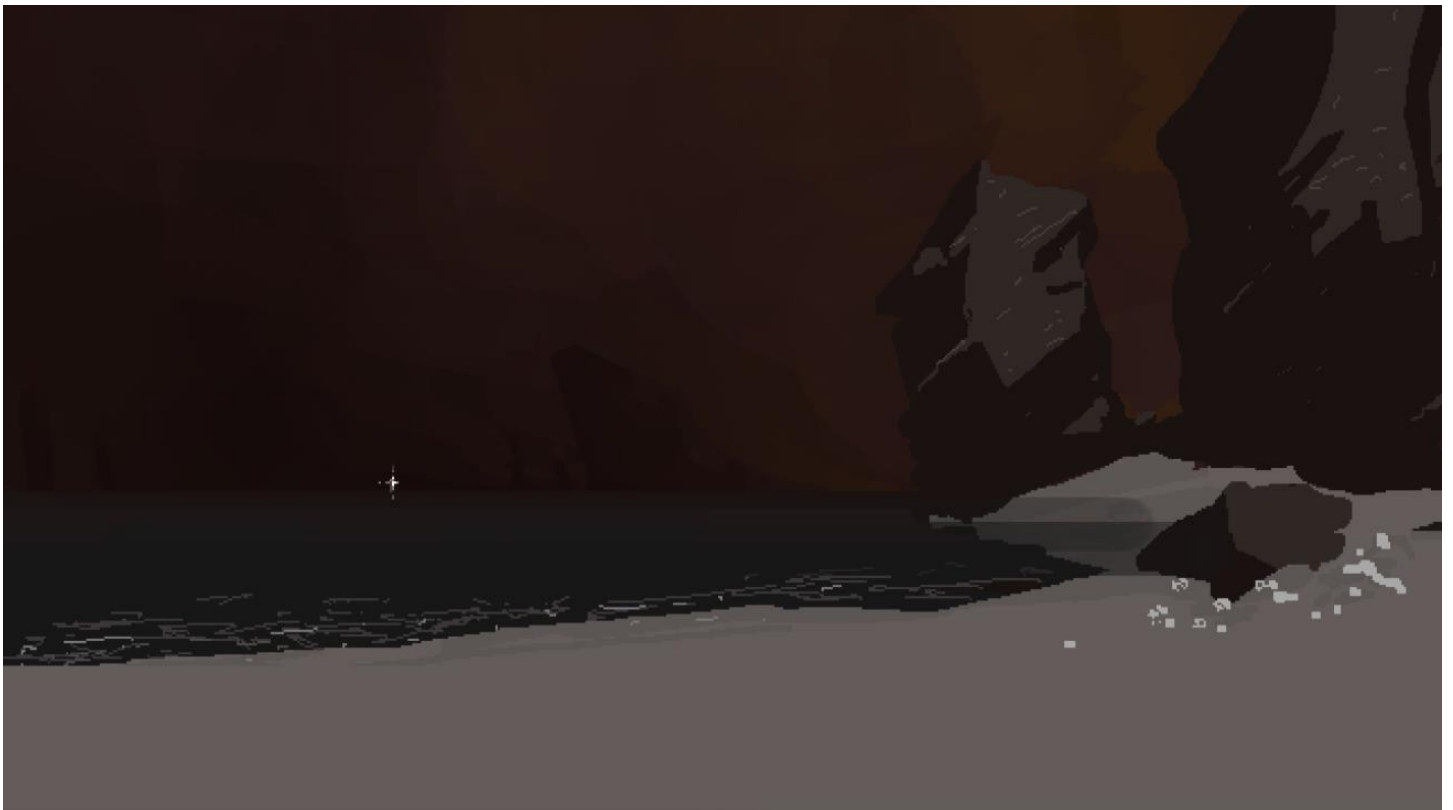
Yes  
No

Pick up *The King in Yellow*?

3.2: The King in Yellow.



3.3: First person segment 1.



3.4: Carcosa.



3.5: The Isle of the Dead.

	<p><b>PHOTOGRAPH</b></p> <p>A photograph taken on self-developing film. Despite the damage, Alina Seo can still be seen on it.</p> 
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3.6: Photograph of Alina Seo



3.7: Photograph of Ariane Yeong



4.1: Falke.



4.2: Leaving.



4.3: Memory.



