Pure Vessels[*]

The Insect and the Other in *Dark Souls* and *Hollow Knight*

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Introduction

How, in games, do we think the insect beyond the other? In spite of an ever-growing body of knowledge respecting our insect kin, the insect in the sphere of video games remains the monstrous other, a symbol of infection and corruption. Insects (and arthropods, generally) persist in the gaming consciousness as mindless enemies to annihilate, swarming infestations to exterminate, and evil minions to expunge. As a game researcher and designer wrestling with the topic of this workshop, I am necessarily confronted with such a popular imagining of the insect, wherein any thought of interspecies entanglement is reduced to that most violent of exclusions: utter destruction.

And yet, we cannot merely dismiss the imagination of the video games industry insofar as it is *popular*, and so, some might say, 'vulgar.' Even if we set aside claims about the artistic merits of video games, we nevertheless encounter the strictly pragmatic concern of cultural reach. Referring to the Entertainment Software Association's latest report, we discover that the American video games industry in 2019 was worth \$43.4 billion.[1] Furthermore, as the industry has grown, we see that 65% of adults in the United States play video games, that the average age of gamers is 33, and that gamers, on average, have been playing video games for 14 years.[2] In sum, video games are no niche hobby; they are here to stay. Globally, roughly one fourth of the world's population plays or has played some form of video game, and the international industry is predicted to reach

[1]"2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry" (Entertainment Software Association, 2019), https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Essential-Facts-About-the-Computer-and-Video-Game-Industry.pdf, 20.

[2]"2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry." 6-7.

$196 billion in revenue by 2022,[3] and upwards of \$300 billion by 2025.[4] These numbers dwarf those of the global movie (\$42.5 billion in 2019)[5], music (\$20.2 billion in 2019)[6], and home entertainment (\$58.8 billion in 2019) industries.[7] Whether or not one appreciates video games as an artform, the fact remains that distorted or harmful tropes respecting insects have the potential to be disseminated to billions of people worldwide. A critical intervention is required.

Theoretical Groundwork

In Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*,[8] we find a philosophy and critique of the other that, in its attention to *space* and *story*, provides us with a uniquely suitable entry point for our discussion of video games and the stories they tell about insects.[9]

"Stories," de Certeau argues, "traverse and organize places [regions]; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories ... [they] have the status of spatial syntaxes."[10] One such spatial syntax is that of the *place*:

> A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). The law of the "proper" rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own "proper" and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.[11]

In other words, place is the syntax of *synchronic collocation*. On the other hand, *space* (*espace*) "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction,

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[3] Kevin Webb, "The \$120 Billion Gaming Industry Is Going Through More Change Than It Ever Has Before, and Everyone Is Trying to Cash In," *Business Insider*, October 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/video-game-industry-120-billion-future-innovation-2019-9.

[4] Liz Lanier, "Video Games Could Be a \$300 Billion Industry by 2025 (Report)," *Variety*, May 2019, https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/video-games-300-billion-industry-2025-report-1203202672/.

[5] Pamela McClintock, "2019 Global Box Office Revenue Hit Record \$42.5B Despite 4 Percent Dip in U.S." *Billboard*, January 2020, https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/8547827/2019-global-box-office-revenue-hit-record-425b-despite-4-percent-dip-in-us.

[6] "IFPI Issues Annual Global Music Report," *IFPI*, May 2020, https://www.ifpi.org/news/IFPI-issues-annual-Global-Music-Report.

[7] Rebecca Rubin, "Global Entertainment Industry Surpasses \$100 Billion for the First Time Ever," *Variety*, March 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/global-entertainment-industry-surpasses-100-billion-for-the-first-time-ever-1203529990/.

[8] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

[9] In fact, the section of de Certeau's book in question is titled "Spatial Stories." See De Certeau, 115-130.

[10] De Certeau, 115.

[11] De Certeau, 117.

velocities, and time variables."[12] Space, conceived in this way, requires an analytic shift "from structures to actions," to "practices," to *modes of organization.*[13] The practice of space is a matter of "intersections of mobile elements," of a region "actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it," a "polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities."[14] In distinction from place, space has "none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper'."[15] Space is "*practiced place*"—it is the syntax of *diachronic mobilization.*[16]

Given this distinction, de Certeau proceeds to describe the two modes of entanglement, the two *stories*, whereby each syntax of practice is enacted: the *map* and the *tour.*[17] Insofar as the practice of place is carried out through position and "'gridding' (*quadriller*),"[18] the map tells a story of "*seeing*"—it "presents a *tableau.*"[19] On the contrary, the tour tells a story of "*going*"—it "organizes *movements.*"[20] Citing a study by Linde and Labov,[21] de Certeau notes that the tour as a mode of practice "is overwhelmingly favored" by Linde and Labov's participants,[22] but he is quick to emphasize that neither the map nor the tour, place nor space, is more original than the other. Both modalities or practices condition each other, which is to say, *as* modalities or practices *both* place *and* space are actions or activities, *stories* whereby a region is made navigable. Thinking space requires a shift from structure to action, but this shift does not irrealize place, and as such, does not irrealize structure. Instead, as we shift from synchronic, structural analysis to diachronic, praxical analysis, the second *story* includes within itself the first while precluding a reduction of either to the other, constituting an incommensurable syntax that can in no way be understood as a representation of the region, but operates instead as a "mobile infinity of tactics" for its traversal.[23]

