

From epic fail to epic music: music, silence and failure on *Dark Souls 3*

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ABSTRACT

Progression through a series of challenges, and the chance that players may lose, is one of the main mechanics used by many video game genres today. While a growing set of titles are exploring game development with mechanisms other than dying (such as walking simulators or narrative-based games), others have gone so far as to be considered a genre in their own right. This has resulted in several forms of online content production by their cybercommunities, among other aspects of commercial success. This phenomenon is best known with regard to the *Soulsborne* RPG series, particularly the *Dark Souls* trilogy (FromSoftware, 2011-2016). Famous for its difficulty (and the fact that the player's character dies many times), *Dark Souls* is often mentioned as a helpful or satirical benchmark to define another game's level of challenge. Besides failure as design, however, *Dark Souls*' sonic and musical accompaniment are a key factor in the narrative arc, player agency, and the construction of meaning.

While the absence of non-diegetic music during the player's navigation through the game world is commonly referred to as *silence*, each area and character has carefully designed sound spaces and cues which build a transdiegetic sonic threshold intrinsically related to the player's (inter) action. In addition, musical accompaniment only features in boss encounters and rest areas, articulating all these spaces.

This paper aims to examine the role of the aural components in *Dark Souls* and their engagement with the player's agency while also being underscored by the orchestral soundtrack. Furthermore, this musical dimension has also attracted the attention of *producers*, leading to the production of online resources, such as playlists and ambiance compilations. Its music is key, not

only for player immersion and narrative definition, but also for the game's commercial success and role in consolidating the *epic* style as a popular genre and its consequent circulation, mainly on YouTube.

“Prepare to Die”: *Dark Souls*’ (lack of) tutorial

In the midst of a pandemic that continues to define the year 2020, several industries have had to adapt and respond to the many millions of people at home looking for additional ways to be entertained, to consume new forms of media, and to connect and socialize remotely. From live streamed concerts on Facebook to new music playlists on Spotify, the current participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b) exemplifies contemporary society, and reflects and reinforces the increasingly thin barrier between producers and consumers, encouraging *producers*¹ (Bruns, 2008) to actively engage and circulate content — either original or pre-existing — on online spaces and participate in the general demand for digital activities. The gaming industry is no exception and in fact has played and continues to play a key role in promoting cultural and artistic production as well as entertainment on several platforms.

Titles that have gained enormous popularity since March 2020 include *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Activision, 2020), and even *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), to name a few. The family-friendly battle royale, *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* (Mediatonic, 2020) was launched merely five months after COVID-19 was deemed a pandemic and attained a record number of downloads on the PlayStation Store (Goslin, 2020). The frantic free-for-all to get to the end of each challenge, via a race or timed survival, in which players were progressively eliminated after each round until the final fight for the winning crown, resulted in the internet being flooded with videos, streams, articles, and memes of colourful jiggly bean-like figures with different costumes and customizations in chaotic but lively virtual landscapes.

Despite apparently being accessible for everyone, the video game² *Fall Guys* was quickly deemed a frustrating and punishing experience for many players, either due to cheaters, or to the disorderly way of playing and the mechanics of the system itself. The colourful world accompanied by upbeat electronic music therefore rapidly descended into nightmarish situations marked by anger. This challenging aspect is sometimes paralleled to the renowned video game series characterized precisely by its difficulty: *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011-2016). From Reddit posts comparing gameplay mechanics to articles mentioning that “[...] it’s like *Dark Souls* in that you’ll definitely want to play with a gamepad” (Chacos,

1 *Producers* – merging the words ‘producers’ and ‘users’ – is a term coined by Alex Bruns in the context of *produsage*, which aims to explore and define the phenomenon of increased consumer participation, transforming them into producers in a networked context and thus blurring the boundaries between passive consumption and active content production and circulation in a collaborative environment.

2 ‘Video game’, in the context of this paper, encompasses the proposed definition of the term by Jesper Juul, in which “A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable” (Juul, 2005, p. 35). The term ‘game’ will function as a synonym of video game in this text, as ‘video games’ are essentially games with which one can interact via a screen in the hardware used (computers, mobile phones, consoles – portable or not – televisions, etc.). The components of rules, challenges, and results with associated values and emotions are thus combined with the (inter)active aspect of video games.

2020), *Fall Guys* is considered by many to be the *Dark Souls* of battle royales. It is worth noting that one specific round – Slime Climb – is considered the most *Dark Souls*-esque of the entire game. One particular run “but with *Dark Souls* Music”, featuring the soundtrack of the *Dark Souls 3* boss Vordt of the Boreal Valley³, can be found among the various attempts by streamers on YouTube and Twitch.



Figure 1. A meme mashup between the start of the *Slime Climb* round of *Fall Guys* and the *Dark Souls* interface, with elements such as the title of the area, HP⁴, items and number of “kudos” (“souls”). Aiwa Rikiar, @CrimsonBloodTea [Username] (2020, August 14) Now this looks like a Thursday [Image attached] [Tweet] Twitter Entry, Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/CrimsonBloodTea/status/1294139680695283713>.

The use of this series title as a means to compare and measure difficulty is one of several ways in which the *Dark Souls* universe is transformed, *memefied*, circulated, and shared, increasing its popularity and reach in the gaming cybercommunities even further. While its predecessor, *Demon Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009), was well received by critics but had some unrefined design elements, the subsequent *Dark Souls* trilogy has had much wider circulation and greater success at an international level, consolidating a large fanbase to the point where it is recognized as a genre in its own right (Byrd, 2016).

