

# Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: **Dark Souls 3**

Platform: **PC, Playstation 4, XBox One**

Genre: **Action RPG**

Release Date: **April 12, 2016**

Developer: **FromSoftware**

Publisher: **Bandai Namco**

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: **Hidetaka Miyazaki**

## Overview

The Bell of Awakening tolls ceaselessly over the ruined lands of Londor as the First Flame takes its dying breath - an omen of the inescapable Age of Darkness. With all the great Lords of Cinder having forsaken the Age of Fire, will one lowly, Unkindled undead be able to gather up the ashes to prolong the inevitable? Or will they too succumb to the nefarious Abyss like so many great heroes before them?

The finale of the critically acclaimed *Souls* franchise, *Dark Souls 3* uses callbacks, references and audio cues to convey a sense of finality - this is the “death” of the series, and the player will always be reminded of this.. Fittingly enough for a game that is so thematically tied to the idea of death and melancholy, *Dark Souls 3* is structured around the **five Stages of Grief** [3], with each **Lord of Cinder** encounter corresponding directly or indirectly to a different stage.

## Characters

- **The Ashen One:** Rising from the grave with the unenviable task of recalling the errant Lords of Cinder back to their empty thrones, the Ashen One acts as the player character and protagonist of *Dark Souls 3*. With almost every single one of their aspects customizable, the Ashen One essentially serves as the avatar through which the player is able to impose their will upon the game world.
- **The Fire Keeper:** Taking up the mantle from similar NPCs in previous *Souls* title, like the Doll in *Bloodborne* and the Emerald Herald in *DS:2*, the Fire Keeper is essentially a narrative wrapper around the old RPG mechanic of leveling up.

She serves in humanizing the often inhumanely-cruel world of *DS:3*, showing that compassion can still exist in the face of inevitable oblivion.

- **The Lords of Cinder:** Powerful individuals chosen to extend the Age of Fire by burning within the First Flame, the refusal of the current living Lord, Lothric, to do his duty kicks off the entire plot of *DS:3*. Previous Lords of Cinder are brought back from the grave to complete Lothric's task, but most of them follow his example, turning their backs to the First Flame. Confronting them is the primary objective of the Ashen One.
  - **Ludleth of Courland:** Only Lord of Cinder to remain loyal to the First Flame, Ludleth is a friendly NPC that assists the Ashen One on their journey by providing advice and forging powerful weapons from the souls of slain bosses. He represents the **Acceptance** stage of Grief.
  - **The Abyss Watchers:** A band of warriors, sworn to defend the world from the taint of the abyss, Farron's Abyss Watchers decided to burn together in the First Flame rather than condemn only one of their own to endless torment. Ages of burning ceaselessly to extend the Age of Fire has driven them insane, and susceptible to the same Abyss they fought so hard to contain. The Ashen One must put these once great heroes out of their misery on their quest to rekindle the First Flame. The mindless manner in which the Abyss Watchers fight, combined with their lack of focus and infighting, equate them to the **Anger** stage of grief.

- **Aldrich, Devourer of gods:** Once a holy man, Aldrich was driven insane by a vision of the future, causing him to turn into a terrifying cannibal. The only Lord of Cinder sacrificed against their will, the resurrected Aldrich focused all his efforts into acquiring the power of the gods themselves for his own ends. His association with Pontiff Sullyvahn, a man who struck a pact with the Devourer to gain more power, paints him as an aspect of the **Bargaining** stage of grief.
- **Yhorm the Giant:** King of the land that became known as the Profaned Capital, Yhorm sacrificed himself to save his kingdom from the Profaned Flame. Yet his sacrifice only strengthened the inferno, causing it to immolate most of his domain. Knowing that one day he'll be resurrected to the kindle the First Flame once again, Yhorm entrusted a weapon capable of stopping him to his closest subjects. The self-destructive nature of his narrative, coupled with the ultimately futile nature of his sacrifice, marks him as a representation of the **Depression** stage of grief.
- **Lothric and Lorian, the Twin Princes:** Marked at birth to be a Lord of Cinder, the sickly Prince Lothric was never strong enough to shoulder the weight of his destiny. His older brother Lorian thus chose to shoulder his burden - an act that rendered the Crown Prince mute and crippled. Distraught by the futility of extending the life of the dying Age of Fire, Lorian and Lothric chose to hide away in the highest tower and do nothing as the inevitable Age of Darkness slowly consumed the world. Rather

appropriately, the Twin Princes seem to embody the **Denial and Isolation** stage of grief.

## **Breakdown**

Cinders and ash, indistinguishable from the first frost, cover once-grand ruins - the whimpering end of a great Age, marked only by the mournful knell of an ominous bell. From long untended, ash covered graves, forgotten champions rise up solemnly to fulfil their destiny. The world is dying - its end is inevitable. But will it die with a whimper or a final triumph against the approaching darkness?