With the semiotic axes restored to each other, we see, then, that map "describers (*descripteurs*)" can have "the function of indicating either an *effect* obtained by the tour ('you see . . .') or a *given* that it postulates as its limit ('there's a wall'), its possibility ('there's a door'), or an obligation ('there's a one-way street')."[24] Going allows for the *situation* of seeing. In the same way, then, the "chain of spatializing operations," (i.e., the practice or story of space, the tour), "seems to be marked by references to what it produces (a representation of places) or

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[12] De Certeau, 117.
[13] De Certeau, 116.
[14] De Certeau, 117.
[15] De Certeau, 117.
[16] De Certeau, 117.
[17] De Certeau, 119.
[18] De Certeau, 46.
[19] De Certeau, 119.
[20] De Certeau, 119.
[21] Charlotte Linde and William Labov, "Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language and Thought," *Language* 51 (1975): 924–39, cited in De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 221.
[22] De Certeau, 119.
[23] De Certeau, 41.
[24] De Certeau, 120.

to what it implies (a local order)."[25] Seeing allows for the genericization and repetition of going. Everyday stories, those matters of ordinary understanding—going and seeing, seeing and going—are always a matter of "combination," of being "interlaced," of incommensurable but reciprocally conditioning practices.[26]

Problems arise, however, when the map "colonizes space."[27] In this scenario, space is abolished; there *is* only place, "a formal ensemble of abstract places," a "theater," a "totalizing stage."[28] This static formalization of the real elides the "operations of which it is the result," the "itineraries" that make such a *seeing* possible, thereby instituting the syntax, the story, *as* real.[29] Insofar as the dominant relational term of abstract place is *beside*, the organization of a region is reduced to the "configuration of positions," the "constitut[ion] [of] proper places in which to *exhibit the products* of knowledge" and "form tables of *legible* results."[30] Entities are determined as *auto-position*, as self-definition, as tautology, a determination that is the practice and the story of *self-possession* and *self-presence*—the logic of the proper place. This logic is none other than the metaphysics of presence, that monolith against which so many assaults have been mounted.[31] But what de Certeau's critique demonstrates is that this basic form of western thought (static, scopic, essentializing, totalizing) emerges from everyday stories, practices, and technologies, from the privileging of one syntax among many. Philosophy, the *decision* of the west, is an epiphenomenon of a certain *trajectory* of practice excised from the manifold of "ways of 'making do' "—but this trajectory is in no way *necessary*.[32]

We are in error, then, if we respond to this scenario, the problem of metaphysics, with an overcorrection, a determination or decision in the opposite direction. The critique of place, presence, *the same* cannot be achieved through an opposed but necessarily equivalent transcendentalization of space, difference, *the other*, through the establishment of a *negative absolute*.[33] De Certeau's tactical syntax, his practice of space, is not a decision, because to decide one must establish a proper place, either *here* in the place of the same or *there* in the place of the other. *Which* place does not matter because *place as such* is auto-position, the *colonization of space* by transcendental identity: $A = A$. To *decide for the other* (to choose the other, to choose *on behalf of* the other) is to make of the

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[25] De Certeau, 120.

[26] De Certeau, 121.

[27] De Certeau, 121.

[28] De Certeau, 121. Such a gesture is *onto-political* in nature, a performative definition of *what is*. The syntax of place is reified, obscuring the fact that this syntax is a *practice* of the real, productive of a *profile* of the real, but not reducible to the real. I derive this argument, in part, from François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (London, UK: Continuum, 2010).

[29] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 121.

[30] De Certeau, 117, 121.

[31] Laruelle, following Derrida, contends that the history of these assaults is the history of philosophy. See Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*.

[32] "Decision" is a key term throughout Laruelle's work. "Making do," for de Certeau, is the mode constitutive of everyday practice. See De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 29.