4.4: Promis





**András Keskeny**

## **UTOPIISCHE TENDENZEN IN DER ZEITGENÖSSISCHEN VIDEOCLIPKULTUR. DER VERSUCH EINES ÜBERBLICKS\***

### ***Was sind Utopien?***

Der Begriff der Utopie ist so alt wie die Neuzeit. Das Wort stammt von dem englischen Humanisten Thomas Morus aus dem Jahre 1516. Morus stellte in seinem Roman eine ideale republikanische Gesellschaft vor, die er auf einer fiktiven Insel mit Namen Utopia ansiedelte. Die Utopie war bei Morus also nichts anderes als eine perfekt funktionierende Demokratie. Damals wie heute eine Rarität.

Heute verstehen wir unter Utopie jedoch zum Teil etwas anderes. Laut Duden ist eine Utopie ein »undurchführbar erscheinender Plan; eine Idee ohne reale Grundlage«. Das seltene Wort Utopia hingegen bedeutet im Deutschen »Traumland, erdachtes Land, wo ein gesellschaftlicher Idealzustand herrscht«. Wir denken dabei leicht an die futuristischen Lebenswelten der Science-Fiction-Romane und -Filme. Von Demokratie ist in diesen Definitionen jedenfalls nirgends mehr die Rede.

### ***Die Modernität als Utopie***

Wenn wir das Wort Utopie im Sinne des Dudens verstehen, dann war die bisher historisch bedeutendste Epoche der Utopien zweifellos das 20. Jahrhundert. Auch die *Modernität* wurde *als Utopie* weder in der Politik noch in der Kunst jemals so ernstgenommen wie in jener Zeit. Das unrealistische Moment existierte dabei in den Phantasmagorien des NS-Regimes ebenso wie in den gescheiterten Versuchen der Hippie-Kommunen, die von Grund auf eine komplett neue gesellschaftliche Alternative aufbauen wollten. Wie sich Utopie und Modernität in dem kurzen 20. Jahrhundert miteinander verflochten

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haben, das exemplifiziert die Geschichte der Sowjetunion am besten. Sie galt nämlich für lange Zeit als die real existierende Utopie schlechthin. Ohne die ideologische Bedrohung durch die Sowjets hätten historisch auch die westlichen Wohlfahrtsstaaten nicht in ihren uns bekannten Formen existiert.

Selbst die moderne Kunst und Architektur lebte während des 20. Jahrhunderts lange Zeit von der Vorstellung: Die Modernität wäre nichts anders als eine zu verwirklichende Utopie. Ein Beleg dafür ist das abgeklärte Formdesign des Modernismus. Es war ursprünglich als definitiv gedacht und sollte einen futuristischen Vorgeschmack auf die moderne Zukunft vermitteln, die man in Kürze als Endziel erreichen wollte. Der minimalistisch-geometrische »Formwille« des Modernismus hatte seine Blütezeit vor allem in den Jahrzehnten nach dem Krieg. Zu dieser Zeit erhob er einen absolut universalistischen Anspruch auf die Gegenstandskultur, und zwar unabhängig davon, ob er im Dienst einer kapitalistisch-demokratischen oder sozialistisch-kommunistischen Zukunft stand.

Unter historischem Gesichtspunkt sind die modernen utopischen Ideen erst am Ende der 1960er Jahre dauerhaft in Misskredit geraten. Während die 68er-Bewegungen im Ostblock mit Gewalt unterdrückt wurden, mündeten sie im Westen in ihrer eigenen Rekapitalisierung. In den 1970er Jahren setzte in den westlichen Gesellschaften dann ein postindustrieller Konjunkturwechsel ein. Damit wurden nicht nur die modernen Utopien, sondern das Projekt der Moderne als Utopie an sich in Zweifel gezogen. Darauf folgte der plötzliche Zusammenbruch des Sowjetblocks am Ende der 1980er und Anfang der 1990er Jahre. Mit dem Fall der Berliner Mauer hat der Historiker Francois Fukuyama das Ende der Geschichte verkündet. Er sagte voraus, dass die Begeisterung für ein neues Zeitalter, in dem keine Utopien mehr regieren dürften, nicht besonders lange dauern könne. Spätestens mit den Terrorangriffen am 11. September 2001 und mit der Weltwirtschaftskrise 2008 müsste klar sein, dass die Geschichte in Wirklichkeit nie geendet hat. Über ihr Ende zu fantasieren, war selbst eine Utopie.<sup>1</sup>

## **Die Hyperkultur**

2005 wurde das Videoportal YouTube im Internet freigeschaltet. Und im selben Jahr erschien ein kleines Büchlein mit dem Titel *Hyperkulturalität*. In den 2000er Jahren schien es noch eine offene Frage zu sein, wie eine Zukunft aussehen könnte, die sich nicht nach den alten Schemen des Modernismus gestaltete.<sup>2</sup> Der Autor des Büchleins, Byung-Chul Han, wollte genau diese Frage

