

# ***Dark Souls*, Implied Player and Stoic Ethics**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the gameplay experience of *Dark Souls*. By analysing the game's mechanics and dynamics, we can delineate the implied player that was designed by the authors. The characteristics of the implied player are then related to some passages of classical philosophy, highlighting the points of contact between the elements of the game and some cardinal principles of Stoic ethics. I argue that the processes, rules and mechanics of the game create a peculiar play experience that resonates with the vision of Stoic philosophy. General principles such as a constructive attitude towards adversity, and failure and the management of negative emotions are structured through the rules and dynamics of the game. Progression in *Dark Souls* requires the enactment of meaningful game actions that can have transformative potential. The study indicates that both the precepts of Stoic ethics and the *Dark Souls* game system can bring positive consequences for the psyche. Finally, in the bibliographical appendix, I collect significant testimonies of players who speak of their transformative relationship with *Dark Souls*.

## **Keywords**

implied player, *Dark Souls*, Stoic ethics, MDA Framework, transformative games.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Imagine being catapulted into a foreign land - a mysterious place fraught with dangers - deprived of possessions and without clear indications on how to improve the situation. It is from this set of apparently desperate contingencies that, as passed down by Diogenes Laertius, the philosophical school of Stoicism is conceived<sup>1</sup>. Zeno (336-35 BC - 264-63 BC), considered the founder of the school, was in his youth a merchant originally from the island of Citium, today's Cyprus. One day he set sail for the Mediterranean with a valuable cargo and was shipwrecked off Athens. In the Greek polis he approached philosophy and laid the foundations of

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Stoic philosophy, a word that derives from Stoa Poikile and indicates the "Painted Portico" where the school was based, so called for the paintings by Polygnotus that adorned it. The details of the shipwreck could be the result of rehearsals and exaggerations, Diogenes himself reports different versions of what happened. Yet, whether it is historical truth or legend, the story about the birth of the Stoic school seems to convey a message to us: a shipwreck can lead to a rebirth. The story of Zeno of Citium may seem familiar to the *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) player, and, as I will try to show more fully below, the latter is prompted by the game's procedural rhetoric to adopt behaviors in line with the vision of Stoic ethics. Indeed, when the player completes the *Dark Souls* tutorial, s/he is transported or, rather, "shipwrecked", to a hostile land teeming with adversity and mysterious entities. Without indications or external support, s/he wanders in these ruined lands trying to survive and find meaning. This text focuses on the relationships that exist between the foundations of Stoic ethics and the gaming experience that *Dark Souls* offers to the player: analyzing the procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) of the game, I argue that it presupposes an implied player (Aarseth 2014) who, to advance in the diegetic world and win the game, is led to adopt strategies comparable to some ethical precepts of the Stoic philosophers. Of course, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus expressed the ideal of behavior of the wise man in written form, through words, phrases and material supports suitable for passing them on. *Dark Souls*, on the other hand, requires the player who wants to fulfill his/her mission to understand the philosophy and rules of the game and to carry out certain actions through a controller, his/her own hands, and ingenuity. Very different activities and forms of expression, whose semantic content, however, as I will try to explain, is not so unrelated.

## **Stoicism**

Stoicism is a philosophical and spiritual current founded around 300 BC in Athens by Zeno of Citium. It is a doctrine of rational, pantheistic, determinist and dogmatic nature, with a strong ethical orientation and generally optimistic. Stoic morality is influenced by that of the Cynics, while physics moves from a conception of the cosmos similar to that of Heraclitus. Together with Epicureanism and skepticism, Stoicism represented one of the major philosophical schools of the Hellenistic age. Historically, three great periods can be distinguished in the Stoic school: the Early Stoicism, Middle Stoicism, and Roman Stoicism (Inwood 2003, 7). The Stoic school had great importance in the Roman world, where the ethics it developed led to the creation of an ideal type of Stoic, insensitive to physical evil, capable of undergoing voluntary death when it presented itself as the only means to escape the accidents coming from the outside world.