[33] For Laruelle, this is the *relative-absolute*. See Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, 162.

other a *place* and thereby co-opt this remove as the place of one's own *proper* authority.[34] On the other hand, a tactical syntax, a spatial syntax, is *absolutely determined* by the "opaque reality" that is its "inexpungeable" condition, a condition that necessitates the syntax, the story, of *traversal*.[35] The story to be told does not try to "choose" from among or "fix" in place the mobile infinity of tactics—which include both map and tour, the stories of both place and space—but instead welcomes their "contingent situation," a situation that provides neither authorization nor justification, remaining perfectly indifferent to their everyday operation.[36]

It is from this theoretical dwelling that we must set out upon the terrain of our inquiry, attempting to give a *tour* of our subject matter, to tell a *story* of the insect in gaming that resists the totalization of *either* same *or* other. I have chosen two games to this end: FromSoftware's acclaimed action roleplaying game, *Dark Souls*,[37] and Team Cherry's remarkable 'soulslike' 2D platformer, *Hollow Knight*.[38] This study excludes a detailed analysis of FromSoftware's other games, not for lack of insect imagery and thematization, but for the sake of concision (though my interpretation of *Dark Souls* is certainly filtered through these later works). *Hollow Knight* is included here at the expense of many other soulslikes games precisely because of its emphasis on insect imagery—indeed, it has been referred to as "Bug Souls"[39]—and its metamorphosis of the themes that *Dark Souls* (and its sequels) employ.

The preceding groundwork is necessary for the following discussion because, I have found,[40] without adopting such a posture, *any* discussion of FromSofware's games (and their soulslike inheritors) will lead to a reductive transcendentalization of the other that ultimately converts this other into a source of authority, co-opting the place of the other as justification for the position claimed. As an active participant in both scholarly and popular discourse regarding the disparate soulslike genre, this is a trajectory of argument to which I myself have fallen prey. To merely receive the inversion of values that FromSoftware's games present—which, with respect to insects, would be the formula: *insect* = {*monstrous, evil*}

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[34]De Certeau identifies this co-option in the work of Bourdieu in De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 60, 51: "he gives the impression of *departing* (of going toward these tactics [of the other]), but only in order to *return* (to confirm the professional rationality). This is only a false departure, a textual 'strategy.'" In so doing, in rendering his subject matter "objectifiable," Bourdieu "furnishes the real . . . support allowing the introduction of the concept of *habitus* into the human sciences, which is the personal stamp Bourdieu has put on theory. Hence the particularity of the originary experience is lost in its power of reorganizing the general discourse."

[35]De Certeau, 51.

[36]De Certeau, 54, 55.

[37]Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Dark Souls* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2011).

[38]Ari Gibson and William Pellen, *Hollow Knight* (PS4; Xbox One; Nintendo Switch; Microsoft Windows; macOS; Linux: Team Cherry, 2017).

[39]Polygon, "Let's Talk About Dark Souls One Last Time Wait Where Are You Going," *YouTube*, January 2020, https://youtu.be/9aiTXXifbwE.

[40]Most recently, see Eric Stein, "Praise the Sun: The Metaphysics of *Dark Souls* from the First Flame to the End of Fire," Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, June 2020, https://www.academia.edu/43267406/.

$\rightarrow insect = \{beautiful, good\}$ (a formula that is in fact a chiasm, the crossing whereby the monstrous and evil *becomes* the beautiful and good)—as the lesson to be gleaned, the *true ending* for our play, is to reinscribe this inversion within the totalizing logic of the proper place, within the metaphysics of presence now purified and occulted by the alibi of difference.[41]

The significance of *Hollow Knight* is, precisely, to help us avoid the transcendental gesture, the turn of difference that claims a new authority on the basis of the other. In *Dark Souls*, this turn is the very twist, the metaphysical *torsion*, that, when encountered, forces a complete revision of the player's understanding of the stakes of the game. If, however, we were to analyze in detail FromSoftware's subsequent games, we would find that escaping from this torsion is impossible, as age gives way to age in a never-ending cycle, every *other* becoming a new power to overthrow, a new lord to be slain. What *Hollow Knight* teaches is a way to think the insect *beyond* the other, which is to think the insect *as* other without universal referent, the other in its radical, unreasonable contingency. This is the intervention required.

Dark Souls

In *Dark Souls*, the order of the world is outlined by a bombastic opening cinematic: the player is presented with an eternity of fog ruled by everlasting dragons; then, a black cavern, the birthplace of lords and mortals alike; and then, the First Flame, font of life, soul, disparity, the form of the age to come, and so too the first wound of the new paradigm of existence, the Age of Fire.

Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, strikes down the everlasting dragons with spears of lightning, establishing himself as the sovereign of the new age and inaugurating his solar regime. But the age over which he presides is born of disparity, is made possible by disparity, and the fall of dark is inevitable. In response, Gwyn asks his ally, the Witch of Izalith, to try and create a new flame to replace the old. She fails. Gwyn returns to the cavern of his birth, the Kiln of the First Flame, and uses the last of his strength to rekindle the flame, cursing the world to live by its dull light. Among the subjects of Gwyn's realm the darksign begins to appear, a burning ring that brands the undead—those who would have welcomed death but now are barred from their final passage, trapped in the stasis of the new absolute. Time folds upon itself, cracks and blurs. The game begins.