Known as the *Soulsborne* series, these action RPGs (Role-Playing Games) take place in a medieval fantasy setting on the world of Lordran from a third-person perspective. With the mechanics mainly centred on combat and exploration, the player traverses through several areas in an open-world environment that connects several paths and unlockable zones marked by a central component of the gameplay: checkpoints in the form of bonfires. Bonfires are a core element of the game. In each one, while the character can replenish their health and healing vials (Estus Flasks), the world, respective enemies, and previous encounters the player has had will also respawn. This apparent *reset* is the crucial

3 WillMakeMemes4Food [Username] (2020, August 19) *Fall Guys but With Dark Souls Music*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/EB3KLgnR6-I>.

4 In the case of *Dark Souls*, HP refers to *life*, or *hit points*, a basic component that indicates the level of health of the player’s character.

aspect of all the *Dark Souls* games as it sums up the entire gameplay in repetition and, ultimately, failing. Ironic and undeniably famous for its black screen and red uppercase letters informing the player that “YOU DIED”, death is a principal element in the universe, lore, and player interaction. The character encounters several types of enemies representing different challenges in each area until they come face to face with a main enemy directly linked to the narrative in question, known as the boss. The complexity of the combat and the difficulty for the player results in many deaths. Only by learning and predicting what will happen through repetition will the player increase their chance of surviving and progressing.

With failure as design, another aspect of these titles is the vague and minimal storytelling used to present the narrative to players and to convey its lore. Aside from the introductory cinematic, the games leave the historical events, characters’ backgrounds, and the contextualization of each area — where most of the information is provided through dialogue with NPCs (Non-Playable Characters), world design, and flavour text⁵ — open to interpretation.

This storytelling method requires players to invest in understanding the narrative and timeline in which their character is located. This frequently results in searching online and reaching out to the multiple cybercommunities and platforms centred on the *Dark Souls* universe. From hours of videos proposing narrative theories and chronology explanations to full projects on how to unravel all the plot secrets, *producers*, as in many audiovisual media, are central to the life of the video game outside its own virtual world.

Another crucial aspect of these titles that is possibly still overlooked by the field of ludomusicology, but not by players, is the musical dimension⁶. From soundscapes to diegetic sound effects, from the soundtrack to fan covers, this is the main focus of this paper.

Contrary to the majority of RPG video games, in which gameplay is usually accompanied by non-diegetic music and adapted to each area and/or narrative context, *Dark Souls* uses this component sparingly. The player only hears music – in a broader sense of the term – in combat situations with bosses, meaning only during very specific encounters. Almost all the areas and everything they encompass — from enemies to NPCs, or just exploration —

5 Flavour text is all the textual elements in an RPG that will not alter or affect the actual gameplay, its main purpose being to inform and characterize items (such as weapons, historical events, locations, or characters). For example, the *Animus* database from the *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-) video game series and the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) Codex are both internal collections of information from each game divided into characters, locations, and further contextualization, among other categories.

6 Other authors have looked at *Dark Souls* from different perspectives and contexts: from aesthetics and hermeneutics (Vella, 2015), meaningful learning (Ribamar et al, 2016), network and streaming platforms (Gandolfi, 2018) to procedural rhetorics (van Nuenen, 2016). From a musicological perspective, Marcelo Franca, whom I would like to thank for his personal insight on these matters, presented initial research on the dichotomy of sound and silence in *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* at *Ludo2018: Seventh European Conference on Video Game Music and Sound* in 2018. It is also worth mentioning the work of Gonçalves Júnior (2019), which, although focused on the first *Dark Souls* game, presents an interesting analysis on the different functional aspects of the soundtrack related to the lore and background mythology.

are devoid of non-diegetic music, thus giving prominence to the carefully designed sonic landscape of each zone, sound effects, and other cues that characterize the player's journey along each path. This apparent lack of music (commonly referred to as 'silence') progressively builds a transdiegetic (Jørgensen, 2007, 2011) sonic threshold intrinsically related to the player's (inter)action, interlinking their agency and immersion throughout the virtual experience. This almost binary form of musical function and the articulation between spaces in the game's narrative inclusively reaches outside the game itself to cyberspace, where users produce content from and for the *Dark Souls* community, and also consolidates this title's influence in the online 'epic' music circuit.

This paper aims to examine the role of the aural components, the functions of music, and the articulation between the idea of 'silence' and 'boss music' in *Dark Souls 3*⁷, and their engagement with the player's agency while also being underscored by the soundtrack. This non-diegetic musical dimension — composed almost entirely in an orchestral register — can be considered a key element for immersion and narrative success to foster the player's involvement and flow (Phillips, 2015), while simultaneously constructing a target for *producers* to share and circulate content on online platforms, mainly YouTube. From fan covers to ambiance compilations, *Dark Souls*' influence is also seen on the online circuit of the 'epic' music universe, at either a musical or visual level, on a larger scale reinforcing video games' direct influence on today's music culture for mainstream audiovisual media.

“Welcome to the bonfire, Unkindled One”: *Dark Souls 3* sonic experiences and musical immersion

Launched in 2015, the last instalment of the *Souls* trilogy was critically acclaimed and well-reviewed, considered to be “[...] a fitting conclusion” (Stanton, 2016) by Eurogamer and a “[...] worthy send-off” (Rad, 2016) by IGN, receiving the “Ultimate Game of the Year” award at the 2016 Golden Joystick Awards (Sheridan, 2016).

