"The Crackle of the First Flame: The Sounds and Musical Techniques of *Dark Souls*"

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Abstract

The *Dark Souls* series by Hidetaka Miyazaki and FromSoftware, Inc is a popular video game franchise, notable for its iconic imagery, obscure storytelling and lore, and unforgiving difficulty. In addition to the immersive gameplay elements, *Dark Souls* has a wide variety of music used to accompany the series' many memorable boss fights. Music throughout the series is, to the immediate perception, used somewhat counterintuitively: music is reserved only for the boss fights, and there being no accompanying music in the diverse overworlds the player explores, with *very* few exceptions. This usage of the sound component draws heavy attention to the music scoring of those aforementioned boss fights, and with it the storytelling that lies within. Series creator and director Miyazaki has revealed that he grew up reading books in English that were usually beyond his reading comprehension for the language. To make up for the gap in understanding the story, Miyazaki would use his imagination based on the artwork that accompanied the text along with the parts of the story he could understand.[1] That practice of his as a child has translated into his game design and storytelling philosophy, and it is evident in the use of sparse narrative techniques such as unreliable narrators, and most relevant, music. My aim throughout this writing will be to identify the musical techniques used in the *Dark Souls* series and their origins in film music. Additionally, my goal will be to draw some narrative connections and conclusions regarding the series through its usage of music. I am of the stance that the music contains more context for the story than what might seem initially obvious, based on Miyazaki's

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[1] Parkin, "Bloodborne Creator Hidetaka Miyazaki: 'I Didn't Have a Dream. I Wasn't Ambitious'."

own brand of storytelling. For this writing, I will pay specific attention to the following tracks: "Firelink Shrine", and "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder" from *Dark Souls*; and "Firelink Shrine", "Soul of Cinder"; and "Slave Knight Gael" from *Dark Souls III*.

Part 1a: Introduction to the *Dark Souls* setting

To understand the sounds in lands like Lordran and Lothric, one should be familiar with the story of these lands. In the series, the story begins in what is known as the Age of the Ancients, which was an era of both formlessness and uniformity ruled by Dragons. At some point, an event known the Advent of Fire occurred, which created Disparity: heat and cold; light and dark; life and death. Nearly mindless creatures known as Hollows were drawn to the First Flame, four of whom took from it powerful "souls" (referred to as the Lord Souls). With the power of these Lord Souls, the four Hollows gained the strength to become their own beings: Gravelord Nito who possessed the Death Soul; the Witch of Izalith who held the Life Soul; Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight who took the Light Soul; and finally the Furtive Pygmy who claimed the Dark Soul. Eventually the Lords and their followers warred against the Dragons and upon prevailing, the ushered in the Age of Fire. The first game in the series begins at the end of the Age of Fire, where you the player travels the land of Lordran to ultimately attempt to prolong the Age of Fire, or let the First Flame fade and thus bring about the Age of Dark. *Dark Souls III* takes place untold eons later, where the names of the Lords are all but forgotten, and the First Flame is fading.

Part 1b: Introduction of the Music of *Dark Souls*

It is nearly a given that a video game series called "Dark Souls", in setting like I have just described would use music that invokes fantastical imagery commensurate with the visuals of the

game. But how is this achieved? One part through precedent and tradition, and one part through innovation. As the series is known of its boss characters and their impressive designs and spectacle, so too does the music contribute to that notability. Chief amongst many of the musical scorings attached to each boss fight is the leitmotif technique, pioneered by Richard Wagner. Along with the leitmotif, other musical scoring techniques championed in film music are used in *Dark Souls*, including silent film music practices and gothic tropes (schizophonia, hauntology, excessiveness, and transgression[2]). *Dark Souls* explores these other techniques in its musical score and forwards the narrative in direct and indirect ways. For example, a specific shared leitmotif in the final bosses of *Dark Souls*[3] and *Dark Souls III*[4] rounds out the trilogy in a cyclical way (more on that later); massive brass and choral chords adds to the feeling of being overwhelmed via excessiveness when players first encounter the Ornstein and Smough bosses[5] in *Dark Souls*; and the highly disjointed and polyrhythmic cluster of music that conveys the horror and madness of the character Seath the Scaleless[6] harkens back to the scoring practices of the silent film era. All these techniques are modified to fit the video game medium and fantasy setting.

