Tactile Thematics[*]

From Power to Skill in FromSoftware's *Souls* Games

Eric Stein

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Introduction

The incredibly popular *Souls*[1] games developed by FromSoftware (and their imitators, colloquially referred to as *Souls*-like games[2]) have followed a fascinating design trajectory since the release of the first game in the franchise, *Demon's Souls*, for PS3 in 2009. In many such fantasy roleplaying games, the in-game capacity of the player-character is signified by a 'level,' which is typically increased through the acquisition of 'experience' or 'xp' during gameplay. The more the player plays, the more experience they gain, which increases their character's level, and thus makes their character more powerful in the game-world. This is a common logic of progression that is familiar, I am sure, to most who have spent time playing games (digital, physical, or otherwise).[3]

The problem with such a logic is that it subjects the particularities of different play styles, abilities, and tactics to an abstract metric of power, hiding the nuances of actual play from view. Such abstraction in games turns play (messy,

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[1]FromSoftware, *Demon's Souls*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, PS3, 2009; *Dark Souls*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, PS3 and Xbox 360, 2011; *Dark Souls II*, dir. Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, PS3 and Xbox 360, 2014; *Bloodborne*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, PS4, 2015; *Dark Souls III*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, PS4, Xbox One, and Microsoft Windows, 2016; *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, dir. Hidetaka Miyazaki and Kazuhiro Hamatani, PS4, Xbox One, and Microsoft Windows, 2019.

[2]The question "what constitutes a *Souls*-like (or 'Soulslike') game" is much contested, but a list of games that are typically included in the genre can be found online at Codex Gamicus, "Soulslike," accessed November 18, 2019, https://gamicus.gamepedia.com/Soulslike. Steam has a dedicated "Souls-like" tag for searching the platform for such games: Steam, accessed November 18, 2019, https://store.steampowered.com/tags/en/Souls-like/. Due to the profusion of these games, many consider the label to be meaningless. For instance: Austin Wood, "The 'Souls-like' label needs to die," *PC Gamer*, August 19, 2017, https://www.pcgamer.com/the-souls-like-label-needs-to-die/. For this reason, take any such list with a grain of salt.

[3]A more robust inquiry, in the manner of Chris Bateman and José P. Zagal's "Game Design Lineages: Minecraft's Inventory," *ToDiGRA* 3, no. 3 (2018): 13-46, https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v3i3.77/, would be of much value, here, but exceeds the scope of this paper.

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material, tactile) into barren numeration, min-maxing, a numbers game.[4] Play is lost in counting.

The *Souls* games, however, have steadily innovated upon this logic of progression, changing how we play them and so requiring us in turn to think about the ways in which we navigate our game-worlds—and perhaps even our own world, by extension. As I have argued elsewhere, the playing subject is always *complex* and *compromised*, and FromSoftware recognizes this in the very intricacies of their game design.[5] Indeed, it is my contention that much of this intricacy arises from FromSoftware's efforts to decouple the player-character from the monolith of *power* (typified by experience, levels, and stats), providing in its stead a plurality of *skills*. Power is the form of the transcendental subject, the subject of philosophy, but FromSoftware's efforts have taken the dissolution of this formal foundation to be a matter of design. Only "contradictory, partial, and strategic" subjectivities can survive FromSoftware's games, and, as a consequence, these subjectivities remain material and contingent in their constitution.[6] This dissolution of the transcendental subject can be seen at every level of the *Souls* games, but today, it is my purpose to examine the *tactile* level, the interface between player and game.

But how to read in a commensurately tactile way? In his 1960 *Truth and Method*, while laying the groundwork for his philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer provides us with such a mode for reading, specifically through his theorization of play. He remarks that

> in playing, all those purposive relations that determine active and caring existence have not simply disappeared, but are curiously suspended. The player himself knows that play is only play and that it exists in a world determined by the seriousness of purposes. But he does not know this in such a way that, as a player, he actually *intends* this relation to seriousness. Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play.[7]

Play, then, is never *merely* play, but a particular operation of the real *upon* the real, a suspension of the terms of existence that honours those terms with a genuine seriousness while simultaneously putting them into question. Following

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[4]See "A 16 HP Dragon," May 15, 2012, https://www.latorra.org/2012/05/15/a-16-hp-dragon/. "In my [D&D] 4e game the party had a dozen dragon kills under their belt. The dragons were mechanically threatening, they were tricksy, they were tactical, but their claws and teeth didn't do damage, they did numbers."