As previously mentioned, the gameplay and world building are similar to other *Dark Souls* titles, mainly in the combat, exploration, and interactivity aspects. Set in the Kingdom of Lothric, the universe of *Dark Souls 3* focuses on the cycles between the Ages of Fire and Dark, where the Living and Undead roam the world. With the toll of the bell that signals the dying of the First Flame, the protagonist, known as Ashen One, rises from the grave with the task of pursuing the five Lords of Cinder and returning their souls to the Firelink

⁷ The paper's case study is limited to the *Dark Souls* trilogy, particularly the third instalment, not taking into account *Demon Souls*; its predecessor, the *King's Field* series (FromSoftware, 1994-2006); or even the PS4 exclusive *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015). While the *Souls* series titles share many similarities in terms of gameplay (and also their director, Hidetaka Myazaki), the trilogy gained huge popularity and recognition among the RPG genre and the general gamer community. For a more concise research scope and limitation, *Dark Souls 3* is not only one of the most popular titles from the franchise but also the most present in users' online activity, content production, and imagery circulation (from videos to memes).

Shrine in order to link the flame and begin a new Age of Fire, thus ending the Dark⁸.

Following the character creation menu and the opening cinematic, the players find themselves in the starting area of the game, titled Cemetery of Ash, where both new and returning users interact with the basic mechanics (such as walking and attacking) and find their first bonfire. In order to progress to the Kingdom of Lothric, the Ashen One must face the first boss – Iudex Gundyr – to open the gates and continue along the path. Both as a satirical/punishing tutorial and a *gentle* introduction to the game⁹, these first steps are almost sufficient to demonstrate, at a first glance, the aural experience of *Dark Souls*, the construction of sonic thresholds between spaces, and the player’s agency and musical immersion during gameplay.

Cemetery of Ash is one of nineteen areas¹⁰ the player must unlock and traverse to reach the end of the narrative, and all include encounters that can be considered key points to progression. These encounters, namely with bosses, may or may not have a direct connection to the narrative arc (aside from the Lords of Cinder):

AREA	BOSS
Cemetery of Ash	Iudex Gundyr
Firelink Shrine	None; rest/safe area.
High Wall of Lothric	Vordt of the Boreal Valley Dancer of the Boreal Valley
Undead Settlement	Curse-rotted Greatwood
Road of Sacrifices	Crystal Sage
Cathedral of the Deep	Deacons of the Deep
Farron Keep	Abyss Watchers (Lords of Cinder)
Catacombs of Carthus	High Lord Wolnir
Smouldering Lake	Old Demon King
Irithyll of the Boreal Valley	Pontiff Sulyvahn
Irithyll Dungeon	None
Profaned Capital	Yhorm the Giant (Lord of Cinder)

8 As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, in all the instalments the *Dark Souls* story is presented to the player in a fairly vague manner and with few details. Considering the need for practicality and the limitations of this paper, it is not possible to delve into this matter and explore the narrative, although it is worth mentioning some lore aspects that distinguish *Dark Souls 3* from the previous games. The protagonist in this title is also referred to as Unkindled, beings who are cursed and branded with the Darksign. These figures tried to link the First Flame and become Lords of Cinder in the past but were not able to finish this task and were ultimately burnt and died. This connection to the Lords enables them to come back from the dead and roam the world of Lothric to attempt this task once more and reignite the Age of Fire, as shown in the initial cinematic of *Dark Souls 3*. Fire is thus crucial for defining this video game’s setting and narrative. Parallel to the previous games, in which the protagonist was Undead and needed to seek elements of the Dark (such as “human effigies” and “humanity” to prevent them becoming “hollow”), *Dark Souls 3*’s main character lacks “flame”, seeking “embers”.

9 The start of *Dark Souls 3* and the encounter with Index Gundyr is frequently mentioned and *memefied* on several on-line platforms as another means to identify this video game’s difficulty and to consolidate the idea of its own genre. While most games have an introductory tutorial with easy actions to familiarize the player with the mechanics and controls, *Dark Souls* forces the player to face a boss, which results in many deaths and much frustration.

10 In this paper, the following DLCs (Downloadable Content) of this title – *Ashes of Ariandel* and *The Ringed City* – are not taken into consideration, meaning that the areas and bosses of these two smaller instalments are not featured in this analysis, although the mechanics and system are equivalent to the main game.

Anor Londo	Aldrich, Devourer of Gods (Lord of Cinder)
Lothric Castle	Dragonslayer Armour, Lothric, Younger Prince (Lord of Cinder)
Consumed King's Garden	Oceiros, the Consumed King
Grand Archives	None. Another area of access to Lothric Castle
Untended Graves	Optional/secret area. Champion Gundyr
Archdragon Peak	Ancient Wyvern Nameless King
Kiln of the First Flame	Soul of Cinder

Figure 2. All the main areas and respective bosses in *Dark Souls 3*. The names of the musical pieces on the soundtrack are homonyms of the bosses and/or areas in which they are introduced.

In terms of soundtrack integration and functioning, most of the *Dark Souls 3* gameplay time features no musical accompaniment, in contrast to the majority of RPGs. Several AAA¹¹ titles with similar epic medieval – including medieval fantasy – settings, such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015); *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018); and *The Elder Scrolls* instalments, such as *TES IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), and *TES V: Skyrim* (ibid., 2011) share many equivalent aspects in the musical structure of the game architecture and interaction.

The soundtracks on these last two video games are divided into categories according to specific areas, locations, or encounters during the player's gameplay, which change and adapt to her actions¹². *Skyrim*, for instance, has a corresponding set of tracks for urban environments (cities, divided into exterior and interior zones), nature locations (most of the world map, which can be altered by area and time of exploration, from morning to evening), dungeons, and other specific locations. Combat is the main trigger for the shift in the musical accompaniment. In this case, a non-diegetic track suddenly plays in a different register, marked by an increase in *tempo* and rhythm, orchestral *tutti* and, of course, in volume, thus commonly characterizing *battle music*. The binary division between exploration and battle music in this context, also present in the other video games mentioned above, is essential for the players to be aware of their surroundings and possible dangerous encounters, even if these threats are not visible at first glance.