## ***Dark Souls***

*Dark Souls* is a 2011 dark fantasy action role-playing video game developed by the Japanese company FromSoftware. The game features a complex combat system and is set in a semi-open world with intricate level design. The plot is narrated indirectly, making extensive use of environmental storytelling and flavor text: key events in the game world's history are open to player interpretation. The game has also become

famous for its difficulty: criticized as excessive by some of the public but appreciated by a large community of enthusiasts who continue to support and play the title and its iterations. Together with the previous *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware 2009), *Dark Souls* is considered the game that founded a genre, that of *soulslike* (games "similar to souls").<sup>2</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Before starting the analysis, a clarification is appropriate, to dispel any doubts about the content and intent of this text. This article does not want to state that there are direct links in terms of content between *Dark Souls* and Stoic philosophy, nor that the latter inspired the authors of the game. The purpose of this article is to answer the following research question: what kind of implied player is presupposed by *Dark Souls*?

To develop the answer I analyze the mechanics, rules and processes of the game. The analysis of the gameplay is focused on the combat system and exploration phases, using the concept of procedural rhetoric to understand the implied player presupposed by the game's authors. To conceptualise the philosophy inherent in the procedural rhetoric of the title, I use the "toolbox" that Stoic ethics provides. However, this does not mean that other theoretical systematizations and/or philosophies developed by other civilizations in other historical periods cannot provide conceptual tools that are even more suitable for developing an answer to the research question posed previously.<sup>3</sup>

Procedural rhetoric is a concept developed by the academic and game designer Ian Bogost and refers to the use of rhetoric in the context of video games and their design. This approach considers video games as expressive means and metaphors of reality. Procedural rhetoric is "the art of persuasion through representations and interactions based on rules rather than speech, writing, pictures, or moving images" (2007, ix) and is based on the idea that video games can communicate meaning and influence the player's experience through the rules, processes, and dynamics of the game.

In this regard I consider a critique of the game developed by Daniel Vella (2015) which will help guide the investigation. Vella criticizes the proceduralist approach by arguing that this interpretation fails to recognize the impossibility for the player to fully know the game system with which s/he comes into contact. The player, the author claims, experiences what the logic underlying the game shows, but inevitably remains detached from the complete knowledge of the computer code, its internal processes and the overall architecture of the system that structures her/his experience.

In presenting the logically constructed *cosmos* as the objective game system in itself, proceduralist approaches short circuit the gap between the objective game in itself, as a computational materiality existing independently of the player's experience of it, and the game as *cosmos* that is the result of the player's analytical attempt at imposing rule based, conceptual coherence upon her experience of the game.

This hiatus between the objective game system - opaque, irreducible, and independent of the user - and the game as an object interpreted by the player - who makes a conceptual effort to understand rules, processes and mechanics - serves, in Vella's

analysis, to frame the concept of "ludic sublime" which consists precisely in experiencing this detachment between phenomenal experience and noumenal unknowability. Therefore, if the entirety of the game, with its algorithms and its internal peculiarities hidden in its code remains inaccessible to the user, we can however analyze the ways in which the phenomenal game-object structures a peculiar type of experience for players.

## **IMPLIED PLAYER**

The idea of an implied player can be linked to that of the model reader, elaborated in literary studies and semiotics. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1995) has developed a theoretical model that envisions an ideal reader presupposed by the structure of the text: the implied reader. The origins of the implied reader are to be found in the text itself (and before that in the mind of the author) and should not be confused with the actual reader.

A similar concept is present in the works of Umberto Eco (1979), for whom the "reader in the text" explicitly presupposes the ability and prerogatives of active interpretation of the text. The reader, for Eco, is thought of by the author as an essential factor for the collaborative decoding of the meaning hidden between the pages of the text.

To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. (1979, 7)

Therefore, if the reader of a text is presupposed by the author both operationally - reading activity - and semantically - interpretation of meanings - this idea of an active recipient conceived ab origine by the author is even more valid in the gaming context. The author of a game, be it analogue or digital, imagines from the beginning of his work an active operation of the players who must act within the magic circle (Huizinga 2009) of the game. The idea of an implied player, suggested by Janet Murray, indicates that among the prerogatives of game designers is to structure the player's narrative experience through possible interactions with the environment and game systems: "the first step to make an enticing narrative world is to script the interactor" (1997, 78-79).