[5]Eric Stein, *Affinity: A *DREAM Plugin*, August 3, 2019, DREAMJAM, https://vagrantludology.itch.io/affinity-dream/.

[6]Donna J. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth* Century (1985), repr. *Manifestly* Haraway, 3-90 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2016), 16.

[7]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013), 107.

Gadamer, we can, therefore, qualify the distinction between the game-world and what I referred to as our "own" world, above: the game-world is not "an object that stands over against a subject for itself," but rather it is an "experience" that "reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players"—to make the point clear, the game is *in touch with* the player.[8] The mode of being of games and play is not primarily representational, but *tactile.* In short, play is bodily.[9]

As such, we cannot reduce games to something less than the real or less than material, because to do so would be to miss the radically transformative potential of even the simplest or most poorly made games. Through their suspension of the terms of the real, games disclose these very terms, offering them up for our scrutiny and understanding, and for the possibilities of reinforcement, revision, or, as I have already noted, dissolution. The play-operation allows Gadamer to reformulate aesthetic experience in its ontological priority, which is to say, in its primacy as *the* pluripotent principle of the "emerging-abiding sway" of what is.[10] As another philosopher, Kostas Axelos, has remarked, the world, as such, is an "*opening,*" an "errancy," and indeed, a "game."[11] To read in a tactile way is to put ourselves into play, to welcome the errant opening of the game into our interpretations. To read in this way is to read as one compromised by what is read, indeed, to *get played* by it, to give up interpretive power in exchange for skillful, complex negotiation. Finally, to read in this way is to recognize that reading is an event that demands *fidelity* and *application*, which is to say, *commitment.*[12]

Metaphysics and ontology aside, what does this all mean for our discussion here today? I have argued that the logic of progression signified by the player-character's level elides the materiality of play, that the playing subject of FromSoftware's *Souls* games is a complex, compromised, and contingent subject contrary to the transcendental subject of philosophy, and that play as such participates in the emerging-abiding sway of being, and can indeed be said to be the very principle of this operation. With this groundwork established, it remains, therefore, to examine the trajectory evident in the *Souls* games that we can delineate as a trajectory from the *transcendental* to the *tactile*, or more simply, from *power* to *skill.* Insofar as I have quickly positioned this paper in Gadamer's hermeneutical tradition, we can say that this trajectory is a *material thematic* deliberately experimented with, extended, and transformed through new entries in the genre.

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[8] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 107.

[9] For an interesting discussion of this bodily connection, see Katherine Isbister, "Bodies at Play: Using Movement Design to Create Emotion and Connection," in *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, pp. 73-108 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

[10] A phrase drawn from Gadamer's teacher, Martin Heiddeger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polk (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 15.

[11] Kostas Axelos and Stuart Elden, "Mondialisation without the world," *Radical Philosophy* 130 (March/April 2005, n.p., https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/interview/kostas-axelos-mondialisation-without-the-world/.

[12] See my "Postmortem: Fidelity and Application," *umbral / rhizome*, October 14, 2019, Cryptid Jam, https://vagrantludology.itch.io/umbralrhizome/devlog/104536/postmortem-fidelity-and-application.

Method

I originally intended to include in this study all six of FromSoftware's *Souls* games released between 2009 and 2019, as well as several exemplary *Souls*-like games, but, so as not to exceed the time allotted to me, I have chosen to limit myself to FromSoftware's games only, and will reserve an analysis of the aforementioned *Souls*-likes for a future date.

The six games in question today, which I will collectively refer to as the *Souls* games, include *Demon's Souls* (2009), *Dark Souls* (2011), *Dark Souls II* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015), *Dark Souls III* (2016), and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019). With the release of *Bloodborne* in 2015, some fans began referring to the *Souls* games as the "Soulsborne" games, which I consider an equally valid designator, if ungainly. *Sekiro*, released in 2019, is held by some not to be a *Souls* game, given the several dramatic departures in its design from prior entries (the introduction of a pause menu, the elimination of character creation and customization, and the more explicit narrative structure), but I believe that it is close enough in tone and theme that it ought to be included with its predecessors, and that it evidences a mechanical continuity in play illustrative of the trajectory outlined above.