The fact that the player has to search for the source of danger and think about the kind of interaction she will perform transforms primarily the musical, in addition to the visual, meaning the user receives ergodically¹³ (Aarseth, 1997; Freitas, 2018). The threat and the musical accompa-

11 AAA is the common term in the video game industry used to characterize video games produced by large studios with high commercial visibility.

12 I have discussed both these video games in more detail on previous occasions. Specifically, In Freitas (2017), I analysed these two titles in the context of music and modding phenomena, converging aspects of musical functioning with immersion, musical style, and *playbour* from modders to add to and renegotiate the musical soundtrack for their personal gameplay experiences in the mods cybercommunity.

13 Ergodicity and ergodic interactions are terms coined by Espen Aarseth in the context of ergodic literature and

niment associated with it are thereby interpreted as an opportunity to be — or try to be — a “hero”, to run away, hide, or to do whatever the player decides from the options available.

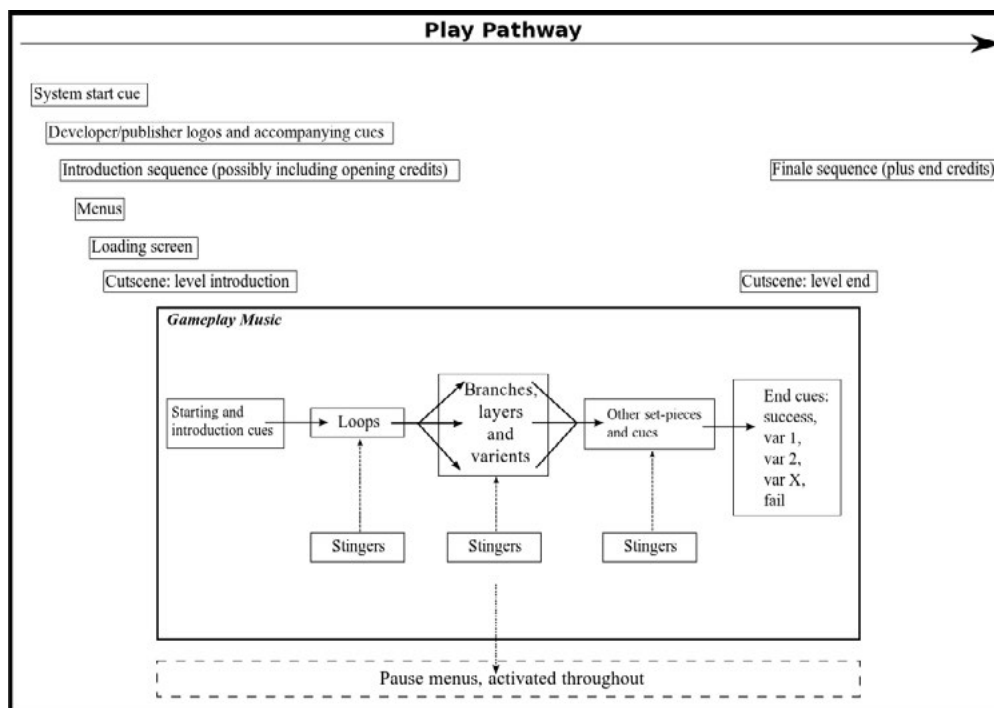


Figure 3. Schematic representation of the musical progression during the playability of a mainstream video game. Image from the book *Understanding Video Game Music* by Tim Summers (Summers, 2016, p. 14).

While not all of these components may be found in the musical sequence of every video game, Tim Summers points out the several steps at an aural level that characterize what the player can expect to see and hear as soon as she starts to interact with one. Aside from the initial marketing screens with studio and company logos, the main menu soundtrack is often essential for the identification of a game and its branding (Buhler, 2016). Followed by cutscenes and other non-interactive moments, the gameplay may contain cues, loops, stingers, and other musical responses to the player’s action and consequences, until the end of a narrative arc or the game itself. *Dark Souls 3* contains all of these steps except, perhaps, during major gameplay: while traversing the world and engaging in regular combat there is no (exploration/battle) soundtrack.

The nonexistence of musical cues during regular gameplay forces the player to be fully aware of her surroundings and, in order to be successful, to understand what each space comprises, particularly the enemies and other threats:

ultimately what the author considers ‘cybertext’. These type of texts must contain information that works in a reciprocal and looped way, which translates into different perceptions every time it is used and interacted with, gaining different interpretations with each user and ‘reading’. For Aarseth, cybertextuality is not a new model of text but a new perspective in the multiple textual forms in order to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that would initially be marginalized by the same field, which would include digital narratives such as video games (Aarseth, 1997).