However, the composition of the music in the first *Dark Souls* does not lend itself to the common understanding of how music is used in video games. While written to loop within the game until the circumstances of which is playing are surmounted (cutscene and end credits underscoring notwithstanding), the structure of the music is much more concert-oriented than interactive, which video game music tends to be.[7] This tendency is unique only to the first game

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[2] Elferen, "Gothic Music: the Sounds of the Uncanny", 42-51

[3] Sakuraba, "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder", entire track

[4] Kitamura, "Soul of Cinder", 2:14min

[5] Sakuraba, "Ornstein & Smough", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tz8OmoF8tg

[6] Sakuraba, "Seath the Scaleless", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_KGcBhr72o

[7] Kamp, Summers, Sweeney, "Ludomusicology: Approaches to Video Game Music", 4

in the series, with there being only one looping section of the piece, albeit longer loops than in the subsequent games. In the music of *Dark Souls III* (and *Dark Souls II* for that matter), the score takes a more traditional video game music approach, wherein each boss track is composed with a certain number of looping sections in mind. The number of sections in the tracks correspond to the number of phases[i] the respective boss has. This understanding is crucial in the structure and pacing of the music in the series.

But what IS the music in *Dark Souls*? Composer Motoi Sakuraba cites everything "from contemporary classical pieces to medieval pieces"[8] as inspirations for the score. Indeed, the series is accustomed to large orchestral and choral arrangements, along with softer, more reserved pieces. As mentioned, and as we will see, *Dark Souls* plays on film music conventions that have led to successful scores in the past. Many of the scores take on a romantic-era style approach similar to Max Steiner for otherwise highly grandiose or emotional encounters, others a more minimalist style a la Philip Glass in moments of restraint. We shall investigate some of these conventions.

Part 2: Leitmotifs and the Musical Themes in *Dark Souls*

The leitmotif or leitmotiv is a musical phrase that is often repeated in association with some entity. The associated entity can be a person, place, idea, or event. The leitmotif was popularized heavily by composer Richard Wagner in his operas even though he was not the progenitor of such usage. Later on, the leitmotif would find its way into early films, with *M* by director Fritz Lang being a notable example[9]. Later films would go on to incorporate the leitmotif concept in the original scores composed for the film. Composers like Max Steiner

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[8] Kotowski, Greening, Schweitzer, "Interview with Motoi Sakuraba (December 2011)"
[9] Costantini, "Leitmotif revisited"

would write many themes for various characters and events such as in the film *The Informer*

(1935). The leitmotif concept would go on to become a staple of film scoring, television scoring,

and eventually video game scoring.

    Dark Souls generally took a freeform approach to its development[10], music included. The

composers for the series used leitmotif in very disguised sorts of ways. Let us now look at the

tracks "Firelink Shrine" from *Dark Souls*, and "Soul of Cinder" from *Dark Souls III*. Below is

the intro the "Firelink Shrine[11]" track from the first game, played by a string quartet and lute

(omitted from the excerpt).

Fig. 1a

Firelink Shrine Intro
Very slow
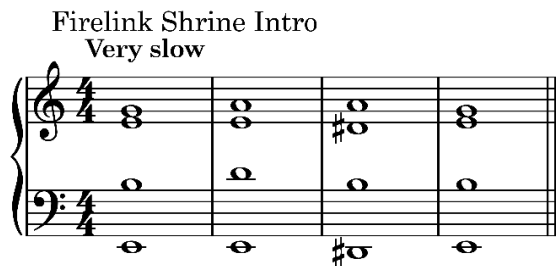
    This harmonic motion and voice leading is found the aforementioned tracks in addition to

"2. Firelink Shrine", simply with alterations such as being transposed in differing keys and using

instrumentation as need for the situation. Below is the intro to the track "Soul of Cinder[12]", the

final boss of *Dark Souls III* as an example.

Fig 1b

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[10] FromSoftware, "Dark Souls Design Works", 114-125

[11] Sakuraba, "Firelink Shrine", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2dptA3AIBY

[12] Kitamura, "Soul of Cinder", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io0zFbQqAUg

Soul of Cinder Intro

Obviously, we see the phrase being altered from four bars to five, as well as differing

instrumentation and a thicker texture. But the motion bass voice matches that of the "Firelink

Shrine" track in these opening chords, as well as the similar voice leading of the solo voice part

in comparison to the first violin in Fig 1a. I picked these two examples first to show the direct

connection implied by the story from beginning to end. Firelink Shrine in the *Dark Souls*

universe is a shrine dedicated to the First Flame, where a Fire Keeper (an individual whose

purpose is to tend to the Flame) guards the bonfire at the center of the Shrine. Bonfires that are

linked to the First Flame have a sword sticking out of the ground at the center of the kindling,

coiled perhaps by the heat. The conclusion of *Dark Souls III* takes place at one such bonfire,

where the Soul of Cinder appears as a manifestation of the First Flame itself, wielding the coiled

sword from the bonfire as its weapon. As such, it is appropriate for the score accompanying the

Soul of Cinder to harken back to the harmonic motif associated with bonfires and the Firelink

Shrine.