To focus my analysis, I have concentrated on the singular mechanic of the "moveset" as it stands in relation to the stats used to schematize the player-character's power across all six games. The moveset consists of the animations attached to each weapon, which are activated by the various controller inputs afforded the player by the developers. It is a common piece of *Souls* wisdom that the moveset of a weapon is more important than its statistics, and I myself have found that I will choose a weapon with a pleasing moveset over a weapon with good numbers.[13] Following this shared intuition, I hypothesized that the trajectory from the *transcendental* to the *tactile* identified above would be evidenced by an *increase* in the complexity of moveset animations from *Demon's Souls* to *Sekiro*, and a *decrease* in the emphasis on stats as markers of the player-character's capacity to act in the world.

I set about testing my hypothesis through a combination of in-game and video capture analysis. This work was an exercise of forced minimal computing,[14] because I do not myself have access to the necessary instruments to unpack game files or collect high-definition, high-framerate footage. Instead, I relied on my own careful attention to animation frames and my extensive experience with the nuances of these games to conduct a kind of *phenomenological* analysis of the moveset animations across the series. With reference to the remarkably comprehensive work of YouTube creator Zombie Headz (*Dark Souls* to *Dark Souls*

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[13]See for instance Gary Butterfield and Kole Ross, "Episode 2: The Undead Burg," *Bonfireside Chat: A Dark Souls and Bloodborne Podcast*, January 23, 2013, 1:30:18.

[14]Such a reference can, necessarily, be only cursory, but for further information see Alex Gil, "The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make," *Minimal Computing*, May 21, 2015, https://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/2015/05/21/user-vs-learner/ and Jentery Sayers, "Minimal Definitions," October 2, 2016, https://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/.

III),[15] supplementary help from YouTube creators Dan Fiskar (*Dark Souls*),[16] Yurai (*Bloodborne*),[17] and Abysmwalker (*Dark Souls III*),[18] data drawn from the fan-maintained *Souls* wikis on Wikidot, Fandom, and Fextralife, and my own testing (all of *Demon's Souls* and *Sekiro*, most of *Dark Souls III*, and select weapons from *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls II*, and *Bloodborne*), I was able to populate a spreadsheet with animation data from all six games, specifically highlighting the number of distinct animations (or *moves*) per controller input for 580 individual weapons. I then had the spreadsheet perform four key calculations: 1) the number of inputs for each weapon, 2) the number of animations for each weapon, 3) the difference between the number of animations and the number of inputs for each weapon, and 4) the complexity of animation for each weapon (a number that I generated by dividing animations by inputs).

Results

In *Demon's Souls*, we see an average complexity of 1.21 for an average of 15.72 inputs across 64 weapons. In *Dark Souls*, the average number of inputs increases to 16.78, but the average complexity decreases to 1.14 across 108 weapons. In *Dark Souls II*, the average number of inputs jumps up significantly to 26.00 (made possible by the introduction of an almost identical left-hand moveset for each weapon), and the average complexity also increases to 1.30, across nearly double the weapons at 204. In *Bloodborne*, developed concurrently with *Dark Souls II*, we see a marginal decrease to 1.29 for 25.96 inputs, but this is significant insofar as *Bloodborne* has only a scant 26 weapons. In *Dark Souls III*, we again see the average number of inputs go up to 29.65 (through the gradated addition of charged attacks, taken from *Bloodborne*, and weapon skills, reminiscent of the powerstance attacks in *Dark Souls II* and transformed modes of the weapons in *Bloodborne*), but the complexity drops from both *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls II* to 1.27, and the number of weapons decreases slightly from *Dark Souls II* to 177.

With *Sekiro*, however, this trajectory climbs sharply. In *Sekiro*, you cannot choose your main weapon. You have one, your sword the Kusabimaru. The Fushigiri is added later in the game as a secondary sword, but it is only utilized in special attacks, and so it remains sheathed on your back for much of the game. The Kusabimaru is used to attack and to deflect, inputs attached to R1 and L1 (PS4) or RB and LB (Xbox One), respectively. At the most conservative, artificially narrowing our focus to *only* the Kusabimaru, the number of inputs stands at 2 with a complexity of 13.00, nearly *ten times* the average complexity in *Dark Souls II* or *Bloodborne*.

[15]Zombie Headz, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNXwTFDQFJ_1TEzyduFpJeA.

[16]Dan Fiskar, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/user/OphionTheTitan.