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[41] This is the logic of the *turn*, the purest gesture of philosophy that Laruelle identifies as the essential operation of deconstruction. See Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, 184, 194: "Difference is THE philosophical decision that affirms the aporetic disjunction of syntax and reality and rests content to 'turn', in all the senses of this word, within this in-between." And yet, the purity of the turn is also its elision, the most radical blockage of thought: "here then is a thinking that entangles itself, ensnares itself, enlyses itself perhaps, turns over itself and in itself faster and faster, substituting intensity for life and the acceleration of motion for movement, yet which thickens heavily like a 'turning' doughy paste."

I have previously examined the ecological[42] and metaphysical[43] stakes of this foundational mythology, but where the present analysis begins is the failure of the Witch of Izalith. As mentioned, at the behest of Lord Gwyn, the Witch of Izalith and her daughters attempted to create a substitute for the first flame. The witches failed in their efforts, losing control of the flame, which became the Flame of Chaos. The Witch of Izalith was consumed by her creation and twisted into the Bed of Chaos, from which an entire race of demons, monsters, and importantly, *insects*, was born. At some point between his initial request and his return to the Kiln, Gwyn and his proud Silver Knights attempted to seal the demons away in their kingdom, and many of the knights were reduced to blackened shells in the conflict, abandoned by their lord to wander the dying world. The kingdom of demons became known as Lost Izalith, a hellish ruin hidden deep in the roots of the world—but the monstrous scourge of chaos remained, a festering blight creeping steadily upward into the kingdom of sunlight.

The player character will first encounter this blight in the aptly named Blighttown, though they will have already met two children of chaos—the Taurus Demon and the Capra Demon—roaming the sunlit realms far from their subterranean home.[44] Blighttown is a toxic swamp at the base of the player character's main hub, teeming with poison-spitting giant mosquitos, flame-spewing cragspiders, mucus-spouting giant leeches, and one very angry parasitic wall hugger. This is not to mention the infested ghouls, toxic dart-blowing assassins, and dung-throwing brutes who live among the insectoid denizens of Blighttown—all of which makes for a truly nightmarish descent. Everything in Blighttown wants to kill the player character; even the ground is deadly, poisoning them on contact and hindering their movement.

The experience of traversing Blighttown is one of utter hostility, and the presence of so many grotesque insects only heightens the feeling that the player character does not belong (none of which is helped by the appalling framerate that plagued this zone in early versions of the game). These are enemies to be slain, an evil to be overcome. When the player character at last reaches the approach to the boss arena—a web covered mound rising out of the noxious sludge—they meet two egg carriers, forced to crawl on all fours under the weight of their burden, chanting with clasped hands in the direction of the boss. What monstrosity might such blighted souls worship?

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[42] Eric Stein, "The Fire Fades: Navigating the End of the World in FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*," International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, March 2020, https://www.academia.edu/42195654/.

[43] Stein, "Praise the Sun."

[44] This is the standard order of progression, from the Undead Burg and the Taurus Demon, to the Undead Parish, the Lower Undead Burg and the Capra Demon, through the Depths, and finally into Blighttown. This sequence can be broken if the player chooses the master key for their character's starting gift, which allows the player character to enter Blighttown through a back door, tackling the zone before ever encountering the Taurus or Capra demons. The effect of the standard order is, in this case, far more compelling, however, as the player's understanding of demons, the blight, and chaos slowly coheres as they traverse the world of the game.

The player will soon find out. When the player character passes through the boss fog and enters the arena, they are met with a terrifying sight. Chaos Witch Quelaag, half woman and half lava-belching spider, stands between the player character and their goal. This fight is often a challenging skill gate for new players. Quelaag's attacks are ferocious and unrelenting, and this onslaught, combined with the discordant operatics of her boss theme and the grey unease of egg-covered walls, makes for a deeply trying encounter.

Quelaag is not, however, the only monstrous arthropod who embodies the corruption of the Flame of Chaos. Later in the game, the player character will return to Blighttown, travel past Quelaag's Domain, and descend into the Demon Ruins. The first boss the player character meets here is the Ceaseless Discharge, the only son of the Witch of Izalith, a horned, tentacled, many-eyed giant who was transformed into such when the Flame of Chaos was created. He is considered the first demon born of the Bed of Chaos, and plainly embodies the failure of the Witch of Izalith. Lava runs out of his sores, creating great pools and rivers that hinder the player character's progression, resulting in the effect that the environment itself expresses the disease of chaos.

Once Ceaseless Discharge is defeated, the player character descends further into the Demon Ruins, encountering Taurus and Capra demons in abundance. Further down still, the player character can fight the Centipede Demon, a huge, chaos-warped creature that again emphasizes the thematic fusion of chaos, corruption, and the insect, redoubling the earlier effects of Quelaag's hybrid body and Ceaseless Discharge's tortured visage.

