

Dark souls 2 and World of Warcraft share a major flaw, their worlds are designed terribly. For it has the objective worse world design out of any from software title: lack of inter-connectivity, bad transitions between zones, constant shifts in the colours and assets used, no regional consistencies in daylight and weather, missing areas, missing LODs, annoying platforming sections, inappropriately placed zones, inappropriate elevation of most sets, and bad enemy placements all contribute to the creation of the most emotionally exhausting and logically inconsistent worlds to ever be put out by the team. Dark souls 2s fundamental ideas behind world design favours difficulty first over structure, believability, and consistency. Many of the locations of the game take place well above water or the ground. Often players can expect to die from fall damage, falling into the ocean when within places like caves, fortresses, plains and any other region where large bodies of water are never present in the real world. In-game this looks absolutely ridiculous, this is infuriating to put up with and plenty of other sections of it have these types of pointless platforming sections. Worst of all, the scale of each level and transitions between them lack any sense of believability to both a real world location and a dark souls title. Nearly every level looks wildly different from the previous entry. There is not a single location in-game where one major region of the map naturally transitions into the next one, like the bridge connecting the mostly clear skies of the shaded woods to the sudden rainy and grey atmosphere of castle drangleic. The size of them is laughably small both in comparison to ds1 and ds3, often a couple minutes are only required to completely run through any level, none have shortcuts and some don't even have any areas to explore through to flesh out the world. When combined with the awful transitions it makes the game look and play as unfinished as it truly is, and the recycling of assets furthers this. Funnily enough, the way assets are recycled doesn't do anything to expand the game's content, it's missing several locations. Ds2 takes place in the areas surrounding and within the kingdom of drangleic, but the kingdom itself, the settlements surrounding Heide's Tower of Flame, the Cardinal Tower, the forest itself within the Forest of the Fallen Giants, LODs for multiple facilities, rooms to justify the size of certain buildings in-game, and natural terrain in place of infrastructure like staircases, bridges and random ladders are all missing content from the game. It's an unfinished world filled with bad ideas behind its design; when regions that are well designed like the Frozen Eleum Loyce, they stick out and feel both pleasant and disconnected from the rest of the game. What it needs is an overhaul to its world, but first any passionate developers for it can only know where to start when it's issues are called to attention in detail.

A very easy to see problem with it's world design is the lack of internal structure. DS2 is designed similarly to demon souls where the map isn't designed based on a mesh of terrain, but rather, in a series of increasingly convoluted maze-like rooms appearing as a collective landmass. This aspect of the game's world design accounts for most of the developer confusion behind level placements and their transitions. Having the entirety of the game take place on a single landmass with clear paths, and LODs - see the image above - would clearly indicate to the player what they should expect from each region: the size, domain, and aesthetics would all be information the player would gain throughout their first play throughs.

Having all of these levels attached to a single shared location permits shared day & night cycles, weather patterns and ambient lighting that feels organic between each level. For instance, the Lost Bastille and No Mans Wharf - levels always taking place at night - are visually disconnected from the Forest of the Fallen Giants and Heide's Tower of Flame because they don't have any day and night cycles or use the same times as the rest of the game making them feel like completely separated areas from Drangleic to new players, despite them taking place in the same region. With a shared map, this would be fixed immediately without having to patch out a proper cycle for both locations. Furthermore the change in time and weather should be triggered based on the players actions and progression; the completion of certain bosses and levels will get the time and weather to gradually shift to a certain point.

Outside of visuals, there's a disconnect between most locations in DS2. The only real locations that connect one major part of the map to others are Majula and the three gates in the Shaded Woods, the ladder whose gates only open to endgame locations in linear order making them pointless as a route anyways. A lot of this is caused in part by the amount of missing locations in. From the hud, the player can tell each location is expected to have 5 bonfires, must only have 1-3 since the file and developer size behind the game wasn't able to produce a game that could run on most hardware available at the time. Today, if there was a remake it would resolve this issue by adding all the missing locations in each area, and introduce shortcuts to each zone making the world feel a lot more fleshed out. Enemy spawns could also change; SOTFS has a lot of issues with gank squads and enemy spam. By increasing the size of the map enemy density would decrease, thus removing issues with the aforementioned problems and creating a better sense of pacing in-game. Pacing in-game is especially important; DS1 despite being open ended, provides a clear sense of direction for the player at the start while most new players here have no idea where to go or what the point of the game's story is until reaching their first encounter with Aldia. A larger and interconnected world offers players more opportunities to understand what they want to do and where they should go, both from a design and visual perspective as such a visually intertwined space offers players chances to see their next destination in advanced to prevent ever being lost, similar to how castle Drangleic is always visible in Majula.

Speaking of castle Drangleic it's important to recognize how many locations are completely out of place visually and in lore. Many sections of DS2 have terrain discontinuity issues, elevation issues within caves or are simply positioned illogically. For example, heide's tower of flame is placed at the edge of the map right next to majula well above water. Ignoring the rest of the issues with how this level is structured, the fact that it's positioned that way barely makes any sense. What tower in any game is intentionally built far above water and contains many edges where it's inhabitants are constantly at risk of falling to their deaths? None, and this design is only implemented to kill the player. The same design choice is applied to many caves, valleys, plains and cities like the Lost Bastille, Things Betwixt, and castle Drangleic. Elevated structures should only be above water if they're specifically at the edge of the map, are disconnected from neighbouring infrastructure appropriately, and lead back into the mainland of Drangleic, otherwise they're completely out of place and exist as

