

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin

**Platform:** PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One

**Genre:** Action RPG

**Release Date:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

**Developer:** FromSoftware, Inc

**Publisher:** Bandai Namco Entertainment

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Tomohiro Shibuya, Yui Tanimura

## Overview

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The Curse of the Undead brands the undead born from the First Flame, and grants the bearers immortality. However, while their bodies remain intact, their minds and humanity deteriorate, until all that is left is a walking mindless corpse known as a Hollow. The Curse of the Undead is a natural part of the cycle of Fire and Dark; The First Flame and the life it granted must one day fade, and the Age of Dark must commence. The Curse of the Undead serves as a signal of the end times, and many kingdoms have fought against it, only to collapse nonetheless. The only way to extend the Age of Fire and stall the curse is by taking the souls of others and sacrificing powerful souls to the First Flame. And so each kingdom devolves into anarchy as the undead seek to slay each other and prolong their own humanity until the Age of Darkness begins.

The Player will journey to the ancient ruined kingdom of Drangleic, in search of a king who had once attempted to defy fate and break the undead curse. Being instructed to seek greater souls and to find the king, the Bearer of the Curse will meet the monsters created by the Curse of the Undead, and explore the ruins of a now-destroyed Drangleic. Through these trials and tribulations, the Undead will find themselves tasked with obtaining the Throne of Want and ushering in an Age of Dark or extending the Age of Fire. Yet is this truly what the Undead desires?

## Characters

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### Main Characters

- **Bearer of the Curse** – The customizable player character. The Bearer of the Curse travels to the ancient land known as Drangleic, searching for a cure to the Curse of the Undead, a curse that bestows immortality on the bearer, while causing their humanity and memories to fade over time. The final stage of the curse has the bearer becoming a hollow, an immortal being with no traces of their identity remaining, left to wander the land without purpose. To become hollow is considered to be a fate more feared than death.
- **King Vendrick** – King of Drangleic, a human branded by the Curse of the Undead. Vendrick had built his kingdom on the ruins of the many kingdoms that had existed before with the help of his brother Aldia, and ushered in an age of peace and prosperity. Vendrick's reign was cut short when the Curse of the Undead began to appear in his land. He desperately tried to prolong the spread of the curse, but his efforts were in vain as a war that spanned centuries ravaged his kingdom. In his time of need, Nashandra betrayed him and attempted to steal the power of the Throne of Want and the First Flame. In response, Vendrick took the seal required to reach the Throne of Want and brought it with him deep into the catacombs to protect it from Nashandra. If a powerful undead were to reach him, then that undead would become his successor and could decide on continuing the cycle or attempting to break it.
- **Nashandra** – Queen of Drangleic, a shard of Manus—the father of the Abyss—and inheritor of Manus's want. Nashandra came to Drangleic, naturally drawn to the powerful souls that are in the land, and desired the Throne of Want and the First Flame for more power. Nashandra had manipulated the war on Drangleic, having persuaded Vendrick to cause the inciting incident. As Vendrick had seen through her plans, he had set up many obstacles meant to stop her specifically, and so she spends the majority of the game manipulating the Bearer of the Curse, forcing them to clear all the obstacles she cannot, so that when the throne opens she can enter and sit on the throne, finally obtaining the power of the First Flame.
- **The Emerald Herald** – A dragon-human hybrid created by dragons, she was considered a failure as she was made with the purpose of breaking the Undead Curse, but was unable to. She serves as the player's method of leveling up, by exchanging souls for stats. She also serves as the main guide of the game, telling

the player to seek the king and the four great souls. She believes that the Bearer of the Curse will succeed the King and bring an end to the Curse of the Undead.

- **Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin** – Brother of Vendrick and devout researcher, he had dedicated his life to researching the undead curse as he believed it contained the secrets of the nature of life itself. His admiration for the curse led to his exile where he continued experimenting on the undead turning them into malformed monstrosities. After the Bearer of the Curse has claimed the souls of the Four Great Ones, Aldia appears and guides them toward King Vendrick. Aldia serves as the final boss of the game, seeking to understand the strength of the Bearer of the Curse as well as the strength of their ambition.