When at last the player character reaches the Bed of Chaos—having killed parasitic chaos bugs and vaguely alien, vaguely insectoid corrosion-spraying chaos eaters along the way—they find a towering tangle of branches that resembles a woman with long hair hunched over in agony. The ensuing fight is a much derided puzzle boss, but what is found at its conclusion is significant: at the centre of the Bed of Chaos lies a wriggling, fire-swathed larva. Here, in this gnarled womb, seedbed of corruption, lies a symbol of uncontrollable growth and generativity, the perverse dynamism of chaos made manifest in an insect. Though not yet the deepest the player character will delve in *Dark Souls*, this particular boss fight is the event that neatly bundles the thorny thematic branches that we have been tracing thus far: insects, infection, blight, corruption, failure, monstrosity, and chaos.

From the first early game encounters with demons, through Blighttown and the fight with Quelaag, and then down into the heart of Lost Izalith, FromSoftware has crafted a coherent thematic and ludic experience meant to unsettle and often overwhelm the player. They deliberately employ tropes of the horrific insect to unnerve the player, drawing on other potent symbols of disease and infection to ensure that the metaphysical significance of the Witch of Izalith's failure is clear for the player character by the time they meet her in her twisted form. Though many often miss these details due to the uniquely obtuse way in which

FromSoftware delivers their narratives,[45] taken in sum this thematic bundle is not subtle in the least. In the ontology of *Dark Souls*, the insect quite simply *is* corruption.

FromSoftware is not interested, however, in the uncritical regurgitation of gaming tropes. If we recall the initial framing of the game, FromSoftware's implementation of the 'insect-as-corruption' theme is couched in a broader conceptual space that precludes the easy acceptance of this theme as given.

The origin of the Bed of Chaos and its spawn is decidedly *contingent*. FromSoftware does not build the conjunction of insects, corruption, and chaos into the foundation of their world, but positions this conjunction as contingent, first, upon the originary *disparity* signified by the First Flame, and second, upon Gwyn's *decision* to prolong the Age of Fire by way of pyromantic reduplication. There is no *necessity* to the Witch of Izalith's failure or the events that followed, only the *fact* of her failure and its consequences as such. In this way, FromSoftware dissolves any ground upon which a moral critique of this corruption might be mounted. The creeping blight is not an evil threatening the goodness of the sun, but the very product of that sun abusing its power to resist the course of disparity and extend its dominion.

Indeed, as if to drive this very point home, behind an illusory wall in Quelaag's Domain, the player character can find a second woman-spider hybrid, the Fair Lady, sister of Quelaag. She is obviously sick and quite feeble, barely able to speak. The player character can learn from her attendant Eingyi that the Fair Lady and Quelaag came up to Blighttown from Lost Izalith, saw the suffering of the people there, and the Fair Lady attempted to suck the blight into herself to heal them, bringing her to the brink of death—all of which occurred *after* the sisters were transformed by the chaos flame. Quelaag is not some mindless monster, but a devoted sister protecting the Fair Lady from murderous individuals like the player character.

The hidden, so called 'true' ending of *Dark Souls* only makes this chiasm, this crossing of good and evil, more clear. Typically, the player character will confront the final boss of the game, Lord Gwyn himself, in a deadly conflagration in the Kiln of the First Flame. Upon slaying the hollowed lord, the player character proceeds to link the fire, allowing it to use their soul for fuel so that it might be reignited once more. In this first, naive ending, the player assumes that they have saved the world while nobly dooming their character to the same oblivion as Gwyn.

But the game begins again with new game plus, a mechanical hint at the thematic of cycles that conditions every choice that the player character will make. If the player character takes slightly different paths, progressing through the game in a slightly different order, they can meet a non-player character (NPC) who reveals

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[45]Franziska Ascher, "Narration of Things: Storytelling in *Dark Souls* via Item Descriptions," trans. Sebastian Heilander, *Paidia: Zeitschrift Für Computerspielforschung*, September 2014, https://www.academia.edu/12025093/.

the truth of the undead curse: that Gwyn feared the dark and that undeath is *his fault*. The coming dark, the darkness of humankind, is but another disparity—like chaos, another contingent real. The undead curse, the hollowing to which all those cursed inevitably succumb, is *intrinsic* to Gwyn's solar regime, to the metaphysics of presence, and so is an *extrinsic* influence on both demon and human kind, on chaos and darkness. Corruption comes from *within* metaphysics; evil dwells at the heart of the good. And this time, the player character can choose to turn their back on the fire (a turn always available to them, but never presented as possible until now), to refuse to rekindle an age of tyranny, and to usher in the Age of Dark as the lord of this radically *other* paradigm.