However, the most notable example of leitmotif bridging the games is comes from the

final boss of the first game, Gwyn, Lord of Cinder; and once again the Soul of Cinder from *Dark*

Souls III. Observe Gwyn's somber theme[13], played on solo piano in track "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder".

Fig. 2a

Gwyn, Lord of Cinder

We can see here that the music attached the final battle of such a journey is quite a contrast from any of the previous combat encounters. Whereas other bosses had large orchestral and choral pieces to accompany them, Gwyn's theme is comprised of a single instrument, with a minimalist-style approach. This theme - affectionately referred to by players as "plin plin plon" in reference to the iconic descending arpeggiated octaves in the right hand - is used to show the sad fate of the once Lord of Sunlight, now reduced to a mere ashen skeleton in his former royal attire. Indeed, Gwyn sacrificed himself to the First Flame in an attempt to preserve the Age of Fire for the countless people who need light to survive. The player's final task is to put him to rest.

Much later in *Dark Souls III*, where the First Flame is fading and no amount of sacrifice is seemingly able to save it, the player encounters the Soul of Cinder, which as mentioned is the manifestation of the First Flame itself and every being who has ever sacrificed themselves to the Flame (known as Linking the Flame). Let us observe the climax of the first phase of the music.

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[13] Sakuraba, "Gwyn, Lord of Cinder", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fegw8UR6qr4

Fig 2b

Soul of Cinder Climax and Phase 2

An arrival point[14] that reinstates the opening chords in an augmented rhythm, along with an unexpected addition. The piano is introduced to the ensemble, playing the same "plin plin plon" that characterized Gwyn's theme from the first game. But why does the music do this? Remember that the Soul of Cinder is the physical manifestation of the Flame and all who have Linked it, including Gwyn. Thus, the second phase of the battle has the Soul of Cinder conjuring the form and power of Gwyn himself, complete with it using the same opening attack that the former Lord of Sunlight uses on the player. It is a fitting end to the trilogy, making a meta commentary on the theme of cycles, and how all must eventually come to an end.

There are many other examples of leitmotivic sharing in the series, too many for the scope of the paper and deserving of its own writing. I wanted to show the most salient examples, and how they reinforce one of the central themes of series. How it is all a cycle, and everything gets a return before it all inevitably comes to an end.

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[14] Kitamura, "Soul of Cinder", *YouTube.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io0zFbQqAUg&t=2m14s

Part 3: Gothic Film Music Tropes in *Dark Souls*

Gothic scenery and imagery have been a particular interest to 19th century writing, and has been integral in the developing of the horror genre of film.[15] In particular, the music of horror films has been especially married to visuals of horror film, as the gothic tropes have codified the audio-visual unity into being inseparable. The "gothic music" we hear in films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) in ostensibly linked to the visuals they accompany in a way other musical conventions do not quite do. "Gothic music", then, is divided into four categories: schizophonia; hauntology; excessiveness; and transgression. In this section, I will explain these four categories and how they all manifested in a single encounter in *Dark Souls III*: the battle against Slave Knight Gael.

The first form of gothic music design is schizophonia. In schizophonia, sounds are visually detached from their source, leaving that intentional dissonance for the audience to have to traverse. With sound directed at the audience (surrogate through the character experiencing it) that does not have a discernible source, the experience quickly turns into an uncomfortable one, even if it is not immediately apparent. Music can be used to amplify this effect, blurring the lines between diegetic and nondiegetic sound. The second form, hauntology, continues the idea. Hauntology plays along the already established connotations music might have associations with. This can create other kinds of dissonance, that using established conventions in an unfamiliar way, imposing a meta convention for the new context established by the music in the scene. Thirdly, excessiveness is the next form of Gothic music design. As the name would suggest, loud music and sound effects both diegetic and nondiegetic can flood a scene, imposing a level of

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[15] Elferen, "Gothic Music: the Sounds of the Uncanny", 34-35

uncomfortableness and uncertainty. Excessiveness is supreme for building tension and climaxes, especially when contrasted with silence immediate afterwards. The fourth and final form is transgression. This form of gothic music is what brings both the audience and the characters within the setting into the "other" – that being the supernatural and different. These moments, often climactic, are enhanced by the music which may combine all of the previously mentioned forms to great effect.