These spaces, the emotional valleys that Collins speaks of [...] contribute to a “musical tension” in that they are purposely sonically unremarkable to contrast with and direct the player towards the curated experiences of proscribed spaces. (Armitage, 2018)

By considering the opening sequence of *Dark Souls 3* until the encounter with Iudex Gundyr, it is possible to outline the musical pathway of the player’s experience in this context: (1) Developer/publisher titles “Bandai Namco Entertainment” and “FromSoftware” → (2) Title screen “Dark Souls 3” with homonymous main musical theme → (3) Opening cinematic (when starting a new game) introducing the track Prologue → (4) Character creation menu with track titled Premonition → (5) Exploration and combat in the Cemetery of Ash (no soundtrack) → (6) Encounter with Iudex Gundyr accompanied by the homonymous track → (7) End of fight and cue for a new sonic space after traversing the boss area to Firelink Shrine. This last area is considered the safe haven, where the player can spend her souls to level up, acquire new items, repair current equipment, and encounter other NPCs for new dialogues, clues, and quests. Besides the boss fights, it is the only area with its own musical dimension that diverges significantly from the register most often used for these enemies. One of the game’s co-directors, Yui Tanimura, explains the studio’s choice to only use music in the boss context:

Because this game involves paying so much attention to your environment, to your surroundings, not just visually, but with sound, we felt that the implementation of music outside of the boss battles would get in the way of the actual strategizing throughout the game. I feel that being able to really immerse yourself and dive deep into the actual world as if you’re the character themselves, we thought the music would get in the way of that. But for the boss battles, the music obviously helps pump up the situation! So that’s basically the behind-the-scenes answer. (Napolitano, 2013)

Contrary to the commonly referred to ‘boss music’, Firelink Shrine provides the player with a sense of comfort and a safe space. A predominantly female vocal and strings fill the area and stress the shift from the general experience on the world of Lothric. However, Tanimura mentions that music “would get in the way” of enabling immersion for the player, a view which rather contradicts the prevailing wisdom in the context of the video game (especially RPG) music paradigm over the past decade. This is an exceptional choice¹⁴, which

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that this particular way of using music during gameplay can also be seen in *Shadow of the Colossus* (SIE Japan Studio, 2005). Originally released in 2005, the 2018 remake of this title brought it a new wave of popularity and success among PlayStation players. This action adventure game shares some similarities with *Dark Souls* in the absence of music while exploring a vast world with scarce information and the cueing of orchestral tracks when encountering huge beings called *colossi* in the context of boss fights. While not defined as an RPG, *Shadow of the Colossus* is frequently cited as one of the best video games in this industry canon. In it, the player controls a young man in a forbidden land. It is characterized by a minimalist landscape and an emotional journey, presenting an artistic experience of storytelling and puzzle challenges (Muncy, 2018).

ultimately distinguishes *Dark Souls* in the epic fantasy genre.

Music and medieval RPGs are interconnected in terms of immersion and player agency. In this context, and in a broader sense for users, these terms converge around the idea of the player being “present” in the (virtual) environment of the video game, oblivious to the reality that surrounds her. This experience is one of the characteristics and main objectives of any interactive virtual experience of this kind (Freitas, 2017). This distancing from the real environment in which the player is located is enhanced if the musical universe of the game is in tune with the narrative and environments it presents. Thus, to be immersive, its music has to be consistent with the rest of the game universe as well as its soundscapes¹⁵. The aural consistency with the environments built in the video games mentioned is a key aspect directly related to the audiovisual and intertextual literacy required from players at the levels of sound and music, particularly with the instrumentation used and timbric patterns.

This uniformity, however, does not apply to music from a synchronous perspective. The soundtrack cannot be considered historically accurate but rather is contemporary and part of a romantic language present in audiovisual media since the first decades of Hollywood cinema. Claudia Gorbman’s statement that “Music, especially lushly scored late Romantic music, can trigger a response of ‘epic feeling’” (Gorbman, 1987, p. 81), can be linked to the words of Isabella van Elferen, who adds that, in interactive fantasy contexts:

Perhaps the first genre that springs to mind in relation to fantasy music is that of the “epic”-sounding orchestral soundtracks to fantasy cinema and computer games. [...] majestic environments painted for the eyes of fantasy readers become visible and audible in film, television and games. Viewers marvel at the beauty of forests and hillslopes, or at the brooding vastness of outer space while being thrilled by the soundscapes that these new lands generate. Epic music sweeps and thunders its intricate melodies and rich harmonies over impressive visuals, irresistibly drawing the audience into the mythical world depicted onscreen. (cf. Jørgensen) (Elferen, 2013, p. 5)

Audiovisual literacy and immersion, converging in the *ALI* model that the same author (Elferen, 2016) proposes in the context of video games, are critical to understand the familiarity created by the relationship between media and users through compositional tropes in music while, at the same time, it is used to consolidate and reinforce the effects

15 In several texts concerning sound in video games, authors use the term ‘soundscape’ without necessarily defining what it implies, although it can be concluded that in these contexts this concept approaches the definition – which is quite suitable for these media – given by Payne, Davies and Adams: “Soundscapes are the totality of all sounds within a location with an emphasis in the relationship between individual’s or society’s perception of, understanding of and interaction with the sonic environment” (2009, p. 2). It is also worth noting that, in practical terms, music is often a separate component of sound in video game production and design, which is considered in this paper. The complex way these two aspects intertwine when in action during gameplay should be analysed. At the same time this does not invalidate the application of a more functional lens and the consideration of both aspects separately to understand the general gamer public in addition to a designer’s standpoint.

of the soundtrack in the player's engagement with the narrative.

Therefore, while *Dark Souls 3* does not employ non-diegetic music during most gameplay, it uses its soundtrack to stress and create specific immersive spaces for each boss, aiming to provide a unique encounter as the player progresses through the narrative. Orchestral music is used as a vehicle of symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu, 2010) for each boss, characterizing its moment (even if the player dies and repeats it several times until the enemy is defeated) not only as relevant for the story but pivotal for the player's immersion and the affirmation of her character as the "Chosen One" for the task at hand.