### Side Characters

- **Lucatiel of Mirrah** – An ally of the Bearer of the Curse, Lucatiel lends her blade to the player during many battles. Lucatiel wears a metal mask that has the visage of a mustached musketeer and uses it to hide her face, half of which has become deteriorated with the Curse of the Undead. Lucatiel had come to Drangleic in search of a cure to the Curse of the Undead, believing that her missing brother had made a similar quest. Lucatiel fears the curse and the thought of forgetting her brother who she loves dearly. Should the player ignore Lucatiel during the game, the final encounter shows her begging the Bearer of the Curse to remember her name for she fears she will soon forget it. If the player completes Lucatiel's questline, she will thank the player for keeping her sane and resigns her equipment and sword to them, accepting her fate as an undead.
- **Straid of Olaphis** – A merchant sorcerer who grants the player powerful weapons and spells in exchange for boss souls. His advanced intellect was worshiped as well as feared, and so he was petrified by a trap. He remains petrified until the Bearer of the Curse frees him from his stone prison. Straid had come from the land of Olaphis, a kingdom that once stood where Drangleic now lies an immeasurable number of years ago. Straid is aware of kingdoms that were older than Olaphis itself and states that the Curse of the Undead had been an issue of their time and the times before as well.
- **Steady Hand McDuff** – A blacksmith found in a prison cell who will reinforce the player's equipment as well as infuse it with elements in exchange for the Dull Ember item. McDuff was once a powerful blacksmith who has now gone insane, often swinging his hammer through the air, mimicking the motions of his craft. Lighting the torch in McDuff's workshop allows him to gain a bit more of his senses and makes him move back to his workbench to properly smith. McDuff's obsession with the flame is his last tie to his deteriorating sanity, barely managing to avoid becoming hollow.

## Breakdown

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### Narrative Structure

The Bearer of the Curse begins the story with one single objective: break the curse before they become hollow. The main difficulty lies in the lack of information on how to achieve this. Much of the history of the world is lost with time, either due to the wars that had ravaged the lands, or the loss of memories experienced by those who bear the Curse of the Undead. The game tasks the player with identifying and constructing their own narrative based on the hints that are delivered through environmental storytelling, and lore hidden in the flavor text of items. NPCs also attempt to reveal the narrative, however many of these NPCs have personal objectives, and benefit from leading the player toward a false narrative to achieve their own goals. For these reasons, much of the narrative is self-driven, where the player is forced to choose who to trust and what to truly believe.

The self-driven nature of the narrative functions well, as it allows for the player to establish their own understanding of the world of Drangleic, something which the narrative later exploits to convolute and twist the player's own motivations. Trusting certain characters like Nashandra will result in the Bearer of the Curse being manipulated into opening the path to the Throne of Want. The throne is irrelevant to breaking the curse, but Nashandra covets its power; she leads the player to believe that reaching Vendrick will serve as a way to break the curse when it actually only solely progresses her own objective. This twist only functions if the player trusts Nashandra, and limiting the player's information forces them to trust her, as they lack any context that could be used to determine her true nature.

The other strength of this form of storytelling occurs during the turning points of the game. The first main turning point is when the player learns that Vendrick is no longer at Drangleic Castle. At this point, the player's clear objective suddenly becomes much more confusing, as you proved your worth and reached the castle and yet still were unable to meet the king. At this moment the player begins to feel despair, one of the core themes of the game, as they begin to feel like their entire struggle was pointless. This is when Nashandra is introduced and provides a new objective for the player to fulfill, giving a renewed sense of purpose. This happens again at the next turning point of the game where Vendrick has been found but is unable to provide any utility due to him having already turned hollow. This is a heavy moment as once again the player has achieved their goal, but it can only be seen as a hollow victory. The unknown nature of the narrative forces the player to put their faith into the smallest of leads, and when those leads fall apart directly in front of the player, it delivers the feelings the game wishes to convey—fighting destiny itself. It is suffocating, seemingly unachievable and yet in the face of such despair, one can only hold onto whatever new form of hope may appear.