Subsequently, the concept of implied player was first elaborated fully by Aarseth (2014). Aarseth constructs the concept of implied player from the concept of implied reader elaborated in literary studies. He then proceeds to highlights a difference between two types of game scholars' approaches: on the one hand, humanists who study the player as a function of the game; on the other hand, sociologists who examine actual players, as real people placed in their historical context.<sup>4</sup>

The approach taken in this work is fundamentally humanistic. Although in the conclusion of the article I collect numerous player testimonies from online sources, my analysis is formal based on close playing of the game. The concept of the implied player is to be

understood as the ideal model conceived by the authors of the game and deduced a posteriori from the empirical analysis of game mechanics, rules and processes. To understand the philosophy of the implied player model assumed by the authors of *Dark Souls* I will use some passages from Stoic ethics. I will first focus on observing the obstacles that the game places on players and the ways in which they are pushed to face the difficulties they encounter using the conception that the Stoic philosophers developed regarding the adversities of life. Subsequently I will analyze how it is appropriate to deal with the negative emotions that difficulties can generate. In the conclusion I will mention future developments regarding the ways in which the game prompts the player to adopt certain principles in line with two virtues of Stoic philosophy: Prudence and Temperance. Finally, I will try to summarize how *Dark Souls* gameplay seems to have the potential for positive transformation.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study is based on the analysis of the gameplay of *Dark Souls* and the interpretation of the meaning of the gaming experience.

This study employs a multi-faceted approach to analyze the game, beginning with the classic Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) framework proposed by Hunicke et al. (2004). The MDA framework provides a structured way to dissect games into their fundamental components: mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics. By systematically examining these elements, we aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the game experience created for the player. The first step in our analysis involves identifying the core mechanics of the game. Mechanics refer to the basic actions that players can perform within the game system. These include rules, data structures, and algorithms that govern gameplay. In *Dark Souls* we basically consider the combat system, the bonfire checkpoint system, and the ways in which you die and respawn. To identify these mechanics, I conducted several play sessions to observe and document all possible actions and interactions. I also reviewed documentation, examined tutorials, manuals, and other game documentation to understand the intended use of each mechanic.

Once the mechanics are identified, I proceed to analyze the dynamics that emerge from them. Dynamics describe the behavior of the game system during execution in response to player actions. These include behaviors, strategies, and emergent patterns that players can exploit or encounter. In *Dark Souls* combat tactics (more or less effective), enemy behavior, and exploration modes (cautious or reckless). I tried to identify recurring patterns and strategies that players adopt to achieve their goals.

The last step in our analysis is to evaluate the game's aesthetics, which consists in the desirable emotional responses it evokes in the player. These include feelings such as excitement for a new discovery, immersion during the exploration phases, and fear for the encounter with a fearful boss, and satisfaction after defeating it. Understanding aesthetics helps us understand how the game's mechanics and dynamics contribute to the overall player experience. To evaluate the game's aesthetics, I conducted a qualitative analysis of my own gameplay sessions. Finally, I observed and collected

player testimonials shared across the Internet (primarily YouTube and Reddit) to understand other people's gaming experiences that highlighted themes such as the transformative nature of *Dark Souls*.

## **HARDCORE EXPERIENCE**

One of the characterizing elements of the *Dark Souls* gameplay consists in its difficulty, which is on average higher than that of contemporary titles of the same genre. FromSoftware's work generates a gaming experience that can be defined hardcore, which in modern video games has become increasingly rare: the difficulty of combat, the lack of instructions, maps or other indicators to understand where to go have contributed to generating the infamous reputation of a game that is "too difficult". *Dark Souls* game design features numerous trials that challenge the player to contend with gradually increasing adversity.

As the player progresses through the game, s/he will encounter increasingly fearsome opponents. Each enemy can cause difficulty and even kill in a matter of seconds. Any mistake can be lethal. To overcome some bosses, a certain mastery of the game system is required. In addition to the active threats represented by enemies, the world of *Dark Souls* presents a series of environmental dangers, such as traps, poison, lava, and elevated places that constitute a deadly threat for the character. In short, the world of Lordran, the setting of the game, is full of adversities.