badly designed sections of the game. Another bad aspect of the level design are the boss runs. Although plenty at the start aren't too awful, DS2 at mid and endgame features absolutely abysmal boss runs that can exhaust players emotionally. Runs like the cardinal tower to the pursuer, ancient dragon and Velstadt feature way too many enemies in an abnormally cramped area that, again, exist to kill the player as much as possible with zero consideration of pacing or fairness. It's a terrible feeling to have to run through the Black Gulch to get to the Rotten only to find the boss itself is easier than the run to it, so much that the developers had to add in a separate bonfire to reach him to prevent players at all skill levels from endlessly dying to cheap deaths all for a mediocre boss. Cheap deaths are especially present in-game worst level, Iron Keep. It's a monument to every problem related to world design the game can offer: enemy spam, zero visual transition, cramped spaces, a generally small level in general, way too linear and visually nonsensical. There's no reason for a level like that to have made it past playtesting and many more like it. What Iron Keep shows is the developed mentality towards level design, a mentality that favours difficulty over depth. Thus many of the other locations are subject to similarly terrible ideas in their worlds that have to go. One way to start is by fixing how they're connected.

How these locations are intertwined is just as important as building those connections. Many locations of DS2 (and in the rest of the souls trilogy) feature platforming sections, ladders, stairs and elevators where they're completely illogical. Often in open plains and caves, platforming and traversal in ds2 is rarely designed in acknowledgement of the game's base movement mechanics, but rather difficulty. Thus, many sections feature tight turns, small platforms, ladders in sections that feel unusual and traps that feel completely out of place all towards making the game harder than it has any right to be, which harms the gameplay experience. Replacing these locations could help: instead of ladders, design transitions with stairs and hills that feel organic to the setting whenever possible; instead of falling on platforms in caves, descend through a series of staircases, and inclines near cliffs against enemies to provide a serious threat; and in place of arbitrarily placed ambushes, design certain sections to contain unavoidable and difficult enemies with faster and heavier attacks. Visuals matter as much to the design of traversal as the objects and terrain in place for it. I can still remember my play through of the Iron King dlc locations and feeling occasionally lost in how expansive the sets felt, you can't get that feeling of curiosity to explore when so many levels block off what you can see. Many levels have massive hills, skyboxes and walls that completely block off the player's line of sight when traversing between and within them. Removing these and making new routes to shortcuts, levels and treasures visible to the player at all times helps the player navigate through the world, and provides new ones a sense of curiosity to fully explore everything it has to offer.

Expanding on exploration. As mentioned previously the world and number of levels in DS2 should be expanded and intertwined. How those levels ought to be structured depends on their purpose. Generally a level should consist of an exploration and trial zone. Exploration areas are large maze-like or open plains of space meant for the player to navigate through while battling enemies to progress. These should contain most of the enemies in each level, provide a few challenging enemies for the player to encounter before stepping into a

trial zone and have plenty of items to grab to encourage exploration. Trials consist of levels specifically geared to challenge the players ability to excel at one component of either combat, navigation or their understanding of the items they have in their inventories. These are typically fully linear sections consisting of higher level enemies and loot available. Art direction plays a key role in expansion, a level can't feel large if it doesn't look that way. Levels, again should primarily consist of similar assets, but also have their set pieces be organised in groups that pay respect to one aspect of the lore to another. I.E cities like a city of Heide or Drangleic as exploration zones should consist primarily of bricks, stones and wood with plenty of homes, shops, gates, archways and roads to communicate the sense of place for the player. Levels like the Shaded Woods or the Forest of the Fallen Giants will contain ruins of old infrastructure, dead giant's from different regions of drangleic, plenty of conifers, mossy sedimentary rocks and lakes, and isolated but highly useful weapons and armours for the player to use. These changes would help make the game feel as expansive, realistic and intertwined as the DLC content and DS1.

Bringing the overworld as a whole to the same level as the DLCs must include a shift to enemy placements. Understandably many fights in DS1 are multi-fights in small locations because the base components of combat are already slow. This is a terrible way to address the issues with the core components of combat, but a solution isn't necessarily to decrease the difficulty of each level with less enemies, but replacements to the enemies used. By replacing certain ambushes and levels containing many enemies with only one or two challenging foes, the pacing of the game stays consistent and the players chances to detest certain areas reduces substantially. These foes should be the same ones used as challenge options in exploration zones. It's important to provide spaces free of enemies entirely, it's not fun to constantly be attacked regardless of what part of the map you're in, especially if you just want to explore a new area for the sake of learning about its history. Enemy encounters should be thought of as a sub component of the level design, not what each zone centres around. The size of the game plays into this: it's the longest dark souls title, constantly fighting new and tougher enemies is exhausting and repetitive from the players perspective to endure, and creating the move sets and models for each of them is tiring on the developers end for such a large game. Opening up more locations to be deprived of enemies but encouraging exploration and delving into its lore and NPCs would allow the world to be fully fleshed out. Would this mean the game would feel longer? Not necessarily, if all those shortcuts are established, players have the option to skip through these sections when they feel like it to rush towards combat whenever they want. A benefit for players that are interested in the lore, veterans wishing to play at their own pace, or as a reward for curious but explorative players disinterested in the lore. The main benefits are the reduced multi-fights, fully fleshed out worlds and the achievable control players have over the pacing of their runs.

DS2s world design suffers from a lot of issues due to rushed development, bad approaches to level design, a lack of internal structure, and the consistency of its visuals. Changes should be introduced that address these core problems of its world, to produce an environment that feels finished, fair, fun, and full of mystery.