<sup>1</sup> Das ganze Video (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8r-tXRLazs&ab\\_channel=TheBugglesVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8r-tXRLazs&ab_channel=TheBugglesVEVO)

<sup>2</sup> Ab der Minute 2:33 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf6Naosms8I&list=PL3Ygjj1FMpe2xIigMBLc7sxFXEckT9s79&index=5&ab\\_channel=HermanZakharov](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf6Naosms8I&list=PL3Ygjj1FMpe2xIigMBLc7sxFXEckT9s79&index=5&ab_channel=HermanZakharov)

reflektieren. Als Auftakt seines Textes zitiert er den britischen Ethnologen Nigel Barley: »der ›wahre Schlüssel der Zukunft‹ liege darin, daß ›Grundbegriffe wie Kultur aufhören zu existieren‹. Wir seien doch, so Barley, ›mehr oder weniger alle Touristen in Hawaiihemden‹.«

Han versuchte damit das Problem darzustellen, wie sich die Kultur im herkömmlichen Sinne, nämlich als Nationalkultur, im Zeitalter der Globalisierung essenziell verändert. Die lokalen Kulturen beeinflussen sich nach Ansicht Hans durch die Globalisierung nicht nur gegenseitig, sondern vermischen sich immer stärker multikulturell. Die kulturellen Motive lösen sich damit allmählich komplett von ihren traditionellen Ursprüngen und bereichern damit eine kosmopolitisch-globale Überbaukultur, die Hyperkultur.

Der Soziologie Andreas Reckwitz bezeichnete die Hyperkultur zwölf Jahre später, also 2017, als die »für die Spätmoderne charakteristische Form der Kultur«.<sup>3</sup> Unter Spätmoderne versteht Reckwitz die Ära nach dem postindustriellen Konjunkturwechsel des Westens. Demnach kennzeichnet die Hyperkulturalität die Kultur der heutigen Zeit. »Die Hyperkultur ist tatsächlich *Überkultur*, das heißt eine Art übergreifendes, dynamisches Prinzip, das eine Sphäre kreiert, in der potenziell alles in höchst variabler Weise zum Gegenstand von Wert werden *kann*«. So heißt es weiter: »In der Hyperkultur kann alles – gleich ob volks-, populär- oder hochkultureller Herkunft, gleich ob gegenwärtig oder historisch, gleich welchen lokalen Ursprungs« – den Wert der Kultur erlangen.« In der Hyperkultur wird also alles mit allem frei kombiniert.<sup>4</sup>

## **Kino im Zeitalter des Post-Cinema**

Martin Gessmann stellt in seiner Studie »Am Nullpunkt der Dinge – Hollywood und das neue Welt-Design« die Frage danach, was von Hollywood im Zeitalter des Post-Cinema übriggeblieben ist. Unter dem Begriff des Post-Cinema wird die Zeit nach der Epoche des Kinotheaters verstanden. Die Filmtheorie betitelt mit dem Label »Post-Cinema« alle Besonderheiten zeitgenössischer Filme, die sie einfach nicht mehr mit den Termini der traditionellen Kinokultur beschreiben kann.

Gessmann geht davon aus, dass das Motiv im Neuanfang liegt, was sich auch im Hollywood von heute zeigt. Der Neuanfang ist einerseits ein alter Topos, dessen Wurzeln bis zu den ersten Siedlern der Neuen Welt zurückreichen. Andererseits verfügt er über christlich-religiöse Konnotationen. Denn wird die

<sup>3</sup> Ab der Minute 0:15 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-yUAFJbQtM&ab\\_channel=NomadicAmbience](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-yUAFJbQtM&ab_channel=NomadicAmbience)

<sup>4</sup> Das komplette Video (letzter Abruf: 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POe9SOEKotk&list=PLOHoVaTp8R7dfrJW5pumS0iDdhIXKv17&index=5&ab\\_channel=BLACKPINK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POe9SOEKotk&list=PLOHoVaTp8R7dfrJW5pumS0iDdhIXKv17&index=5&ab_channel=BLACKPINK)

Das ganze Video (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sdjIQpe5QU&ab\\_channel=OLIGARKH](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sdjIQpe5QU&ab_channel=OLIGARKH)

Sünde ehrlich bereut, besteht im Christentum immer die Möglichkeit zu einem Neuanfang. Beides ist in der US-amerikanischen Kultur also tief verwurzelt.<sup>5</sup> Zudem bietet der Neuanfang Hollywood gute Möglichkeiten auf einem globalen Weltmarkt, wo die Filme der Studios auf ein buntgemischtes Publikum treffen.