Each boss is thus characterized by their music, providing the player – if not already gained through research, tips, and connections with the previous instalments – with sonic clues and layers that may contribute to the likely insufficient information given about the character. To briefly illustrate this, Iudex Gundyr, as discussed previously, is the first boss the player faces, and acts as a test before entering the actual game world. This cues a rather resounding symphonic track with full orchestra. The music accompanies the duel as it progresses: if the player is succeeding and damaging Gundyr, then at a certain HP level she will enter a second phase (increasing the difficulty of the fight even further). The music will reflect this transition, either by introducing new motifs or rhythmic patterns, or by adding layers of instrumentation. From the various videos of boss fights – with or without commentaries and tips to help players in their own playthroughs – the Iudex Gundyr fight video¹⁶ from the GameRottenHD YouTube channel is helpful for understanding the musical transition between the two phases presented by this character. While the first half of the combat is characterized by a consistent melodic line mainly on strings and with some choral notes, the second half (around 01:45) is distinctively marked by the inversion of these motivic lines through the predominance of the female choir and accentuated regular rhythmic strings patterns in the background. Another clear example is the final boss in *Dark Souls 3*, Soul of Cinder.

Another video illustrating this musical transition, this time from the channel Shirrako¹⁷, also characterizes this boss in two phases. The first is well defined with orchestral *tutti* and choir, aiming to represent the amalgamation of all the Lords of Cinder in these moves and spells. The player must completely deplete the boss's health to shift to the second phase (contrary to most of the previous boss fights, in which a new phase is signalled at fifty percent of their HP), which results not only in new abilities but also a new section of the soundtrack. Around 02:50, the intense choir and orchestral register are muffled by the introduction of a single three-note piano motif, slowly progressing to the predominance of piano, strings, and bells until the end of the fight¹⁸.

¹⁶ GameRottenHD [Username] (2016, April 11) *DARK SOULS III - Iudex Gundyr Boss Fight [No Commentary]*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: [https://youtu.be/J8J7ZB4v\]kg](https://youtu.be/J8J7ZB4v]kg).

¹⁷ Shirrako [Username] (2016, March 29) *Dark Souls 3 - Soul of Cinder Final Boss Fight Walkthrough [1080P HD]*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/padfkzGThWc>.

¹⁸ This piano motif is directly quoting the musical theme from the final boss of the first *Dark Souls* game, Gwyn. This

This epic music texturing (Summers, 2016) is adapted and tailored to each boss, considering aspects of their narrative background, fighting style, and spatial context. In addition, music is also a useful element at a technical level; for some bosses, the *tempo* stresses the rhythmic patterns of their attacks, helping the player to predict and counter the opponent. It is worth noting that one boss, the Dancer of the Boreal Valley, stands out from the others. In addition to being the only female figure, she is the only boss with a track in a 3/4 time signature, the rest being either in 2/4 or 4/4. The dance connotation and her synchronized moves in a musical register that is as yet unfamiliar to the player transform this fight into what players consider one of the hardest in *Dark Souls 3*. Divided into three phases, it has an eerie motif that is progressively layered as the Dancer's moves quicken and she approaches her demise¹⁹.

While music is then utilized at a symbolic, textural, narrative, and also functional level, what is considered 'silence' is thus the definition of each area between bosses and, ultimately, most of the gameplay. From white noise to wind, leaves, roars, grunts, and other sound effects whose origin may or may not be entirely visible, each zone has specific sonic characteristics that construct and define their soundscapes. While at the High Wall of Lothric the player may come across both living and dead dragons that can be heard at a distance, Road of Sacrifices combines forest and swamp, where trees, echoes, wind, and water play a part in the sonic environment. In combination with the sounds resulting from the player's direct action – such as footsteps on different terrain (which are particularly relevant in the sound design), dialogue with other characters, the use of tools, weapons, and objects – as well as the general interaction with elements of the world, diegetic and non-diegetic components merge during gameplay, structuring the aural dimension of the relationship established between the player, her character, and the narrative, and can thus be defined as 'transdiegetic' sounds:

By positioning the player outside the game world but with direct access to act within the game world, computer games may utilize extradiegetic sound to give the player information relevant for the choice of actions internal to the diegesis. Since extradiegetic music in films is not part of the fictional world and is not heard by the fictional characters, it is therefore valuable only to the

Lord of Sunlight and Cinder is the last challenge for the player in this instalment, and contrary to the music players are used to when encountering a boss, this piece has a piano solo starting with that single motif (which many users describe as "plin plin plon" in YouTube comments and Reddit threads) instead of a full orchestral theme. Due to this background lore and his "Hollowness", Gwyn does not present a difficult boss fight, disrupting the player's gameplay to a greater extent due to the fact that he is the last boss. This musical connection with the Soul of Cinder of *Dark Souls 3* is thus characterized as nostalgic and sad for experienced players, attributing a particular symbolic connotation to this boss encounter.

19 This special attention to her music quickly gained attention on online platforms, especially YouTube. One particular user published a video analysing in more detail how music simultaneously helps and hinders this boss fight, and the way in which the Dancer, her moves, and particularly her footsteps are intimately linked with the rhythmic pattern and *tempo*. The Game Theorists [Username] (2017, February 14) *The SECRET Rhythms of DARK SOULS! | The SCIENCE!...of Dark Souls 3*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/9ZmAiyPRGqE>.

audience [...]. These sounds are central for the comprehension of the positioning of sound in computer game spaces, and work as a bridge between the game world and the player's world. In this respect, these sounds become part of the interface, and enable the interface to become more transparent. (Jørgensen, 2007, pp. 106-107)

The dynamic function²⁰ (Collins, 2008) of the *Dark Souls 3* soundtrack along with the transdiegetic aspect of these soundscapes provides the player with a carefully designed sonic experience throughout the entire virtual space that can be paralleled to the fog walls that demarcate the boss area and must be traversed (in almost all cases) to start the encounter. The so-called 'silence' in each area and respective sonic environment funnels into a micro sonic bubble right before each fog wall, clearly stressing the shift the player will experience not only in difficulty but also at an aural level. Once the player enters a confined space belonging to the boss rather than the player, and only after his or her defeat, a bonfire will be available, concluding one more step and giving the character another chance to proceed and (probably) continue to fail. With failure as a mechanic and replayability as a necessity, the aural dimensions of *Dark Souls 3* (including 'silence') articulate an interactive experience marked by journeying through sonically defined spaces, orchestral climaxes with bosses, and the calming atmosphere of bonfires and safe havens, where fog walls blur areas and symbolic divisions but not the musical and sonic intentions for the player's interactivity, engagement, and immersion.