We see, then, that *Dark Souls* performs a deconstruction of its own mythology a deconstruction that it achieves through the mobilization of various *others* (chaos, darkness, and more in the following games) to tactically subvert the overdetermination of Gwyn's decision, a deconstruction that is itself the narrativization of deconstruction as a philosophical project. The tropic deployment of the insect by FromSoftware ultimately contributes to the deconstruction of the framework that affords such tropisms. FromSoftware's critical revision of their own theme leads us to recognize an ontological split between the insect and corruption, inverting and then flattening the hierarchy of the real that previously linked the two in a chain of consequence. Corruption is not an intrinsic quality of chaos (symbolized by insects, demons, and the like); corruption is a more generic characteristic of disparity as such, the impossibility of any absolute (in the case of *Dark Souls*, fire, light, and the sun) maintaining itself in the auto-position of its proper place. This ontological corruption *manifests* in blight, infection, and destruction not because of some moral or existential lack on the part of those affected, but because of the suppression of this ontological *fact* by that power that sought to hide the irreason and insubstantiality of its own position.

It is at this critical juncture that the importance of the theoretical groundwork above becomes obvious. In my own earlier readings of *Dark Souls*, this realization that *fire $\neq$ good* has produced the counter-formula *dark = good*.[46] And yet, this counter-position is precisely the co-option of the space of the other that de Certeau challenges, the strategic *emplacement* of the self in the other's position whereby the story of power might commence once more, but now through the syntactic vessel of everything power once dominated and despised. Power repeats itself in an interminable chain of disguises; the utter lack of ground of the *value equation* as such is effaced once more, the story of the new absolute—difference, otherness, corruption—transcendentalized.[47] Rather than let the other stand in

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[46]This counter-formula is nothing but Nietzsche's *transvaluation of values*, that "*most spiritual revenge*." To revolt against a system of morality in this way is a potent challenge, one seen in the Judaic inversion of "the aristocratic value equation (good=noble=powerful=beautiful=happy=beloved of God) . . . namely [that] 'only the miserable are the good, the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good, the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are also the only pious ones, the only ones blessed by God.'" See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro, vol. 8, The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 226.

[47]The gesture of philosophical scission wherein the real/syntax dyad is instantiated, the

its groundlessness, the other is reappropriated to and reinscribed within a higher unity, a more purified unity. And the cycle repeats. FromSoftware's following games play with the logic of this repetition in some interesting ways, but here we will be better served by turning our attention to *Hollow Knight*, a game that lets the bugs stand for themselves.

Hollow Knight

Hollow Knight, like *Dark Souls*, begins with an opening cinematic that provides some crucial context that only becomes clear much later in the game. However, unlike *Dark Souls*, this cinematic is without narration, depriving the player of the thematic cues that would set the stage for their interpretation of the game. Everything comes out in play—a distinctly *Dark Souls* move that takes the *Souls* formula to the extreme.

Permit me once again to summarize: the game opens with the sound of howling wind; then, four lines from an 'Elegy for Hallownest'; a close-up on the eyes of a horned creature as they fill with a noxious orange glow; a crack arching across the creature's forehead; a roar and a burst of orange fog; and then a strange, striated ovoid, marked with three, luminous, droplet-shaped sigils. The cinematic cuts to black. And then, a haunting track begins to play and we see the Knight, the character the player will be controlling, alone in a black and barren wasteland. The Knight approaches a cliff and, looking over their shoulder, we see the glow of a settlement in the distance, a gentle beacon in the empty expanse. The Knight jumps down. The game begins.

Hollow Knight borrows from many games in its design, though it is typically categorized as a 'metroidvania' (in the legacy of *Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*) and a soulslike.[48] It is most obviously a soulslike, however, not in its play or its difficulty but in its *themes. Hollow Knight* is a story about corruption, failure, and the absolute, but the tactical syntax of this story, the way it tours the player through the nooks and crannies of Hallownest, takes it well beyond the thematic conclusions of *Dark Souls.*

It is my contention that the cast of insectoids that populate Hallownest—"bugs" as they are lovingly referred to by the developers—is vital for the thematic metamorphosis that *Hollow Knight* undertakes, and yet, quite serendipitously, the choice to make every creature in the game some kind of arthropod was an entirely contingent design choice. Ari Gibson remarks in an interview that "draw[ing] a few little bugs in Photoshop is simple," and William Pellen, his co-creator, chimes in that the "bugs make for simple characters, which are nice and easy to put together."[49] The sole necessity to this decision was expedience,

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"matrix of duel Unity." See Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*, 103, 16.

[48] Satoru Okada, *Metroid* (Famicom Disk System; Nintendo Entertainment System; PlayChoice-10: Nintendo, 1986); Toru Hagihara and Koji Igarishi, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (PlayStation: Konami, 1997).

[49] Marie Dealessandri, Ari Gibson, and William Pellen, "When We Made... Hollow Knight," *MCV*, July 2018, https://www.mcvuk.com/development-news/when-we-made-hollow-knight/.

but by entering into the thematic space of the insect *Hollow Knight*'s designers also entered into the very deconstruction of the story that *Dark Souls* had begun. *Dark Souls* is a work of fiction, but its referent is the real, the logical structure of the unreasonable, contingent ground of existence itself. *Hollow Knight*, then, begins where *Dark Souls* leaves off, but it learns from the subsequent games in the franchise in such a way that only an external artistic intervention could.

