

User Experience Design

The UX Design of Dark Souls Remastered

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Product selection

This UX Design report will examine the UX design of the software, Dark Souls Remastered. Observations indicated that Dark Souls Remastered chooses a unique approach to UX design and its principles. Studies and player experiences have shown that this can greatly affect the gameplay experience of the player, depending on their chosen platform. Furthermore, a comparison can be made to another game of the same company in the same genre, which caters more to the consistency of UX design seen in other similar products and how this can either be a benefit or disadvantage to the games of this genre.

Initial Review

When a player decides to play Dark Souls, they must first create a character. To do this they must navigate the character creation menu. The way this is achieved can vary as Dark Souls Remastered is available on numerous different platforms, such as, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch and Windows PC.[1] Due to the variation of platforms available to play on, this can complicate control schemes as the game may cater to some platforms more than others. As a result, the menu navigation can be confusing for PC users due to the fact it caters more towards console players. This causes the menu navigation on PC to not follow the UX design consistency as seen in other PC games or software making it a bit confusing to learn as it is more consistent with the UX design for console.

This inconsistency can cause frustration for users due to the time it takes to navigate the menus and having to learn new methods of navigation. As a report by Medium states ‘when design elements align, users feel in control.’[2] However, observations indicated that FromSoftware[3] chose to keep this style of menu navigation for all of their games, creating a consistency and style that would be recognisable for long term players of their games. Furthermore, it is noted that FromSoftware also adds on screen annotations as a guide for their menu navigation, as seen in the image bellow.



(Image 1: Dark Souls Remastered character creator [1]).

When the player has created their character and begun their journey in Dark Souls, the game will provide them with a brief tutorial on the game's basic controls. This tutorial is provided in the form of messages found on the floor, that when interacted with provide information to the player. This is an unusual and unique method of teaching new players how to play, compared with examples of this in other games. Despite this, this method is very effective as the messages stand out to the player and promote player exploration and interaction within the game world.



(Image 2: Dark Souls Remastered message hints [1]).

The combat for Dark Souls Remastered is very unique compared with other games of this genre, as it offers unique playstyles and methods of dual wielding and magic use. This can be quite overwhelming for new players as the control scheme for this can appear to be unorthodox and difficult to learn. Furthermore, it is also catering towards console players, so PC players will struggle learning new key binds that are not consistent with other games.

However, this does offer great reward in the sense of achievement when these controls are learnt and mastered, giving the players great satisfaction at the risk of turning away new players who may not enjoy this unique control scheme.



(Image 3: Dark Souls Remastered UI [1]).

UX Design principles

User-centred Design

User-centricity involves identifying the products target audience and what their needs and problems are and making design decisions based on the information given. It is suggested that good user-centricity 'is to create products and services that solve user problems' [4]

These findings support the hypothesis that to achieve good product user-centricity, user research is required. This would require identifying any problems in the user experience needing to be solved and identifying the target audience, using user testing to understand their needs and requirements for the product.

Consistency

It was found that, when navigating a user interface, consistency is a crucial element to the user-friendly experience. It is widely argued that inconsistency in user interfaces can cause 'users to exert extra cognitive effort' [5] As a result of this, usability of the product is heavily disadvantaged, and pointless friction is introduced.

Research reveals that consistent experiences can be created by establishing design patterns and keeping branding elements uniform.[5] For example, scholars recommend that navigational elements such as menus, buttons and sidebars should be positioned in locations consistent with what is commonly expected of UX design and should behave the same way throughout the products use.

Additionally, design elements such as font, colour scheme, layout and theme should remain consistent throughout the product to strengthen brand readability and promote ease of navigation for users, avoiding the risk of confusion.

Accessibility

UX and product accessibility means ensuring the product is accessible and uses able to as many people as possible. This implies catering to the needs and preferences of users on various platforms, or users with disabilities requiring extra accommodations. For example, users with disabilities may require colour blind options, the option to re-size text or a text narrator. Additionally, users on different platforms may need different UI layouts, images may need to be scaled to different screen sizes, buttons may need to be adjusted for different inputs and more. Observations indicated that 'not designing for accessibility is also a missed opportunity for profitability' [6]

Hierarchy

Design hierarchy can be utilised to help users identify key information and direct them to it, helping users distinguish from less important information at a glance. It is believed that visual cues can 'help guide users to different elements in a user interface'. [7] These elements may include using different font styles, font size and weight, spacing elements and intelligent use of contrast.

Information Architecture

Studies show that there is a correlation found between hierarchy and information architecture. Information architecture is the 'structure and organisation of information' [8] This involves creating a logical navigation structure that prevents user confusion and frustration, providing the important information in a concise manner. The organisation and structure of information can also be referred to as a 'sitemap'. A sitemap is a visual aid allowing UX designers to visualise how UX menus and webpages are displayed and how they connect and relate, identifying gaps and possible faults in the framework.