However, the high degree of difficulty in *Dark Souls* is not limited to the elements belonging to the diegetic system. The philosophy behind the game design of the title requires the analysis of certain features that fall under the set of extradiegetic game elements<sup>5</sup>. The latter are elements integrated into the video game experience but not considered part of the game world in the strict sense. I want to highlight three elements or, rather, the lack thereof: the absence of the ability to adjust the difficulty, the absence of quick save, and the absence of pause. Normally, in games that fall into the open-world fantasy action RPG category of the early 2010s<sup>6</sup>, these extradiegetic features are implemented by the developers, making the players' experience "easier": they allow a multiplicity of errors during game sessions and enable a more relaxed gaming attitude oriented towards discovering the world, enjoying the narrative, and interacting with non-player characters. The *Dark Souls* design, however, excluding these three possibilities from the player's agency, makes the game completion a more difficult task.

## **ADVERSITY AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT: *GIT GUD***

The interactive form of games is often based on the challenge of overcoming obstacles and adversity to advance in the game. The formal model of describing gameplay (Arsenault and Perron 2009) as a heuristic spiral highlights precisely the dynamic relationship between game and player that arises live in the act of playing. Through this dialogue of input and output, the gameplay cycle is created: the player acts in the game world and reacts to the responses of the play system; in this way s/he implements

behaviors, experiments with strategies, and overcomes obstacles. As the player progresses through the game, both her/his sphere of possibilities and the complexity of the hurdles s/he faces increase.

Juul emphasizes how a good game always presents the players with new challenges while also giving them the opportunity to implement new strategies to overcome obstacles.

A player will, at any given time, have a repertoire of methods to use for playing a game. Improving skills at playing a game involves expanding and refining the repertoire. A quality game must present the player with challenges, continually letting the player develop a better repertoire for methods for playing the game, while continually preventing the player from playing the game just using a well defined routine. (Juul 2005, 96-97)

Having understood the difficulties in the *Dark Soul* gameplay, some questions arise: what strategies should a player faced with these challenges adopt? What is the right attitude to have as we face a world of adversity and danger?

To understand how to deal constructively with obstacles and adversity, it may be fruitful to consider the opinion of the Roman philosopher Lucius Anneus Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD) regarding the difficulties of life. According to Seneca, the adversities and misfortunes that occur during the human experience are not evils to be avoided because no external event is intrinsically positive or negative. Indeed, the man of value welcomes this eventuality as a useful opportunity to improve himself. Problems, adversities and difficulties should not discourage but are rather opportunities to strengthen and refine one's qualities. The Roman philosopher represents this concept with a metaphor in his work *De providentia*:

'Why do many reversals of fortune happen to good men?' Nothing bad *can* happen to a good man: opposites do not mix. Just as the vast number of rivers, all the rain that falls in showers from above, and the massive volume of mineral springs do not alter the taste of the sea, do not even moderate it, so adversity's onslaughts are powerless to affect the spirit of a brave man: it remains unshaken and makes all events assume its own colour; for it is stronger than all external forces. I do not mean that he is insensible to those forces but that he conquers them, and as a man who in all else is calm and tranquil of mind he rises to face whatever attacks him. All adversity he regards as a training exercise. (2007, 4)

Marcus Aurelius (121 AD - 180 AD), Roman emperor and philosopher, also expresses a similar idea in a passage from book IV of the *Meditations*:

For such a thing as this might have happened to every man but every man would not have continued free from pain on such an occasion. Why then is that rather a misfortune

than this a good fortune ? [...] Remember too on every occasion which leads thee to vexation to apply this principle that this is not a misfortune, but that to bear it nobly is good fortune. (2012, 62)

To better explain this concept, Seneca, again in *De providentia*, uses the analogy with a fighter who, by competing and clashing against opponents who are stronger than him, manages to develop his skills and talents.

We see wrestlers, who concern themselves with physical strength, matching themselves with only the strongest opponents, and requiring those who prepare them for a bout to use all their strength against them; they expose themselves to blows and hurt, and if they do not find one man to match them, they take on several at a time. Excellence withers without an adversary: the time for us to see how great it is, how much its force, is when it displays its power through endurance. I assure you, good men should do the same: they should not be afraid to face hardships and difficulties, or complain of fate; whatever happens, good men should take it in good part, and turn it to a good end; it is not what you endure that matters, but how you endure it. (2007, 5)

This metaphor takes us directly back to *Dark Souls*. The heart of the gameplay of FromSoftware's title lies in the deeply complex combat system. The character controlled by the player will face large quantities of enemies of different types during the adventure. This situation can lead to numerous defeats and resulting deaths. As pointed out by Mukherjee (2011) death in video games is often presented to players through a multiplicity of experiences. These death experiences can be expedients for exploring new possibilities.<sup>7</sup> I argue that not only is this true in *Dark Souls* but that the experience of death and failure, presupposed by the title's design, is a lever that the player can use to enhance her/his own play performance.