## Characterization

In *Dark Souls II*, characterization is largely delivered through design as well as information hidden in the game environment. Each character has a very distinct visual identity that is further supplemented by the environment in which they reside. The Emerald Herald, for example, wears saintly robes and an emerald hood. Green is a color that indicates life and growth, complementing her role as the NPC that helps the player level up and encourages them even at the lowest points of their journey. This kind nature is further implied by the location she is encountered in, the town of Majula. The town acts as a hub for the player to return to and is filled with permanent warm afternoon sun. There are nearly no threats in the town, and the music plays a small gentle melody. Majula is meant to make the player feel safe and act as a location to seek respite from the horrors that wander Drangleic. The Emerald Herald using this location as her choice of home indicates that she shares many of the values that Majula serves to provide.

This form of characterization is solely delivered visually, conveying all the necessary information to the player simply through symbolism and color association. Handling the characterization through visual cues and symbolic imagery, allows the game's dialogue to focus on the crucial information that needs to be delivered and minimizes the time needed to exposit plot information. In short, characterization is largely achieved through a visual medium to expedite the delivery of the narrative.

Another strong use of this visual characterization is present in the first encounter with Nashandra. Nashandra is portrayed as a beautiful woman sitting upon an individual throne located higher in the castle than where Vendrick's throne had once been. She is adorned with silk robes of gold and white and is illuminated by a shining beam of light from above. While this initially presents her as some sort of holy or deific figure, it is worth noting the area she resides in. Drangleic castle is a fortress made from dark black bricks, where the only traces of color present are used to attempt to break the overwhelming darkness of the castle. The storm above the castle never relents, the only light coming from the torches that struggle to remain aflame in the face of the storm. Located in the castle is a portrait of Nashandra, which if approached begins to curse the player, resulting in instant death. Nashandra's holy appearance in a kingdom of such overwhelming darkness can initially be interpreted as a faint glimmer of hope in a hopeless land. This is by design, as Nashandra wishes to deceive the Bearer of the Curse into doing her bidding. Upon learning of her true nature and seeing her true form, a skeletal grim reaper as dark as the abyss, the player understands the second meaning behind her first appearance. Nashandra's deity-like image is an illusion, exploiting the visual connotation of an impossible light shining in a rainstorm in an attempt to gain the Bearer of the Curse's trust. Less trusting players may have already inferred this, but Nashandra's stark contrast to her environment helps to visually describe her deceptive nature.

By using the environment as well as the character's design, the game creates a twist that is surprising and yet completely reasonable given all the prior hints. This once again serves the narrative of the game as it all comes from inferences the player will

make just from observing, meaning that no explicit trickery such as dialogue was used to create the surprise of the twist.

## Themes

The main themes of the game all come as derivatives of the Curse of the Undead. Hope, despair, fear, and desire are the main emotions the narrative showcases, and how the Curse of the Undead highlights these concepts throughout all of Drangleic. Each of the main characters serves as a vessel to convey each of these emotions. King Vendrick represents the fear of the curse, the fear of forgetting as well as the fear of inevitable demise. King Vendrick took extreme measures to try to prevent the spread of the curse, exiling hollows to faraway lands, and incarcerating them in cells until the cells themselves eroded with time. He encouraged the hunting of the undead as a sport in an attempt to kill the curse, though this too would fail and his very hunters would become hollow as well. Vendrick's fear of loss caused him to trust Nashandra, which would ironically be the cause of the destruction of Drangleic. This fear is not solely expressed by Vendrick, as other NPCs such as Lucatiel of Mirrah show a similar desperate fear of their curse. Lucatiel, similar to Vendrick, attempts to bargain, begging the Bearer of the Curse to remember her name in case she does not.

Nashandra represents the despair the curse infests within individuals, complimented by her proximity to Vendrick, as fear and despair are never far from each other. Nashandra continuously guides the player to near success, fully knowing that the player will never have a true victory, driving them closer and closer to despair. Nashandra also incites despair within Vendrick towards the end of his journey as she reveals that his beloved had been the cause of the fall of Drangleic. Despair takes many forms, but the form best represented in the game is the despair that manifests through multiple failures, and the despair that fills the land as it attempts to prevent a guaranteed future.