If the name were not indication enough, *Dark Souls* as a series uses these gothic forms to a large capacity, *Dark Souls III* being no exception. Slave Knight Gael is the final boss of *The Ringed City*, last DLC (downloadable additional content for a video game) for *Dark Souls III* (doubly serving as the last combat encounter developed for the series). The character Gael is a former warrior seeking out dark souls to consume – the souls of humanity. Recall the origin story of the series: of the four Hollows that took the Lord Souls from the First Flame, the Furtive Pygmy would go on to fragment the Dark Soul into countless shards, which would become the basis of humanity. Gael loses himself in the search for dark souls, becoming complete deranged and corrupted with unnatural (by *Dark Souls* standards) powers. The music and sound that accompanies the battle with Gael embodies all the forms of gothic music design as well shall see in track "Slave Knight Gael".

Let us start with schizophonia. The battlefield is a massive desert of ash, with only you the player, Gael, and the last of the Pygmy Lords still left in the world. During the first phase of the battle, you can hear the faint cries of souls in the background, perhaps from the Pygmy Lords that Gael has come to slay in his mindless state. However, what makes this schizophonic is the fact that the remains of the Lords are nowhere to be found, leaving the source of the cries unknown. It can be theorized that the moans come from the souls inside Gael that he has already

consumed. From here, hauntology comes into play. The music[16], composed by Yuka Kitamura,

uses a neo-romantic style, albeit playing homage to early and middling horror films. It uses

strings, brass, and choirs to give the resulting sound a sense of spirituality to it. This is contrasted

to the disturbing circumstances of the battle: Gael having been a former ally of yours, him losing

himself and killing the Lords in cold blood, and the barren wasteland that is the remains of the

world where you battle him. The only bridge between you the player and the visuals is that the

music portrays a melancholic tone.

The second and third phases of the battle are where excessiveness and transgression come

in. In the second phase, Gael reclaims a bit of his sanity, and no longer acts bestial and instead

stands upright starts to use some his enhanced powers. The music explodes[17] into a large

orchestration, complete with sweeping string arpeggios, brass fanfare, and SATB choir singing

through the den. The excessiveness is conveyed through the intense orchestration, the whoosh of

Gael's large sword, and the swirl of the building wind. Combine this with your likely increase

heartrate as the intensity of the battle picks up, and progression through the forms of gothic

sound is evident. Finally, transgression occurs in the final phase of the battle. A torrent of

flaming souls erupts from Gael, showing just how much he has consumed, and just how much it

has corrupted him. The battlefield is now alight with constant lightning strikes. The diegetic

sounds have built to a near cacophony, to say nothing of the score. The music builds to its final

section[18], where the orchestration is even thicker, the tempo faster, and increasingly unstable

harmony. The explosion of the orchestration happens to coincide with the torrent of souls that

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[16] Kitamura, "Slave Knight Gael", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9lr62Lth_I
[17] Kitamura, "Slave Knight Gael", *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9lr62Lth_I&t=1m58s
[18] Kitamura, "Slave Knight Gael", *YouTube*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=k9lr62Lth_I&t=4m00s

explode from Gael, fully bringing us through the transgression of Gael's descent. Though the Soul of Cinder serves as the final boss for the main story, Slave Knight Gael is the last boss for the series, and is indeed a spectacle of visuals and sound like no other in the *Dark Souls* trilogy.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

The music in the *Dark Souls* series has had a large impact on the reception of the trilogy and its iconic boss fights. This is in no small part due to the conventions borrowed from film music scoring practices. These practices have been developed for decades, and it stands to reason that they would find their way into video games. And though *Dark Souls* generally eschews with many of the usual tendencies or expectations of video game music, chiefly being the interactive element, the music still has a firm hold on the visuals that accompany it. The power of the leitmotif cannot be overstated, as we that with even years between releases, Gwyn's theme affects players just as powerfully in 2016 with the Soul of Cinder as it did originally in 2011. That a story with such sparse storytelling can have so much be told through the sound and music alone. And how music can be used to pull us from our world into the world of the game, filling us with all the emotions and intensity of the characters and events on our screen. Music in film and video games can have such impressive effect on its audience so as to allow for the establishing of the world we become immersed in, only to use sound as a bridge into the uncanny in an already fantasy and uncanny world. Sound has a particular way of helping us ground ourselves, even in worlds with Lords, giants, and dark souls. Without the developments of film music in the 20th century, this sort of affect might not have been achievable in a game like *Dark Souls*, as the music truly is not used any differently than composers for film have done in the past for stories in fantastical settings. And in carrying on these developments, *Dark Souls* perhaps has set a new bar in music for video games of the genre going forward.

[i] Boss phases are a way of separating a combat encounter into measurable progress, with successive phases often involving new mechanics for the player to figure out how to overcome

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All engraved musical examples transcribed by me~