It is appropriate to highlight a mechanic of the game: following a death, the character loses her/his "souls" (a sort of game currency: it is collected by defeating enemies and can be spent to level up or buy objects and equipment, thus improving the character) that s/he had collected, the game world resets itself and the enemies defeated before dying (except for the bosses) are present again. To recover the lost "souls", the character must start again from the last checkpoint visited, represented in the game by a bonfire, reach the point where s/he was killed again and press a button to restore the lost power. If during the journey the character is killed again before reaching the point of the previous death, the souls he had collected will be lost forever. This mechanic pushes the player to favor an analytical approach and prudent tactics. However, it is possible to find oneself in a cycle of repeated failure.

Juul (2013) explored the reasons why players measure themselves against failure, which we normally avoid, in his formulation of the failure paradox. The thesis formulated by Juul is the following: games expose players to the risk of failure, and this produces the unpleasant feeling of inadequacy in players. However, games also offer us a chance to play again and to better escape inadequacy and failure: they offer a chance for



redemption. The conventions that govern games are philosophies about the meaning of failure. My thesis expands from here to assert that the meaning of failure in *Dark Souls* has links to the elaboration of Stoic philosophy.

Once one of these cycles of failures and deaths occurs, the player is ideally placed at a crossroads: on the one hand there is the possibility of reacting by allowing himself to be carried away by negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and discouragement, compromising the quality of the playful performance (which risks ending with the phenomenon of *rage quit*<sup>8</sup>); on the other hand, there is the possibility of, it is worth saying, stoically resisting the onset of negative emotions, rationally analyzing what went wrong and thinking of strategies to improve our gaming performance. This second path can also be described as a playful way of fulfilling the path of Virtues or, in two words, *git gud*<sup>9</sup>.

A similar argument is elaborated by psychologist Jamie Madigan (2020). The author tells of a conversation he had with his daughter regarding her swimming lessons. The girl found herself having to face athletes who were stronger and more capable: the competition was intimidating. The father, wanting to encourage his daughter, is reminded of his experience with *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware 2016)<sup>10</sup>. Here's what Madigan says about his experience with the game:

Specifically, I was thinking of the video game *Dark Souls III* (Bandai Namco, 2016), which I had been diligently working my way through at the time. If you don't know, the *Dark Souls* series is difficult by most standards, but I think most of that reputation is because it brutally punishes you if you don't slow down, proceed with caution, and focus on doing better. While some amount of skill is required—you have to tap buttons and flick thumbsticks at just the right times—it's not sufficient by itself to win. You have to learn how things work, where enemies are hidden, and how to avoid every deadly little trick that the game's designers have created. The game even eschews the whole "reload from a save point" paradigm and makes failure part of the game. When you die, you return to the last checkpoint you rested at and the world resets so that you have to do better on your next attempt. Growth and learning aren't just abstract concepts in these kinds of games; they're practically a mechanic like jumping or inventory management.

My point is that nobody is naturally good at *Dark Souls*. Nobody flies through on their first try if they're truly new to the game. In these and many other types of video games, hardship is an opportunity to learn, an opportunity to persist, and an opportunity to, as they say, "git gud." Video games teach you how to be open to feedback, value improving yourself, and to have what psychologists call a "growth mindset." (2020, 66-67)

The author highlights the difficulties of the title and how these are inserted into a system of rules and processes that favor the learning and improvement of one's skills and characteristics, leading the player to adopt what psychologists call a "growth mindset". Adversity and difficulties, if dealt with constructively, can foster a path of growth; thus, *Dark Souls* players have all the tools they need to improve themselves. In

any case, adversities in the game are not only obstacles in the game world, but can create additional difficulties by evoking negative emotions in players.

## MANAGEMENT OF NEGATIVE PASSIONS: *DE IRA*

Seneca's thought is also significant regarding the management of negative emotions. Considering his opinion on the matter may clarify the implied player of *Dark Souls*. Novice players are likely to encounter some difficulties in exploring a certain area or succeeding in defeating a certain boss. Multiple failures in a row can be a demanding test of the player's patience: frustration at not being able to advance risks turning into anger. To understand how to effectively deal with these emotions we will turn again to Seneca, this time considering *De Ira*. In this text, Seneca speaks of anger as the most dangerous and frightening of passions because of all it is the one that does not give the soul a moment's respite and indeed is presented precisely as a brief madness.