In *Dark Souls II*,[50] the player learns that their choice in the first game was merely the second in a long series of such choices, and that the ages have been repeating themselves in the same way for some time. At the end of the game, rather than being presented with a choice, the player character takes the throne, sublating the dualism of fire and dark in the higher unity of want.[51] In the rerelease of *Dark Souls II*, the *Scholar of the First Sin* edition,[52] a third option is presented to the player, a refusal of the choice altogether: "Beyond the scope of light, beyond the reach of Dark. . . what could possibly await us?"[53] *Bloodborne*,[54] overlapping in development with *Dark Souls II* and released just prior to *Scholar of the First Sin*, makes the critique of the first *Dark Souls* discussed above explicit, spending a great deal of time exploring the possibilities of *otherness* that might emerge in opposition to totalizing authority. However, *Bloodborne* remains yoked to the tropes of gothic and Lovecraftian horror, which makes escaping from the exploitation of insects and monsters for the purpose of disturbing the player quite difficult. *Dark Souls III*,[55] learning from both prior *Dark Souls* games and from *Bloodborne*, presents the player with perhaps the most robust pluralism of otherness in the series to date, offering a multiplicity of third choices or non-choices as alternatives to the repetition of the fire-dark dichotomy. And yet, these third choices often rely on the insect for the deployment of the same tropes as the earlier games—corruption, infection, disease—to evoke feelings of disgust and terror in the player, once again relegating the insect to the *place* of symptom, the unfortunate consequence or side-effect of a metaphysical illness. The insect in its otherness is reintegrated in the higher unity of a cyclical overcoming, and as such, divested of its real difference.

This co-option of the insect other is clearly seen in the *Ashes of Ariandel* and *The Ringed City* downloadable content (DLC) packs for *Dark Souls III*. In the first, the fire that would render the Painted World of Ariandel into ash and so allow passage to the next painted world has been held at bay, and the painting wallows in the rot of its deferred apocalypse—a rot concretely signified by the giant flies that take sustenance from it and spit maggots at the player character

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[50]Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II* (PS3; Xbox 360: FromSoftware, 2014).

[51]I present this argument in detail in Stein, "Praise the Sun."

[52]Tomohiro Shibuyo and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls II: Scholar of the First Sin* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2015).

[53]"Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin," Dark Souls Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed June 1, 2020, https://darksouls.fandom.com/wiki/Aldia,_Scholar_of_the_First_Sin.

[54]Hidetaka Miyazaki, *Bloodborne* (PS4: FromSoftware, 2015).

[55]Hidetaka Miyazaki, Isamu Okano, and Yui Tanimura, *Dark Souls III* (PS4; Xbox One; Microsoft Windows: FromSoftware, 2016).

if they draw too near. In the second, the player character enters the Ringed City where they encounter the locust preachers who proclaim the advent of a coming feast—the final embrace of the abyssal swamp and all that gnaws and swarms within.[56] The language of their sermons is deliberately disturbing, and ultimately fails to produce an actual third path on the part of the insects that, we are told, share a kinship with humanity, a kinship not of kind or identity but of a common groundlessness, the contingency of the abyss, or rather, the contingency of the *black* before the abyss, the black of the Kiln before the splitting, the rupture, the *disparity* of fire. The locust preachers invite the uncontrollable consumption and transformation first thematized by chaos and its spawn in *Dark Souls*, promising these inversions of the metaphysical order through the vessel of dark, a promise that, once again, relies upon the other, the othered insect, the othered monster, as an instrument for the attainment of a new unitary paradigm, a new totalitarian absolute.

I have argued that the End of Fire ending to *Dark Souls III* is an attempt at getting beyond the oblivion of transcendental wholism or oneness, but this ending only points *into* the darkness, offering mere suggestions at what might lie beyond.[57] *Hollow Knight*, in a uniquely compelling way, presents itself as a response to this indication.

The orange-eyed creature in the opening cinematic is the titular Hollow Knight, a vessel born of light and Void for the express purpose of containing the Radiance, a god of searing brilliance that threatened to enslave the bugs of Hallownest. The Pale King, a Wyrm, and the White Lady, a Root, conceived a myriad of such children, placing their eggs in the Abyss in the hope that one would prove pure enough to serve as a suitable vessel. Importantly, the Pale King and the White Lady are both higher beings like the Radiance, and both beings of light, but their light is incommensurable with that of the Radiance—similar, to be sure, but irreducible to it. With this simple move, we see *Hollow Knight* perform a pluralization of one of the terms of the metaphysical dualism at the heart of *Dark Souls*, precluding the metaphysical logic of sublation and unification that would abolish such difference in sameness.