[17]Yurai, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqKZIisGLNeJfggqvvHoSIw.

[18]Abysmwalker, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCc_Pbg6om-VHWq0BtjtM2eQ.

The moveset with the Kusabimaru is not, however, limited to the sword alone. Linked to the R2/RT (PS4/Xbox) input is the player-character's "shinobi prosthetic," a mechanical arm replacing the titular character Sekiro's left arm. The shinobi prosthetic has up to 40 prosthetic tools, 3 of which can be equipped at any one time, but which can be swapped out on the fly via the pause menu, effectively rendering all 40 tools available to the player at any moment with just a few button presses. If we again artificially narrow our attention to *only* the prosthetic tools, performing the same calculation on them as with the weapons in the other games, we find an average complexity of 3.43, more than doubling *Dark Souls II* and *Bloodborne*. Similarly, with a simultaneous press of R1/RB and L1/RB, the player can use one of Sekiro's 17 combat arts, which have an average complexity of 3.18. What is remarkable in FromSoftware's design is that the 40 prosthetic tools and 17 combat arts available to the player can be fluidly linked with Sekiro's standard attacks with the Kusabimaru. Six of Sekiro's many unlockable skills—Mid-air Prosthetic Tool, Mid-air Combat Arts, Chasing Slice, Fang and Blade, Projected Force, and Living Force—directly act upon Sekiro's animations, opening up new spaces in his moveset and allowing for the blending of animations across inputs. Sekiro's combat arts function like skills from *Dark Souls III*, but all are executed with the same weapon, the Kusabimaru. And finally, neither can Sekiro's prosthetic tools be considered independently from the possibilities of the Kusabimaru, because FromSoftware deliberately designed the prosthetic tools to function as supplements to the shinobi's sword. At the most conservative, strictly counting each animation only once (and so excluding the iterations of each prosthetic tool and combat art made possible by the mid-air skills), we find that, across 5 inputs (including the grappling hook on L2/LT), there are a total of 219 animations, resulting in a complexity of 43.80. Needless to say, this is astounding in comparison to the previous games.

Importantly, this staggering complexity of animation is paired in *Sekiro* with a commensurately remarkable minimalism in player stats. *Demon's Souls* schematizes power with 8 statistics and an overall "soul level." *Dark Souls* uses 8 slightly different statistics, *Dark Souls II* uses 9, and both use an overall player level. *Bloodborne* is again notable for its restraint, reducing the number of statistics to 6 plus player level, but *Dark Souls III* returns to 9 statistics plus player level, blending the stat lists from *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II*. It is *Sekiro* that makes a substantial change, cutting the list of statistics to 2, and eliminating player level entirely. In *Demon's Souls* the player-character is told to gather the souls of demons to make their own soul more powerful, but in *Sekiro* the player-character must learn to skillfully navigate the possibility space opened up by their tools. Furthermore, by making it next to impossible to grind for attack power until late in the game, *Sekiro* forces players to *learn*, to grow in skill rather than pad their ability with the artifice of "soul power." In short, we can see from the data that *Sekiro*'s design crystallizes the trajectory from the transcendental to the tactile originally hypothesized above.

Conclusion

Though much about *Sekiro* differs from the prior games in the *Souls* series, the player-controller interface remains familiar. As close as it might appear to action-adventure, hack and slash, or fighting games in terms of animation complexity, *Sekiro* remains a *Souls*-like insofar as its primary possibilities are mapped to the same four buttons, with the same deliberate (if greatly accelerated) pacing of its forebears. One does not need to execute complex button combos to pull off the complexities of *Sekiro*'s combat, but merely find the pulse in a flurry of blows and steadily match it until an opening appears. The tactility of *Sekiro* is, as such, quite different from that of the superficially similar genres listed above. It is about rhythm, about *feeling the game*, a fact that is true of the preceding five FromSoftware games but only becomes explicit in this one.[19]

The key, here, is *rhythm.* This is not rhythm in the sense of keeping time or following a beat but rhythm in the ontological sense, as described by Martin Heidegger in his *On the Way to Language*:

> Rhythm, *rhusmos*, does not mean flux and flowing, but rather form. Rhythm is what is at rest, what forms the movement of dance and song, and thus lets it rest within itself. Rhythm bestows rest.[20]