Der Neuanfang kann am besten – so Gessmann – durch das Aufbauen neuer Welten erreicht werden. Ist das aber nicht das, was Hollywood spätestens seit dem digitalen Zeitalter macht? Es baut nie gesehene Welten, Megaspktakel auf der Basis einer ungeheuerlich simplen Story auf. Nach der Meinung Gessmanns gibt es zwei Gattungen, die dafür besonders geeignet sind. Die eine sind Science-Fictions,<sup>6</sup> die andere historische Dramen. In beiden Fällen können komplette Kulissenwelten so aufgebaut werden, dass sie die Tür zu einer Welt eröffnen, die einem sofort vertraut wirkt. Da die Zuschauenden diese neuen Welten noch nie in ihrem Leben gesehen haben, müssen sie diese auch nicht mit ihrer eigenen soziokulturellen Realität abgleichen. Sie bleiben das, was sie letztendlich sind: im weitesten Sinne utopisch.

## **Cyber- und Retrotopien**

Ich bin der Meinung, dass sich Gessmanns Thesen nicht nur weithin auf die zeitgenössische Videoclipkultur übertragen lassen, sondern uns auch dabei helfen, jene Frage zu beantworten, wie Utopien nach der Phase des Modernismus aussehen könnten? Also, wie sich die Utopien der Spätmoderne gestalten? Gessmanns Thesen klingen besonders spannend, wenn wir die utopischen Tendenzen und heutigen Formen des Utopismus in den aktuellen Videoclips untersuchen bzw. versuchen, sie nachzuvollziehen.

Der postindustrielle Wandel seit dem Ende der 1970er Jahre überschneidet sich mit dem Aufbruch der Digitalisierung. So sind die Cyber-Utopien bzw. -Dystopien (kurz die Cybertopien) seit den 1980ern populär geworden. Cybertopien als fiktive Erzählungen spielen entweder im Cyberspace, oder es treten Cyborgs als zentrale Gestalten auf. In der Wirklichkeit sind die Spuren einer andauernden Tech-Euphorie allerdings ebenso zu beobachten wie jene der Skepsis. Ist das Projekt des Metaversums nicht selbst eine Utopie? Sind viele von den Hoffnungen im Zusammenhang mit der Künstlichen Intelligenz nicht utopisch? Eines ist sicher.<sup>7</sup> Wir sind pro oder kontra sofort begeistert oder misstrauisch, wenn es um Künstliche Intelligenz, Robotik, Bionik, Bioengineering, Posthumanismus und so weiter geht. Diese Begriffe spalten

<sup>5</sup> Ab der Minute 0:04 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3QKkl1WyM&ab\\_channel=MarvelEntertainment](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3QKkl1WyM&ab_channel=MarvelEntertainment)

<sup>6</sup> Ab der Minute 1:17 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqNYrYUiMfg&ab\\_channel=UniversalPictures](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqNYrYUiMfg&ab_channel=UniversalPictures)

<sup>7</sup> Ab der Minute 3:01 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL-tvd8jeBc&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zk&index=9&ab\\_channel=Arca](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL-tvd8jeBc&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zk&index=9&ab_channel=Arca)

die Menschen heute genauso wie einst die moderne Industrialisierung. Gerade deshalb scheint die Kategorie der Cybertopie heutzutage von einer so hohen Signifikanz zu sein.<sup>8</sup>

Der Soziologe Zygmunt Bauman wurde auf eine weitere Form spätmoderner Utopien aufmerksam. Mit dem Titel seines Werks *Retrotopia* führte er einen Neologismus ein.<sup>9</sup> So schreibt er: »Was ich hier Retrotopia nenne, geht aus der [...] Negation der utopischen Negation hervor.« Demnach sind »Retrotopien«: Visionen, die sich anders als ihre Vorläufer nicht mehr aus einer noch ausstehenden und deshalb inexistenten Zukunft speisen, sondern aus der verlorenen/geraubten/verwaisten, jedenfalls untoten Vergangenheit«. Retrotopien gehen daher über allerlei Retromoden und Nostalgiewellen hinaus. Sie sind retrograde Visionen, die oft eine unterschwellige Lust auf die Rückkehr zum Gestern oder zum Historischen in sich bergen. Diese Lust steigert sich in manchen Fällen sogar bis zu einem mehr oder minder ausgeprägten Willen zur Restauration. Retrotopien können somit leicht zu einem politisch heißen Thema werden. Entgegen den Cybertopien, die für uns weiterhin eher fiktional als real klingen, kennen wir die Vergangenheit viel zu gut, als dass wir uns über jede retrospektiv-utopische Anspielung unbefangen freuen könnten.