The Emerald Herald represents hope, as despite her being a failed creation she continues to aid the Undead, and believes in the Bearer of the Curse's ability to succeed the king. She represents and compliments the Bearer of the Curse's hope to one day break the curse. Despite the curse being a guaranteed outcome, the undead can continue to prolong it, allowing for a chance to make more time and find a cure. Hope directly antagonizes despair, being a clear indicator as to why the Emerald Herald serves as an antagonist to Nashandra, giving the Bearer of the Curse hope and courage to challenge Nashandra and decide on the fate of the world.

*Bearer of the Curse... Seek souls. Larger, more powerful souls. Seek the King, that is the only way. Lest this land swallow you whole... As it has so many others.*

The Emerald Herald repeats this phrase many times throughout the story, almost as a mantra. She repeats it time and time again to remind the undead to hold onto hope and to continue forward so as to not be defeated by the apathy caused by the cycle of Fire and Dark itself.

Lastly, Aldia represents desire, in every shape it takes. The Curse of the Undead only exists due to the undead's desire to live forever, and acts as a motivator for those who wish to break it. Aldia is the only character in the game to encourage the player to think about their own goals within the story, serving as an anchor for the player's motivations. Whether the player desires to participate in the cycle of Fire and Dark or to reject it and seek their own cure for the Curse of the Undead, Aldia supports it as long as it is the decision you as a player make and not one controlled by scheming forces.

Towards the end of the game, after defeating Nashandra, Aldia makes his final appearance and decides to test the Bearer of the Curse and the strength of their soul. After besting Aldia in combat, Aldia asks the Bearer of the Curse one last time what it is they desire. An age of Fire, an age of Dark, or something else entirely.

*What was it I wanted again?*

This question is what the core of Dark Souls II's themes have been building towards. The Bearer of the Curse had come to this land in search of a cure to their curse, their very title and identity focused on this core aspect of themselves. Yet at the end of their journey, they are offered the choice of deciding the fate of the kingdom of Drangleic.

*Why does this even matter to me?*

It doesn't. While the player may have grown to love the ruined kingdom of Drangleic, it only remains ruined, and extending the Age of Fire doesn't change its inevitable demise. Neither does inciting the Age of Dark, as it will come regardless of the Bearer of the Curse's actions. What mattered was breaking the curse and freeing themselves from the fate of the Undead. The reason the player sought the king was to find a cure: Nashandra and the Emerald Herald encouraged this to fulfill their desires of despair and hope respectively. When Vendrick had been a dead end Nashandra took advantage of this lapse in judgment of the Bearer of the Curse, encouraging them to seek the throne without any reason as to why. A concoction of fear, death, despair, and futility, all caused by the Curse of the Undead, acts as the perfect way of having the Bearer of the Curse fulfilling the objectives of manipulators such as Nashandra and the Emerald Herald. At a certain point, the player makes the mistake of assuming their goals are aligned with the objective of breaking the curse. When the player's goal falls flat, the goal of others consumes the player, tricking them into believing that it is still a goal that the Bearer of the Curse desires.

Aldia's unclear motivations become visible with this newfound context. He wants to be an anchor of the player's motivations, for he is interested in what they desire to do with their power. Aldia's fight serves not as a test of physical strength, but of mental strength. His own desire is to see whether or not the Bearer of the Curse has the strength to hold onto their goal of breaking the curse and not be swallowed whole by the land and the Curse of the Undead.

Accepting the throne means accepting the cycle of Fire and Darkness, but Aldia's offer to search for something else entirely is the core message of Dark Souls II. The Bearer of the Curse has not achieved their objective. So if they so choose, despite the impossibility of the task, despite the impossible amount of strength required to continue onwards, and despite the intentions of false guides who seek to lead the good-intentioned astray, the Bearer of the Curse may continue to search for a way to break the curse. True strength lies not in power, or in quantity, but in the fortitude and willpower that is required to truly achieve your goals.

## **Strongest Element**

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The Souls series is known for its obscure plotlines, relying on item descriptions or environmental storytelling to properly tell the full story. While this may seem to result in a disorganized and confusing narrative, it actually makes for a much more compelling story, and this is especially true for Dark Souls II. Drangleic is a ruined kingdom devoid of life, where all that's left for the player when they arrive is rubble and mindless zombies. It makes sense that the player would not have the full story, as much of Drangleic's history would have been lost when the kingdom fell. Furthermore, this gives an opportunity for players to proceed based on their preferences. A player may enjoy the game without having to worry about the story, while a player interested in the full narrative can further research and explore the game's world and items to find answers and feel a sense of reward once the narrative has been stitched together.