“Most epic music ever”: the sonic dimensions of *Dark Souls 3* in online spaces and cybercommunities

Like other successful RPGs, *Dark Souls 3* extends beyond its virtual landscape and is the focus of attention on several platforms mainly accessed by fans and users. Aside from its official and fan *wikis*, this title has a widespread presence on the internet, particularly on YouTube, where channels produce walkthroughs, guides, tips, narratives, theories, and other types of content in which music plays a major role in user production, sharing, and circulation on quite a large scale.

As mentioned above, *Dark Souls 3* shares some similarities with other medieval fantasy video games, particularly concerning music and how it is perceived as 'epic'. In online spaces the direct relationship between video games and the epic category is often easy to spot, due to games' narratives and settings, playability, and their marketing in franchises and transmedia logic (Jenkins, 2006a). The circulation of the term 'epic' on the internet – whether in YouTube comments, forums, or social networks – fragments its use and meanings, and can refer to a genre, a style, an adjective, a quality, etc. However, the music in these formats

²⁰ Dynamic music, according to Collins, is a broader term for variable music, encompassing interactive and adaptive music, which the author also explores. In this sense, dynamic music is defined as music that reacts to changes that occur during gameplay and its universe and/or in response to user actions.

can work as a brand, identifying the franchise in question through a theme and recognizable musical content. Even though *Dark Souls* may be considered a genre in its own right due to the characteristics referred to previously, its music, while considered by some as one of the best soundtracks in the last decade (Banas, 2020), aligns with the epic compositional tropes and patterns that currently dominate the video game music paradigm.

On YouTube alone, the search for “epic music” returns more than 312 million results, varying from music videos of a single track to playlists and compilations of over 10 hours of music. Among the most popular, found using the search/ordering filter “relevance”, certain videos²¹ graphically characterize themselves using *Dark Souls* imagery, relating epic music to power and adjectives of grandeur and heroism. For users who are unfamiliar with this video game, the artwork may be just one more image that blends in with the others used in these videos; but for the familiar user, it may also result in a direct association with previous musical experiences from *Dark Souls* and epic music from other sources (from library music sites, independent artists, or fan composers), thus reinforcing the already established connotations of this soundtrack as a direct link between the orchestral register and the symbolic value of the boss encounters.

On another note, in the same way that users adopt these epic music videos and compilations to accompany them in their daily lives and tasks — from cooking to using the bathroom or doing homework, thus transforming a menial experience into something greater, heroic, or even transcendent — the music of *Dark Souls* is transposed through other types of audiovisual content on YouTube, which reconfigures its initial perception as a soundtrack for difficult, frustrating, and other negative contexts during gameplay. The sonic landscapes, which may or may not be combined with the soundtrack, are manipulated and transformed for ambiance videos, which may be categorized as “relaxing”, “ASMR”²², or just the atmosphere²³. Other accompanying soundscapes of specific areas (such as Road of Sacrifices or Irithyll of the Boreal Valley²⁴) can also be accessed and integrated by users as needed in their domestic and/or personal contexts. Others use this combination for the

21 A selection of videos with *Dark Souls* images as thumbnails featured in this filter can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/3TAUnYZpMba>, <https://youtu.be/rJ8sLgHxa88> and https://youtu.be/XBFTw_3dsnc.

22 ASMR, standing for *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response*, is, according to Klausen, “[...] the name of a physiological sensory reaction that can be described as a tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck and at times further areas in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli” (Barratt and Davis, 2015, p. 1). The peculiar sensation is also frequently referred to by the audience as *headgasm*, *braingasm* and – most commonly – *tingles* (Klausen, 2016, p. 49). Despite its bodily nature, ASMR is best known as a technologically-mediated phenomenon in the form of videos due to its presence and recent explosive growth in mediated spaces such as YouTube.”

23 Franco Cornaló [Username] (2019, March 25) *Dark Souls III - Atmosphere*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/MbH2falYzPE>.

24 Ambiance Magic [Username] (2018, November 29) *Dark Souls III - Road Of Sacrifices Ambiance (white noise, wind, trees, distant echoes)*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/hlYOomjcdSc>. Viewtiful ASMR [Username] (2017, August 22) *Dark Souls III -ASMR- Nap Time In the Boreal Valley - Ambient Sounds {Wind & Snow}*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/GlWI6BpLA5U>.

purpose of relaxation, as in *Chilling Souls*²⁵ or Firelink Shrine's music with its ambiance. By mixing all three soundtracks and selecting the ones users consider the best for concentration²⁶, they can also be used for studying.

It is also worth mentioning the creation of videos and playlists that suggest music and other ambiances to listen to while playing *Dark Souls*, either to add to the existing musical content or to aid gameplay and make the experience less difficult. For the former, thematic videos add newly composed music appropriate to this universe by suggesting tracks for each area that was originally unscored. This new material follows the original soundtrack's orchestral register and has similar compositional tropes, as found in *Hollow - Ambient Music for Dark Souls, or Cursed - Ambient Music for Dark Souls II*²⁷. For the latter, playlists of music "to listen to while playing *Dark Souls*" add a diverse range of musical categories, from music considered 'epic' to classical music (mainly Beethoven and Mozart), and to pop or heavy metal "jams to have some epic battles on *Dark Souls*"²⁸.