That is the image *Dark Souls 3* sings into the player's mind and reinforces through moment to moment gameplay. The *Souls* series has never been known for having a vibrant color palette, but *DS3* takes the bleakness much further. Very few objects in a scene could be described without using the word 'grey'. However, far from making the game look monotonous and repetitive, this makes the subtle instances of color much more noticeable and meaningful. Cinders blowing in the wind is an image that appears frequently throughout the game either to denote a powerful enemy or to direct the players towards a (relatively) safe location. Had *DS:3* possessed a more varied color palette, the significance, and even the visibility of these particles would have diminished considerably. The few areas which do defy the traditional color palette are either mythical locations, in-universe, or correspond to the haunt of one of the elusive Lords of Cinder.

The uninitiated may wonder at the purpose of these ruins - they may pause to ponder on the meaning behind all these grand, abandoned edifices. But veterans of the

franchise may often be moved to tears upon closer inspection of the land known as Lothric. Unlike *DS-2*, which persevered in telling a story completely separate from the original game, *DS-3* fully utilizes its status as a franchise ender to make sure the series receives as much closure as possible. This is noticeable within the layout and general aesthetics of the many locations the Ashen One visits. Not only do they feature visual callbacks to *DS-1*, and, less frequently, to *DS-2*, but they geographically correspond to many specific areas from the original game. If one were to superimpose a map of *DS-3* over one of *DS-1*, one would be surprised to find them fitting like a jigsaw puzzle.

Despite this, *Dark Souls 3* does not lack in originality. Indeed, it introduces more than its share of new elements to the *Souls* mythos. But, more importantly, by revisiting old areas, *DS-3* conveys **narrative through recapitulation**. Anor Londo, formerly a citadel of the Sun-aligned deities of old, being depicted instead as a cold ruin, trapped under an eternal moonlit night, conveys more about the general state of the world than most expository dialogue or text. The lands of Izalith, only recognizable to older players because of the sheer amount of demon corpses littered around, similarly tell a tragic story wordlessly. It's accurate to say that the narrative structure of the *Dark Souls* universe resembles a **fugue** - each story beat is taken and modified through the intertwining of successive story beats.

*Dark Souls 3*'s narrative through recapitulation isn't just limited to level design however. Musical notes and altered leitmotifs of bosses from other *Souls* games also become powerful storytelling tools. The true heinous nature of Aldrich's crime, for

example, only becomes apparent to attentive players when snippets of *Darkmoon Gwyndolin*'s leitmotif starts playing - signifying that the cannibal had devoured the deity.

This method of storytelling does have the disadvantage of being-inaccessible to players who started the series with *DS-3*. To ease them in, FromSoftware had to make sure *DS-3* had a compelling self-contained narrative to stand on its own. However, they also had to ensure that this new narrative did not conflict with *DS-3*'s original purpose of providing a conclusive end to the *Souls* series. The solution was increasing the number of NPC quests available to the player. For the most part, NPCs in *Dark Souls 3* are far friendlier than their counterparts from previous *Souls* games. The Ashen One's ever expanding party included some genuine friends. At various points in the storyline these NPCs would offer their assistance to the player or, at the very least, express concern over their well-being. This created bonds between the player character and the NPCs that were quite rare to see in other games of the franchise. Often times the player would be motivated to go seek out quests and assist NPCs, not out of any sense of completionism, but for more personal reasons. These quests often involved exploring areas in greater detail and uncovering secret rooms, vaults or items that would have otherwise been missed by players. This is especially useful for newer players who may not understand or realize just how important exploration is to uncovering the entire narrative of a *Souls* game.

The true genius of these NPC quest designs become apparent when one realizes that, despite having more optimistic/altruistic characters present, the overall setting remains just as bleak, dark, and hopeless, if not more so, than all the other titles in the

*Souls* series. Almost every single NPC's personal story arc revolves around them clearing up some personal loose ends, before quietly and somberly accepting their own demise and passing on. Thus we see *Dark Souls 3's* overarching theme of finality and facing death repeat itself in these character arcs - indeed, this theme may accurately be described as an **idée fixe**, or a dominating idea, because of how prevalent it is in every aspect of *DS-3's* design.

## **Strongest Element**

The *Souls* series has always been famed for its boss fights, and *DS-3* is no exception. However, more important than the boss fights themselves, is how they are structured, and how well they tie into the **idée fixe**. As mentioned earlier, each of the encounters with the Lords of Cinder seem to embody a different **Stage of Grief**. Prince Lothric, and his crippled brother Lorian, raised from birth to be fuel for the First Flame, grew disillusioned with the false hope provided by temporarily extending the Age of Fire. Their decision to ultimately abandon their role and lock themselves away cause them to embody **Denial and Isolation**. Farron's Abyss Watchers, lashing out at anything and everything around them in a futile effort to escape the inevitable embody **Anger**. Aldrich, Saint of the Deep, sought a power that was never his own to escape his own fate, causing others in turn, to make nefarious pacts with him. The series of events he's directly or indirectly involved in turn him into an avatar of **Bargaining**. Yhorm, King of a people he failed to protect, setting up the means for his own downfall, is a perfect personification of the self destructive, inescapable nature of **Depression**. And finally, Ludleth, only Lord

of Cinder to not face the Ashen One as a foe, represents **Acceptance**. Together the five Lords of Cinder embody not just *Dark Souls 3*'s **idée fixe**, but the player's personal feelings about having to let go of the *Souls* franchise as well. The nonlinear manner in which some of the Lords of Cinder may be encountered also represent how the Stages of Grief are not linear and link to each other in different ways.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

