

# Players as Visitors, Games as Museums: a New Museology Perspective on Dark Souls

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## **Keywords**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, the inclusion of video games as museum collections and the adoption of gamification as a curatorial method have become increasingly prominent, bringing video games in museums to the forefront as an important theoretical and practical issue (Aydin and Schnabel 2016; Davies 2019). Yet existing scholarship remains largely focused on strategies and techniques of collection and exhibition, with limited engagement with museology as a humanistic discipline (Naskali et al. 2013). As a result, technical and operational discussions are seldom situated within broader cultural currents or intellectual-historical shifts, weakening the linkage between video games and museum history's theoretical traditions and limiting sustained reflection on the medium's distinctive qualities and its relationship to core humanistic questions.

Drawing on the histories of museums and museology, this research argues that the convergence of video games and museums touches upon multiple foundational issues in museological thought, including cultural authority and public agency, education and entertainment, modes of knowledge transmission and plural interpretation, relationships between objects and people, and the tension between original context and recontextualisation (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995; Latham and Simmons 2014). Consequently, such research should not be confined to digital collections, gamified exhibition design, or the instrumental borrowing of player community practices. Instead, it can be understood as re-articulation or even an actualisation of new museology under digital conditions, a paradigm that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is characterised by a shift from objects to people. This perspective foregrounds public participation, the construction of spatial, environmental, and ecological experience, critiques of linear progress narratives, and the development of public history (Malraux 1974; Vergo 1989; Bouquet 2012). Within this framework, video games are incorporated into a wider museological discourse, while players,

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within the game-as-museum, generate questions of participatory experience, collective memory, and the re-creation of digital heritage, thereby acquiring museum-like forms of engagement (Vandewalle 2024).

This research uses the *Dark Souls* series (FromSoftware, 2011, 2014, 2016) as a case study to examine how dark fantasy action role-playing games can deliberately minimise linear storytelling. Across the series, spatial organisation, architectural ruins, enemy design, and item descriptions function as dispersed fragments of history, guiding players to assemble their own understanding through exploration, comparison, and speculation, as if moving through an unfinalised museum space (Smith Nicholls and Cook 2022). However, unlike the grand, coherent, and progress oriented historical narratives commonly found in traditional museums, the series presents a world shaped by decline, sacrifice, and forgetting, revealing a resistance to commemorative and triumphalist historical arrangements and a sustained engagement with historical reality. Moreover, in game mechanisms such as invasions, cooperation, and message systems transform exploration from an isolated individual activity into a shared experience across players. At the same time, ongoing discussions formed outside the games within player communities through screenshots, strategic analysis, and numerical calculation continuously extend and reinterpret the meaning of this virtual historical space.

From the above perspective, the *Dark Souls* series constructs a form of living exhibition through environmental storytelling, elegiac narratives of decline, and interactive processes of generating historical remains, one that can be repeatedly entered and continually reinterpreted. Players constantly shift between multiple roles as viewers, narrators, and curators, functioning both as visitors and as producers and transmitters of meaning. In this sense, the difficulty often perceived as harsh does not constitute an ethical stance incompatible with museum practice, but instead operates as a structural condition that shapes the levels of knowledge, patience, and commitment involved in participation (Andriano 2024). It is equally important to note that this structure does not assume that all participants must engage in prolonged or high intensity immersive experiences. Rather, the series demonstrates the possibility of layered participation, allowing modes of engagement at different rhythms and depths to coexist, ranging from brief encounters to sustained and repeated exploration. This study therefore argues that such video games are cultivating a new generation of museum audiences and reshaping their modes of perception and interaction. Building on this, we further propose that contemporary new museological research should not only attend to video games within museums, but should also place museum players at the centre of analysis and situate their experiences within the historical development of museum types and modes of visitation.

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## BIO

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