Regardless of whether or not the player decides to engage with the story, a perceptive player will observe the elements of the story that are baked into the environment. The Forest of Fallen Giants implies the history of a great war through an area filled with hollow soldiers guarding the ruins of a destroyed fortress. This is further insinuated by groups of soldiers mindlessly attacking the corpses of long-deceased giants. Drangleic Castle is guarded by gold-clad knights, and yet the Throne Room remains empty. The queen resides in a higher, more glorified room, indicating the passing of the old monarchy and the new queen's perverse domination over the castle. The blacked-out bonfires that the player is incapable of revisiting serve as a visual reminder; The player is turning hollow and is forgetting the locations to which they had once been. These are all elements a player will be forced to see and serve as a way of showing the player the story rather than simply telling them. By interacting and engaging with the game, the player naturally begins to understand the fate that had befallen the land, without disrupting the flow of the game and the immersion of the world.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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While the narrative is extremely engaging, the gameplay can often undermine it, especially at critical moments of the story. This can hurt large climactic encounters with the bosses of the game where the fight falls into tedium rather than excitement, ruining the climax and player engagement. For some bosses, the reason lies within a poor A.I., such as Lucatiel's brother, who despite being constantly foreshadowed as a master



swordsman, is easily dispatched by the player. Due to the visual delivery of the narrative, the lack of difficulty in this encounter may cause players to infer that Lucatiel may be deceitful, something that is not meant to be implied. As the player is trained to learn the story visually, accidentally conveying an incorrect narrative may cause future confusion on whether or not story elements are intentional. This is an issue in Aldia's fight, which is largely hated despite being the final climactic battle of the game. The battle is supposed to be a test to see if the Bearer of the Curse is fit to be a monarch worthy of sitting on the Throne of Want. Unfortunately, he fails to mention that it would be a test of patience because a large part of the battle is waiting for his invincibility to disappear, creating a final encounter of the game that is slow and uninteresting. While it does not ruin the story of the game, it creates a sense of dissonance where you are being told that this is the ultimate test of your skills but don't experience the challenge that the story is telling you it is. These lackluster battles end up hurting the consistency of the narrative, breaking the player's investment in the story.

## Highlight

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The search for Vendrick has led the Bearer of the Curse over a kingdom submerged in molten lava, into deep underground caverns filled with poison-spitting elegies of the dead, and through King Vendrick's most trusted knights. The player had inched closer and closer to their goal of meeting the king and cleared the halls of the now-abandoned Castle Drangleic. Despite having found the throne room empty, the player journeyed further nonetheless into its catacombs. The Bearer of the Curse finally arrives at the king's final guard, Velstadt, who wields a bell hammer the size of a giant. After a difficult battle against the king's most trusted friend now corrupted by the insatiable abyss, the player stands before the grave of the king, open and waiting for the player. And so the player enters and meets the king. The king stands towering, hair magnificent and flowing onto his shoulders, wielding a sword that is larger than any human could possibly carry. Yet, the player feels no fear as the situation is very wrong. The king wanders his small room, dragging his sword behind him barely capable of lifting it. He remains unclothed, his armaments laying towards the back of the room, the sole articles he still wears being a loincloth wrapped around his waist. His crown lays lopsided atop his head as though mocking his sorry state. In this dark and empty grave, the sole color remaining comes from the green decay of Vendrick's skin and the blood-red colors of his raw exposed flesh. The player moves to the back of the room and retrieves the king's ring, the symbol of the king required to open the door to the throne of want. As they leave, they see the Emerald Herald looking in solemnly at the king, once the strongest undead now reduced to yet another hollow. Attempting to engage in combat with the king results in the Bearer of the Curses strikes being ignored—The body of the king remains so impossibly powerful as to be unwounded from the petty blows of a warrior, and yet is devoid of life as to not even attempt to arm a counterattack, lacking any form of purpose or meaning to its perpetual movement.

This is the Curse of the Undead.

The Emerald Herald speaks to the Bearer of the Curse. “If you are to be the next monarch, Then, one day, you will walk those grounds... .. without really knowing why.”