### **Spätmoderne Utopien als Hybridutopien**<sup>10</sup>

Während sich die Cyber- und Retrotopien tatsächlich als zwei wichtige Tendenzen in der zeitgenössischen Clipkultur ausmachen lassen, sind sie in ihren reinen Formen – zumindest in Videoclips – doch sehr selten. In der Hyperkultur herrscht eine Regel der freien Kombinationen. Und dieser Logik unterwerfen sich auch die spätmodernen Utopien. So vermischen sich in den zeitgenössischen Musikvideos sowohl die Cyber- und Retrotopien komplett frei miteinander wie auch mit den herkömmlichen Utopien und Dystopien. Meist mündet das in komplexen Lifestyle-Utopien von Influencer-Prosumer-Stars.<sup>11</sup>

Ob das 21. Jahrhundert ein Jahrhundert sein wird, das weniger im Geiste der Utopien stattfindet, wird die Kultur- und Politikgeschichte erst später entscheiden. Jedenfalls scheint der Geist der Utopie zu Beginn des zweiten Jahrzehnts dieses Jahrhunderts mit frischer Stärke wieder aufzuflammen.

<sup>8</sup> Das ganze Video (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzDqmQMabUQ&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zK&index=14&ab\\_channel=UPSAHL](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzDqmQMabUQ&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zK&index=14&ab_channel=UPSAHL)

<sup>9</sup> Ab der Minute 0:29 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thJgU9jkdU4&ab\\_channel=RammsteinOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thJgU9jkdU4&ab_channel=RammsteinOfficial)

<sup>10</sup> Ab der Minute 0:26 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMWLX0KXwF4&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zK&index=3&ab\\_channel=ToveLo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMWLX0KXwF4&list=PLPjU7ZjKv8uj4dZMM1o5A3saIM30p5zK&index=3&ab_channel=ToveLo)

<sup>11</sup> Ab der Minute 1:00 (letzter Abruf am 30.11.2022):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-NTv0CdFCk&ab\\_channel=LanaDelReyVEVO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-NTv0CdFCk&ab_channel=LanaDelReyVEVO)

Allerdings in erneuerten Formen. Unzählige neue Programme haben das Monokonzept der Modernität ersetzt. Meistens sind diese jedoch nicht weniger utopisch. Während eine Rückkehr zur Vergangenheit in der Periode der Moderne noch unvorstellbar schien, nähren sich die spätmodernen Utopie-Konzepte sowohl aus einer erahnten Zukunft als auch aus unterschiedlichen Abschnitten der Geschichte. An die Stelle des Modernismus sind Entwürfe zahlreicher Ästhetiken getreten, die statt universalistischer Schemen eine nicht-reproduzierbare Einzigartigkeit erstreben. Auf diese Weise entstehen Hybridutopien.

Die unterschiedlichen digitalen und transhumanen Motive bedeuten ebenso wie die Cybermotive und die zahlreichen Retroelemente eine Bereicherung für den aktuellen Stillkonsum. Sie finden bei der Gestaltung eines bewusst kuratierten Lifestyles durchaus Verwendung. Dieses Spiel mit den Sujets überschreitet die Linie des Unpolitischen und kulturell Harmlosen allerdings ungeheuer schnell, sobald es auf eine identitätspolitisch utopische Denkweise trifft. Mir scheint die zeitgenössische Videoclipkultur eine der wichtigsten Orte zu sein, wo Stillkonsum und kuratierter Lifestyle identitätspolitischem Utopismus begegnen. Im Gegensatz zu den atemberaubenden Filmepiken aus Hollywood, die die Lebenswelten der Zuschauenden in den seltensten Fällen direkt betreffen, wirken Videoclip-Lifestyle-Utopien automatisch identitätsstiftend. Die augenblicklichen Angebote des spätmodernen Identitätsmarkts begegnen im Clipformat fiktionalen Formen, die audiovisuell in effektiver Weise Narrative vermitteln. So werden ästhetische Identitäten kreiert, die – ähnlich wie bei Filmen – von Clip zu Clip einen ewigen Neuanfang erleben können und müssen.

In einem solchen Traumland (Utopia) der identitätspolitisch-ästhetischen Diversität könnte ich mir nur eins wünschen: mehr utopischen Mut zu den demokratischen Verhandlungsprozessen gemeinsamer Realitäten.

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