In other words, rhythm is the *emerging-abiding sway of what is* that I referred to above, the form that allows form itself to circulate and repeat and rest within itself, infolding and unfurling, always iterating, always open, always errant, always full and overflowing with itself. Rhythm as a descriptive term allows us to think ontology in terms of *process* and so begin to reconceive of the ways in the which we play, analyze, and design games in terms of process as well. In concrete terms, thinking about games in this way leads us to shift our focus from *agency* to *context* (a context that is rhythmic, processual, and never static). Agency is the domain of the transcendental subject, that awful, frictionless eyeball freely gliding over the world.[21] The transcendental subject acts but is not acted upon. It is closed to the real. Context, however, is about situation, connection, compromise, intimacy, all those myriad means of friction that awaken the subject to its being as flesh, as surface, as open to the real: tactile subjectivity.

There is not time here to interrogate this thematic at the symbolic or narrative levels of the six games in question, but I believe that the data presented here is *at least* indicative of the actuality of this thematic at a mechanical level. From *Demon's Souls* to *Sekiro*, FromSoftware has steadily pursued the dissolution of

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[19]See, for instance, Rachel Watts, "Is *Sekiro* a rhythm game? We asked the player who beat it on Donkey Kong bongos," *PCGamesN*, June 25, 2019, https://www.pcgamesn.com/sekiro-shadows-die-twice/sekiro-rhythm-game.

[20]Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 149.

[21]I draw this image from Emerson, *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2009), 3. I have previously critiqued this logic in my paper "Bodies in Form," presented at the ImageText in Motion conference at the University of Florida in 2019, https://www.academia.edu/38800196/.

the transcendental subject through the mechanics of the moveset. It remains to trace the impact of this deconstructive trajectory through other levels of significance in these games and through *Souls*-like games from other developers.

Appendix 1: Animation Data Results

DEMON'S SOULS	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Mean	15.72	19.02	3.30	1.21
Median	16.00	19.00	3.00	1.19
Mode	16.00	21.00	2.00	1.31
Maximum	16.00	21.00	5.00	1.31
Minimum	10.00	12.00	2.00	1.13
Range	6.00	9.00	3.00	0.19

DARK SOULS	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Mean	16.78	19.15	2.37	1.14
Median	17.00	19.00	2.00	1.12
Mode	17.00	17.00	0.00	1.00
Maximum	17.00	32.00	15.00	1.88
Minimum	11.00	12.00	0.00	1.00
Range	6.00	20.00	15.00	0.88

DARK SOULS II	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Mean	26.00	33.84	7.84	1.30
Median	26.00	33.00	7.00	1.27
Mode	26.00	33.00	7.00	1.27
Maximum	26.00	54.00	28.00	2.08
Minimum	26.00	30.00	4.00	1.15
Range	0.00	24.00	24.00	0.92

BLOODBORNE	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Mean	25.96	33.50	7.54	1.29
Median	27.00	33.00	7.00	1.29
Mode	28.00	31.00	6.00	1.29
Maximum	28.00	43.00	15.00	1.54
Minimum	23.00	24.00	1.00	1.04
Range	5.00	19.00	14.00	0.49

DARK SOULS III	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Mean	29.65	37.82	8.18	1.27
Median	30.00	38.00	8.00	1.27
Mode	30.00	38.00	8.00	1.27

DARK SOULS III	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Maximum	30.00	51.00	21.00	1.70
Minimum	16.00	19.00	0.00	1.00
Range	14.00	32.00	21.00	0.70

SEKIRO	*Inputs*	*Animations*	*Difference*	*Complexity*
Totals	5.00	219.00	214.00	43.80

Appendix 2: Player-Character Attributes

DEMON'S SOULS	DARK SOULS	DARK SOULS II
Vitality	Vitality	Vigor
Intelligence	Attunement	Endurance
Endurance	Endurance	Vitality
Strength	Strength	Attunement
Dexterity	Dexterity	Strength
Magic	Resistance	Dexterity
Faith	Intelligence	Adaptability
Luck	Faith	Intelligence
Soul Level	*Level*	Faith
		Level

BLOODBORNE	DARK SOULS III	SEKIRO
Vitality	Vigor	Vitality
Endurance	Attunement	Attack Power
Strength	Endurance	
Skill	Vitality	
Bloodtinge	Strength	
Arcane	Dexterity	
Level	Intelligence	
	Faith	
	Luck	
	Level	