## Critical Reception

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*Digitally Downloaded* gave the game a 9/10, where the writer Nick, praises the way the game represents its core themes from a visual perspective, believing that the rotting undead enemies and player serve as a perfect contrast to the vibrant colors of the environments, representing the decay of land that had once been flourishing with life. Nick praises the way the game encourages the player with hope and encouragement, just as much as it attempts to create despair and hopelessness, creating a true sense of purpose when the player manages to push through the difficulty and conquer a powerful foe or progress to a new area.

Ref: <https://www.digitallydownloaded.net/2014/04/review-dark-souls-2-pc.html>

*MMORPG.com* gives Dark Souls II an 8.5/10, describing the game as a narrative that invites you into a quiet mystery in a ruined land. The review details that if the player is expecting a heavy, exciting story, then the game's more subtle and hushed tones will likely be unappealing to that kind of player. They experienced that ultimately the lack of a clear narrative allows the player to form their own understandings of the story, and causes the player to build their own methods and reasons for traversing Drangleic.

Ref:  
<https://www.mmorpg.com/reviews/character-development-frustration-and-mechanics-2000103012>

## Lessons

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**A single persistent element can reveal varying themes through its impact throughout the narrative.**

The Curse of the Undead serves as a constant in the world of Drangleic, unavoidable and unstoppable. Every living being will eventually be forced to confront it. This simple logic allows every character the opportunity to explore what the curse means to them as an individual. For King Vendrick, the most powerful soul in the land, the curse manifested itself as fear, which drove him to despicable acts in an attempt to protect himself from the curse. For Aldia, the curse fed his curiosity and led him to want to learn more about both it and the nature of life itself. Each character uses this element as a way to explore their own emotions and values, and in turn, allows the narrative to use them to explore opposing themes in a natural manner. Having the themes deeply tied to the

different NPCs allows the themes to follow the player throughout the story and demonstrate their impact on the player's story.

### **Use visual elements to reinforce the narrative.**

Visual elements can be used as a shortcut to communicate information to the player, delivering details more efficiently than exposition or dialogue. Many characters have their personalities immediately conveyed visually, either through character design or implicative imagery, allowing the player to infer and draw conclusions from what they see. By not explicitly describing elements, the game manipulates the player's expectations, to later exploit their interpretations and create more powerful emotions of despair. Reinforcing this theme, the warping mechanics of the game seem very straightforward at the start of the game, but after a certain point in the story, the player is presented with blacked-out bonfires. The player spends time trying to understand what they are seeing and is confused as to why they could no longer access a previously visited bonfire. The realization that perhaps the player is forgetting the bonfires due to the curse creates a new sense of urgency and the need to find a cure immediately increases, as the journey will become much harder with fewer available bonfires. The player is not actually forgetting bonfires, but the game leads you to believe this. These narrative connotations delivered through visual information deliver a more subtle yet effective narrative regarding the character's fears.

### **Subvert expectations**

There are multiple points in Dark Souls II that subvert a player's expectations to tell a dynamic story. King Vendrick's reveal is incredibly anticlimactic, having a massive build-up to an expected boss fight, only to find a harmless shambling corpse. This shatters a player's expectations, robbing them of their climax, in a way that does not break the conventions of the narrative. By losing this climax, the player experiences a devastating loss that furthers the themes of despair and hopelessness in a beautiful way. Furthermore, having unreliable guides gives the players an opportunity to have their trust betrayed, hurting them on a foundational level. It must be carefully implemented, so as to avoid creating dissatisfying moments that hurt the progression of the narrative, but when used successfully it creates a much more personal narrative that allows the player to be part of the twists.

## **Summation**

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Dark Souls II has an extremely interesting narrative, one that reveres its predecessor and serves to flesh out one of the more loosely explored concepts from the first game. The game's exploration of themes of despair and forgetting is well-rounded and helps reveal interesting sides of characters that would not be shown otherwise. Furthermore, the relatability of the concepts and the game's heavier involvement of the player in the narrative helps add a more personal stake that is generally not present in the

Dark Souls series. Dark Souls II is an expertly crafted exploration of themes and should be analyzed by anyone interested in creating a more lived-in world.