Further on in the text the philosopher compares this passion to the condition of a body falling from a certain height: when a body falls into the void not even a sudden change of heart can restore the previous condition and avoid the disastrous impact on the ground. The best thing to do, continues Seneca, is to resist the first onslaught of anger, not to be captured by its mania but, as soon as the first signs of passion are recognized, to use reason to remove space for destructive behavior.

First, however, it's easier to shut out harmful things than to govern them, easier to deny them entry than to moderate them once they have entered. Once they've established residence, they become more powerful than their overseer and do not accept retrenchment or abatement. That is why Reason itself, to which the reins are entrusted, stays potent only so long as it's kept apart from the passions; if it mingles and pollutes itself with them, it can no longer restrain that which it formerly could have rebuffed. [...] Just as bodies in freefall have no power over themselves and cannot resist or slow their descent, but the unstoppable downrush cuts off every thought and regret, and they cannot help arriving at a place where they once could have not arrived — so the mind, if it launches itself into anger, or love, or the other emotions, has no chance to check its impetus; its own gravity, and the sloping nature of the vices, naturally seizes it and pulls it down to the bottom. (2019, 17-19)

These principles are also applicable in a fruitful way when we face the adversities of the world of *Dark Souls*: sooner or later all players fail, but one of the fundamental differences between those who manage to advance in the game and those who instead close the software in the grip of a feeling of frustration depends, first of all, on how s/he reacts to failure and the onset of anger. Psychology has also studied how the response to feedback influences the possibility of individual growth: individuals who have the ability to constructively welcome even negative feedback are more likely to improve. Let us quote the psychologist Madigan again:

Psychologists studying how we seek out and react to performance feedback have learned, however, that not everyone reacts to feedback the same way. What's more, some orientations toward feedback are better than others if you want to grow and get better. This concept of "feedback orientation" is usually defined as something along the lines of "an individual's overall receptivity to feedback". (2020, 68)

The author states that not everyone has the same attitude towards the feedback obtained: the way in which we interpret and react to these situations is of crucial importance. Further on he states that feedback shows our "position" regarding the set objectives and can be an extremely effective lever in improving performance:

Feedback, as described above, is then used to see if there's a gap between where our performance is currently and where it needs to be in order to say we reached the goal. This is called a performance/goal gap. If a gap exists, we ideally work harder, work smarter, or both (Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984). The better the feedback and the higher our feedback orientation, the more effectively we can use it to close that gap. You see gamers do this all the time when they figure out how to reach their goal of beating a boss, earning a record time, or winning a match based on the feedback they've accumulated over many play sessions. (2020, 69)

In *Dark Souls*, failure provides ruthless and objective feedback on performance. If the player takes it constructively, game death becomes an immediate opportunity for improvement. Returning to the example of a cycle of consecutive deaths: there are basically two possible attitudes when faced with negative feedback. If the player is overwhelmed by anger, s/he will probably try to quickly recover the souls, increasing the likelihood of dying again and the sense of frustration: thereby opening a negative spiral that leads to a worsening of the gaming performance and experience. If, however, s/he manages to act rationally, calming destructive passions and considering difficulties as opportunities to improve, s/he will be able, at the next attempt, to adopt the virtue of Prudence, the ability to discern the least risky path, and possibly overcome the obstacle. The distinction between a constructive and a negative attitude comes from a correct interpretation of responsibilities and an understanding of what is actually under the player's control. The idea is central to the thought of Epictetus (c. 50 AD – c. 135 AD), another exponent of Stoicism, and has been called the dichotomy of control.

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. (2014, 287)

In the situation described above of the cycle of consecutive deaths, under the player's control there is neither the fact of having to face those specific enemies, nor of having to

complete that specific path, nor the fact of having lost the precious souls, but what is under her/his control is the attitude with which s/he faces these challenges and the motivation that drives her/him to persist.

Seneca teaches: “whatever happens, good men should take it in good part, and turn it to a good end; it is not what you endure that matters, but how you endure it”: even for the player who is facing *Dark Souls*, adopting this mentality is beneficial to manage the negative emotions that arise in the face of adversity.

## TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

A final element to underline is the transformative nature of the *Dark Souls* gaming experience. Every game (and in general every experience) has a transformative potential. *Dark Souls*, and other souls-like games, however, seem to provoke a peculiar emotional and cognitive response. By playing, not only do we learn to master the mechanics and dynamics of the game, but we can transform the perception of our potential to impact the game world. Through the experience of failure, which can also be painful, we learn to improve ourselves. This dynamic can be translated from the game world into the real world: video games can have a healing effect (Donnelly 2021). This seems to be especially true for *Dark Souls* and other souls-like games.

At the end of this article I have collected several testimonies of players shared on YouTube and Reddit that highlight how *Dark Souls* helped them during a difficult time and how the gaming experience had a positive impact on their lives. Research was conducted through a thematic analysis of Reddit discussions that showed that *Dark Souls* could support the mental health of players (Väkevä et al. 2025).

It may seem strange that such a dark and difficult game could have beneficial effects on the psyche of (some) players, and yet it seems so. And here is one last element of connection with Stoic philosophy that I would like to conclude on. The Stoics conceive the philosophical school as a space of healing. Epictetus openly states this:

A philosopher’s school, man, is a doctor’s surgery. You shouldn’t leave after having had an enjoyable time, but after having been subjected to pain. For you weren’t in good health when you came in; no, one of you had a dislocated shoulder, another an abscess, another a headache. (2014 , 197).

Epictetus' words bring us directly back to the gaming experience and sheds light on a key element of *Dark Souls*' gameplay: through the experience of pain, healing takes place.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, the video game *Dark Souls* has been analyzed by reconstructing the idea of the implied player that the authors of the game have codified through the possible interactions of the real player. To explain the identity of the implied player and effective strategies for advancing in such a challenging game, I used concepts and principles from

Stoic philosophy, theories developed in the field of game studies and, to a lesser extent, some psychological theories. The analysis of the processes, rules, and mechanics of the title produced a hermeneutic framework that relates specific elements of the game to other sources, even those very distant in form and historical context. Some typical elements of the game, such as high difficulty, the risk of repeated failures and the management of negative emotions have been interpreted through philosophical and psychological conceptual lenses.

Future developments of this research lie in the analysis of the complex combat system which constitutes a key element of the game. Some optimal strategies for advancing can be found in the application of some principles relating to the Stoic virtues, in particular Prudence (from Latin *prudencia*, contraction of *providencia*, meaning "seeing ahead, sagacity") and Temperance (from Latin *temperantia*, derivative of *temperare* in the sense of "to moderate oneself, to observe the right measure"). For reasons of length of the text, the issue relating to the playful implementation of virtues will not be analyzed in detail, but it will be an aspect to be explored in depth in future developments. Another possible development of this research is to delve deeper into the potentially beneficial aspects of play by investigating the links with Stoic philosophy and some therapeutic practices: some studies have indicated relationships between cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy and stoicism (Robertson 2019). Once again I would like to clarify that the intent of this text is not to propose imaginative genealogies between classical Western philosophy and a modern video game developed in Japan, but rather to use the former to attempt to explain the ideal type of implied player presupposed by the latter, in order to deepen our understanding of the unique experience many real players have had in their adventures in the lands of Lordran.

Finally, I would like to underline once again that the peculiar play experience generated by the game, in addition to having links to some principles of Stoic ethics, has a high transformative potential for the real player, as is also evidenced by the numerous testimonies of players in this regard, collected in the references. In fact, as Marcus Aurelius writes: "For all things are formed by nature to change and be turned and to perish in order that other things in continuous succession may exist." (2012, 215-16).

1 «He eventually left Crates and studied with the others already mentioned for twenty years. And they say he said, “Now I have had a good voyage by having a shipwreck.” Some say he said this about Crates; others say he was visiting Athens when he heard about the shipwreck and said, “Fortune does us a good turn in driving us to philosophy”; and some say he first sold his cargo in Athens and then turned to philosophy.» (Diogenes Laertius 2021, 266)

2 Research has identified ruthless difficulty and environmental/contextual narrative as the key characteristics of souls-like games; cf. (Guzsvinecz 2023).