Although the musical style of these tracks may not enable immersion for most players, the function of overlapping external non-diegetic sonic information helps the user traversing the world between bosses to focus her attention on what is happening at a visual and not an auditory level.

Therefore, despite being famously distinguished by its difficulty and having a specific gameplay and storytelling format that diverges from other mainstream medieval fantasy RPG, the *Dark Souls* universe and its music extends its existence from a personal experience to collective circulation on online platforms, from memes to ambiance compilations. The users' perspective, which is of central importance, should be noted. Through their different roles and forms of agency, users have repositioned themselves as active participants in the consumption and transformation of texts that require a high level of understanding, experience, and familiarity through their personal and collective engagement (Keltie, 2017) in order to negotiate the place, function, meaning, and symbolic value of video game music in these contexts. While *Dark Souls* uses subtitles to warn its players to "Prepare to Die", fans go so far as to adapt and transform this experience into one for studying, working, cleaning, or cooking, turning it into – we might say – a *Prepare to Chill* edition.

25 Kiactus [Username] (2018, June 27) *Chilling Souls - A Relaxing Mix from Souls series*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/FMxj-zHfZbw>.

26 Ken Wainwright [Username] (2017, March 11) *Dark Souls 3 - Ambience and music at Firelink Shrine*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/LHVY8zzo8ao>. DragonstarDT [Username] (2018, May 8) *Dark Souls 3 - Game Music for Studying - Dark Souls - Soundtrack Trilogy Best of Mix*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/epK4CBE4bB8>.

27 Sound Phenomenon [Username] (2017, November 21) *Hollow - Ambient Music for Dark Souls - Full Album*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/kOHXUUbZyLM>. Sound Phenomenon [Username] (2018, March 4) *Cursed - Ambient Music for Dark Souls II*. YouTube video. Retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/AW2mxsPWCXU>.

28 Vulkktur [Username] (2015 November 15) *Songs To Play Dark Souls To*. YouTube playlist. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqIFkQch-LMVFx2PhvYV6QMUoHjnoT4Ol>. TuneLink [Username] (2017 October 12) *Dark Souls 3-Songs to Listen to While Playing*. YouTube playlist. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFV545xORTc69Tass2FMXqBpSn46f1cp4>.

To conclude, the current *videoludification* of society (Mäyrä, 2008; Muriel & Crawford, 2018) combined with the digital culture, which encompasses several modes of interaction and platforms including social networks, has enabled present-day cybercommunities to use their *produsage* and flow of activity to question the power of the cultural industries and entities seeking to regulate, and often sanction, their creations. This process is one more reflection of the complexity of intertextual dialogues resulting from the appropriation and transformation of pre-existing content or content made available by several agents, and music is evidently one of the most dominant texts in this paradigm.

Music, whose production and diffusion are associated with and determined by the capitalist systems that dominate Western societies (Nowak, 2016), has an undeniably predominant role in our daily lives. Its processes, which bring together and foster the structuring of bubbles and communities, emphasize the various individual practices of musical consumption and creation, thus demonstrating its importance today. Hesmondhalgh states that “[...] music has the possibility to make people collectively ‘flourish’” (cit. in Nowak, 2016, p. 6), relating to the intertextual levels of meaning(s) of music located in one’s own interpretation, experiences, and subjectivities, and in relation to others (Hennion, 2001).

The relationship between video games and music as two central hubs of artistic expression and cultural production in today’s industries is therefore a convergence of the phenomena expressed above. In the context of this paper, *Dark Souls 3* functions as a model for an examination of the musical dimension both off- and on-line, and more precisely, within the virtual world and in external online spaces. Considering its relative absence in the academic field, this video game presents an interesting case study that encourages the application of a ludomusicological lens to analyse the interaction between the non-diegetic soundtrack, sonic landscapes, and player immersion and engagement. *Dark Souls* stands with other RPGs mentioned as an example of what cybercommunities identify as ‘epic’ music on YouTube, intimately linking this tag with the orchestra and what is also referred to as ‘orchestral music’.

The interconnection between the fantasy worlds, the epic connotation, and the orchestral register of its soundtracks thus builds a musical repertoire familiar both to the industry and to the cybercommunities that consume it, based on a set of codes considered key to the viability of an ‘epic music’ genre.

However, the growing standardization of this musical language and the respective user listening habits – mostly passive and with specific functions as described, such as relaxing or studying – reveals a primary need to listen to orchestral music, which is then followed by other requirements (usually tags and adjectives) to align it with the ‘epic’ idea. If the majority of mainstream video games that surpass the latest cinema blockbusters and television successes convey orchestral sonorities in their musical dimensions, then their soundtracks will, to a certain extent, be regarded as ‘epic’, borrowing imagery and visual cues to illustrate similar music and thus circulating the *Dark Souls* universe on other formats.

If in the world of Lothric the player must constantly witness her own failure and learn through mistakes accompanied by ‘silence’ until she reaches certain checkpoints of gratification and rewards underscored by “pumped-up orchestral music”, then in the real world this music can be a vehicle for transposing her previously virtual sonic experience to an epic daily life. Through users’ activity and digital connectivity, *Dark Souls* integrates a roster of interactive experiences that trespass outside their universes to digital platforms that convey and enable a symbolic transformation of musical meaning at any time of day, in the process converting any menial task to a heroic one, while configuring an epic bubble for the self.

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