While thematically the boss battle with **Yhorm the Giant**, one of the Lords of Cinder, is excellent and the narrative arc involving him quite moving, the actual mechanics associated with the fight leave a lot to be desired. The **Stormruler** blade, plotwise one of the only things that can annihilate giants in the setting, makes the encounter almost trivial even on higher difficulties. More problematic than the difficulty, though, is how the entire fight is designed to be needlessly tedious and gruelling should the player not use the Stormruler blade. Yhorm is predictable, slow, and laborious, possessing an extremely large health bar that only takes a fraction of the damage dealt by players using conventional weapons. Not using the Stormruler in battle feels less like a challenge and more like a grind. This stands out especially when contrasted with the other boss fights in *DS-3*, almost all of which are faster paced and facilitate the use of widely diverging strategies. Combined with the fact that, as a Lord of Cinder, Yhorm gets a lot of build-up, the entire boss battle feels like a disappointing, single-solution puzzle, rather than a dynamically epic clash.

## Highlight

The Lords of Cinder have been vanquished; their ashes have returned to the Fire Link Shrine. The Ashen One is transported to the Kiln of the First Flame to face his destiny. Nothing else stands between him and the First Flame, save one solitary knight in burning red armor. The Knight notices the Ashen One's approach, pulling his flaming sword out of the ground in front of them. Embers and cinders spiral around them as the two combatants clash. Only then does it become clear that there's more to the Red Knight than meets the eye. With a dynamic fighting style eerily similar to player characters and a repertoire of skills and abilities from the *DS-1* and 2, the Red Knight, better known as the ***Soul of Cinders***, is clearly an amalgamation of every possible player character from previous *Dark Souls* games. To master this fight, one must master themselves. As the Ashen One finally gets the upper hand against his predecessors, the Soul of Cinders is brought down to their knees. Right before the final blow can be struck however, fire bursts all around the Red Knight. They get back to their feet, somehow changed. And then the piano chords hit! Veterans players let out a gasp of wonder as they find themselves crossing swords with none other than the remnants of **Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight** - the first entity to start the Age of Fire and the final boss of the original *Dark Souls*. It is only fitting that he be present at the final moments of his franchise. For *Dark Souls* has always been as much of a story about Gwynn and his selfish sacrifice, as it had been about the undead and the monsters - ashes and cinders. The setting of the

final battle, Lord Gwynn's leitmotif, and the mechanics of the fight itself meld seamlessly into each other, creating a perfect video game "bookend".

## Critical Reception

Robert Zan of *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* praised *Dark Souls 3* for threading together and collecting all the tidbits of lore presented in previous *Dark Souls* games. The repetition of themes, locations, characters, and even items strengthen the bond *DS-3* shares with the rest of the franchise according to Zan. The author argues that this Sisyphean repetition doesn't make the game monotonous because of how good the *Dark Souls 3* is at conveying its intended core experience [1]. Though Patrick Kelpik of Kotaku criticized *DS-3* for not having the same sense of mystery that its predecessors did, he conceded that this was inevitable for the final installment of any franchise. Kelpik, however, went on to praise *DS-3* for feeling like an excellent farewell to the *Souls* franchise and a great fusion of the best points of the entire series. [2].

## Lessons

- **Musical cues can be a great storytelling tool**

There's almost no text or piece of dialogue implying that Gwyn from *DS-I* has any relation to the Soul of Cinders. Yet, just with a few simple piano chords, the connection becomes obvious. The greatest tragedy in the *Dark Souls* universe, at the end of day, was able to be conveyed with just few musical notes and that best exemplifies the power leitmotifs can have over narratives - especially ones that span multiple games.

- **Empathy doesn't have to make the game world brighter**

*Dark Souls 3* boasted the most empathetic cast of NPCs in the entire franchise, but their inclusion did not detract from overall bleak feeling that the *Souls* series is known for. Their empathetic nature made them a lot more relatable to the player, and their tragedies much more painful.

- **A bleak, grey color palette is not always a bad thing**

In an age when bleak, washed out colors are the norm for many games, *Dark Souls 3* shows us that how this palette can achieve more than simply 'reinforcing realism'. All the subtle flame effects, all the cinders blowing in the wind, all the ash particles raining down gently from the sky would have been nigh impossible to notice with a brighter palette. The feeling of a world close to burning out is reinforced greatly thanks to the greyish color scheme.

## **Summation**

*Dark Souls 3* is, at its core, a beautiful example of a video game elegy - a piece that exists to convey all the varied emotions that one goes through when coming to terms with grief. It's primary goal had always been to give the *Souls* franchise a send-off worthy of it's legacy. And through a combination of well structured boss fights,

thematically appropriate visuals, and a stronger, more personal emphasis on the world, *Dark Souls 3* manages to do just that.

## Works cited

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3. Broom, Sarah M. "Milestones." *Time*. Time Inc., 30 Aug. 2004. Web. 05 Dec. 2016.