3 One value system and code of conduct that would be worth investigating thoroughly in this regard is the *Bushidō*, The Way of the Warrior. As a philosophy originating in the same state, Japan, as the authors of *Dark Souls*, it would be worth conducting an in-depth analysis. In particular, the concept of *Ganbaru* (“stand firm,” “working with perseverance”), which is also popular in modern Japan, could be a lens through which to read the philosophy of the implied player in *Dark Souls*.

4 For an analysis of real players, their behaviour and emotions regarding souls games; cf. (Pan et al. 2024.)

5 For a comprehensive analysis of the different categories of diegetic and nondiegetic actions in video games; cf. (Galloway 2006).

6 I give just one example that I think is significant: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) released in the same year as *Dark Souls*. The game was a great success with audiences and critics alike, and in terms of the specific issue discussed here, the game natively incorporates the three design elements mentioned above: the ability to adjust the difficulty, the ability to pause, and the ability to make a quick save.

7 As an example of death that opens new possibilities I would like to point out the first meeting with Seath the Scaleless, one of the bosses of the game, in which the player must die to be transported to prison inside the Duke's archives to continue in the game.

8 Rage quit is a slang term meaning to suddenly stop participating or engaging in (something) in a fit of rage and frustration : to abandon (something) in anger . Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “rage quit,” accessed November 7, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rage%20quit>.

9 *Git gud*, a slang rendering of *get good*, refers to getting better at a task or skill, used especially among video gamers online. In the *Dark Souls* gamer community, the expression has become a meme that has spread widely through various forms . <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/git-gud/>  
<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/git-gud>

10 Although Madigan's text refers to *Dark Souls III* and not to the first installment in the series, the experience and procedural rhetoric of the two games is very similar and thus for the purposes of ours it is useful to highlight his words.

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## Player Testimonies

Daryl Talks Games - How Souls Games Save You

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keIWG6hSD7Q>)

NakeyJakey - Dark Souls Saved Me

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSJkxLdIlyE>)

Ember - Dark Souls Saved My Life.

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABV\\_7BEsIX8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABV_7BEsIX8))

Internet Pitstop - Dark Souls 1 Changed My Life

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bEBo\\_CktqA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bEBo_CktqA))

Soldier\_1stClass - Dark Souls Changed My Life

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7bI9O\\_b3JQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7bI9O_b3JQ))

Key - Dark Souls CHANGED MY LIFE: A Tribute and Retrospective

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1zIYsyJKVI>)

Writing on Games - Dark Souls Helped Me Cope With Suicidal Depression

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viP4psS3MUQ>)

Indie Bytes - Don't You Dare Go Hollow - Dark Souls As An Allegory For Depression

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y41l4FGHPg> )

Fra in the Frame - I SOULS E LA DEPRESSIONE - COME DARK SOULS ED ELDEN RING  
AFFRONTANO LA DEPRESSIONE

(<https://youtu.be/8CWK9Ld-v8>)

Andrew Gebhart - How Dark Souls saved my life by killing me repeatedly

(<https://www.cnet.com/tech/gaming/how-dark-souls-saved-my-life-by-killing-me-repeatedly/> )

DarkSoulsandMe - How Dark Souls changed my life.

([https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1hexor/how\\_dark\\_souls\\_changed\\_my\\_life/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1hexor/how_dark_souls_changed_my_life/) )

Dark\_Souls\_Tom - Dark Souls changed my life.

([https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1ru7ya/dark\\_souls\\_changed\\_my\\_life/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1ru7ya/dark_souls_changed_my_life/))

My\_murdered\_remains - I think Dark Souls changed my life

[\(https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/s1rjf6/  
i think dark souls changed my life/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/s1rjf6/i_think_dark_souls_changed_my_life/)

3raxftw - Dark Souls has had an impact on me as a person.

[\(https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/7neda9/  
dark souls has had an impact on me as a person/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/7neda9/dark_souls_has_had_an_impact_on_me_as_a_person/)

G102Y5568 - How Dark Souls changed my perspective on life and got me through today

[\(https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1r9phz/  
how dark souls changed my perspective on life and/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/1r9phz/how_dark_souls_changed_my_perspective_on_life_and/)

ReactorRevolution - How Dark Souls changed my life.

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how dark souls changed my life/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/3bzgc2/how_dark_souls_changed_my_life/)

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