UX Analysis

UI Navigation

This topic has been selected due to dark souls remastered unique approach to Navigation and information architecture which is not standard with other examples of similar products. Previous studies on other examples of the same product type show a very different path for navigation which is consistent and therefore intuitive as it is what players would expect when playing a video game. For example, the most common method of accessing the player inventory in a video game would be pressing the letter 'I' button or the 'TAB' button. However, contrary to this consistency found in most games, Dark Souls remastered places the inventory into the menu to which you must press the 'esc' button, then navigate to the inventory tab which is located in the same row as architecture 'settings' menu, 'armoury' menu and 'status' menu. This

represents poor information architecture as this may confuse new players due to the number of steps needed to locate the inventory and the unusual location of it.



(Image 4: Dark Souls Remastered menu [1]).

Furthermore, it was found that the inventory navigation is convoluted and difficult to use as it is designed to cater more to players using a controller, rather than players using the PC platform. Observations indicated that navigating the inventory requires the use of the arrow keys which is an unconventional method of navigation causing extra cognitive effort to be used which may possibly frustrate the player due to increased difficulty of reaching what page or item they need. Additionally, navigating the inventory involves switching between numerous tabs and scrolling down to locate an item. These findings support the hypothesis that dark Souls Remastered has poor navigation and information architecture which could negatively impact the player experience. An example of a player-first navigation system for an in-game inventory with a similar style from a similar genre would be the inventory seen in Oblivion Remastered [9]. As pictured below, this inventory shows items in smaller images taking up less screen space allowing things to be easily seen all together, avoiding the need of scrolling to locate things. Furthermore, the player can use the mouse button to navigate the different menu tabs easily.



(Image 5: Dark Souls Remastered inventory [1]).

Dark Souls remastered inventory with controls displayed on the bottom.



(Image 6: Oblivion Remastered inventory [2]).

Oblivion Remaster's similar but improved inventory layout.

Visual Design

Observations indicated that FromSoftware uses a unique style and colour palette which remains consistent throughout their games with very little changes. Patterns emerged showing that the layout for buttons, functions and menus often cater more towards console players and this can be seen in most of their games, with the exception of 'Elden Ring Nightreign' which features a control scheme and menu layout which is more suitable to PC players.



(Image 7: Elden Ring Nightreign inventory [3]).

Furthermore, Dark Souls Remastered, much like FromSoftware's other games, features menu with a dark colour palette matching the atmosphere of the game with subtle textures to increase player immersion. This textured, dull and dark aesthetic is seen throughout the game and has become a staple style for FromSoftware due to its consistency.

Multi-Platform capability

Research reveals that Dark Souls players would recommend people play the game on controller only [10]. This is due to numerous reasons, for example, observations indicate that players struggle with the default input mapping on keyboard and mouse, stating it is catered more towards controller use making the controls difficult to learn and use. Additionally, key layout is another issue as actions and inputs are spread across many keys causing slower reaction times for players and added confusion.

Furthermore, there are some difficulties with compatibility when using a keyboard as some actions that would otherwise be easier on controller become much more difficult to execute on keyboard, an example of this would be the 'kick' action, players recommend the use of a controller as on keyboard this button combo is extremely difficult to use.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

An analysis was conducted that revealed that only 15 percent of steam users use a centred [10]. With this data in mind, Dark Souls Remastered may be at risk of limiting their target audience due to their controller-centred UX design, locking themselves from 85 percent of steam users who prefer to use a keyboard and mouse. This prevents accessibility to players who may want to use a keyboard and may not want to invest into a controller.

Furthermore, research reveals that Dark Souls Remastered lacks a colourblind option for players which decreases the games accessibility. Additionally, the game is made more difficult due to the dark graphics and difficult to see colour palette, making the game inaccessible to players who may have visual impairments.



(Image8: Dark Souls Remastered Blightown [1]).

Area in Dark Souls Remastered showcasing difficult to see colour palette and lack of brightness that may affect visually impaired players.

Recommendations for improvement

Research reveals that Dark Souls Remastered lacks user-centricity due to the UX design catering to controller which only makes up a small percentage of steam users. As a result, formatting the UX design and control scheme to cater more to keyboard and mouse users could result in a larger target audience.

Secondly, providing players with colour blind options and visual impairment options would increase the accessibility of the game allowing more players to enjoy, decreasing player frustration.

Thirdly, UI navigation could be re-designed to appear more convenient for PC players and screen sizes, allowing a less frustrating experience when trying to find items. This can also be improved by allowing players to utilise the mouse in the inventory and downsizing item icons to allow more to fit on the screen.

Conclusion

While Dark Souls Remastered is still a highly successful game, observations indicated that a larger market can be found by improving accessibility and UX design in the game and therefore benefitting the company and player base. Research shows that there are many players who may feel locked out of the game due to it not catering to their preferences or due to it lacking accessibility. As a result, UX design principles are crucial for ensuring a larger target audience for the product, ensuring all users are happy with the product which would result in users returning to the product and recommending it to others.

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