The Hollow Knight, climbing from the Abyss, is taken and raised by the Pale King until they are grown strong enough to contain the Radiance. Through a ritual involving the Hollow Knight and three Dreamers—Monomon, Lurien, and Herrah—the Radiance is trapped within the Hollow Knight, who is bound and sealed within the Temple of the Black Egg, the ovoid from the opening cinematic. The Dreamers remain in an eternal slumber to ensure that the ritual holds.

But the Hollow Knight is not entirely pure, and over time the Radiance begins to overpower it, corrupting it from within with the "plague, the infection,

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[56]These preachers supplied the original title of this paper: "Fear not, the dark, my friend. And let the feast begin." See "Locust Preacher," Dark Souls III Wiki, *Fextralife*, accessed June 1, 2020, https://darksouls3.wiki.fextralife.com/Locust+Preacher.

[57]Stein, "The Fire Fades."; Stein, "Praise the Sun."

the madness" of light.[58] And herein is found the great revolution of *Hollow Knight*—by making every creature in the world an insect, the insect as such cannot be considered the cause of this corruption. Further, by allowing for the proliferation of *lights*, rather than the reification of *Light* (as fire, lightning, or sun), *Hollow Knight* locates the source of corruption in a particular entity, so isolating corruption as *fact* from any universalizing or moralizing category that might be used to sublate all manner of differences in its higher reality, to the end of either justification or condemnation. Thus, we can say that in *Hollow Knight* we witness the *genericization* of difference, the simultaneous emancipation and sheltering of the other in its own groundless existence.[59]

This genericization of difference and otherness is a consistent design principle and thematic element throughout *Hollow Knight*. As the player character traverses the world, they encounter the Mosskin, denizens of Greenpath who worship the higher being Unn, an enormous slug who is not affiliated with light like the Pale King, White Lady, or the Radiance, but is neither affiliated with Void. In Deepnest, the player character meets the Weavers, spider-like creatures who, before the corruption of the Radiance, had deigned not to bow to the Pale King but, like the Mosskin, did not worship the Void. In the Fungal Wastes, the player character meets the Fungal Tribe and the Mantis Tribe, consisting, respectively, of sentient mushrooms and warlike mantises, each with their own alliances, affiliations, and identifications—but neither reducible in these relations to either light or dark, operating independently in the groundlessness between. The bee-folk of the Hive welcomed the Radiance when it first arrived, whose light resembled their own, and the Moths—the only survivor of which tribe awaits the player character in the Resting Grounds—were birthed of the Radiance, but turned their back upon it at the sight of Pale King's new light. And we could go on, examining all the ways of being otherwise that the scholars of the Soul Sanctum, the near-extinct Snail Shamans, and the Godseekers of Godhome present. We could speak of the Nightmare Heart, another higher being of neither light nor Void, and the Old Gods of Thunder and Rain that abandoned the Godseekers in a time long past. But all of this would merely serve to emphasize the fact that *Hollow Knight* takes the auto-deconstruction of *Dark Souls* seriously, responding to its shattering of the metaphysical dichotomy not as catastrophe but possibility.

In the final, 'true' ending of *Hollow Knight*, added by the *Godmaster* DLC, the player character enters the dreams of the Godseekers to do battle with the Pantheons of Hallownest one final time. At the pinnacle of this challenge the player character will face the Absolute Radiance, transcendent form of

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[58]"The Infection," Hollow Knight Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed June 17, 2020, https://hollowknight.fandom.com/wiki/Infection#cite_note-1.

[59]The generic is here conceived in the Laruellian sense, which has been succinctly formulated by Alexander Galloway, a philosopher and commentator on Laruelle, as follows: "The one is never the Whole or the All, but rather merely a finite and generic one: *this* one; this one *here*; this one here *in person*." See Alexander R. Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xiii.

the Radiance as *totalizing sameness*, and must defeat it in order to eradicate its corrupting influence in Hallownest. When they do so, however, the player character merges with the Void, *giving it focus* (i.e., absorbing all the Siblings who failed to ascend from the Abyss), and becoming the "God of Gods," a terrifying being that, in its brutal evisceration of the Absolute Radiance and the consumption of Godhome and its dreaming residents that follows, feels like no better a god than the one that came before, a new absolute to replace the old.[60] What is key, here, is that this deliberate subversion of the player character's quest does not rely on the exploitation of the space of the other for its narrative and thematic heft, precluding, in its framing, any moralizing, universalizing position that might render this supposed true ending a *good* one.

Indeed, before the player character faces the Absolute Radiance, the penultimate foe of the Pantheon of Hallownest is the Pure Vessel—the perfect form of the Hollow Knight, the apotheosis of the insect, now figured as the transcendent shape of metaphysical dichotomy and trapped in a dream of never-ending servitude. A deadly, soul-wielding demigod, prime instrument of light and Void, it is their curse to serve as a vessel no longer for the Radiance, but more tragically, as a means for the ascendance of their sibling—the player character, the Knight—an ascendance that will see the dissolution of the Pure Vessel's *particular* difference in the "focus" that is the God of Gods. The Pure Vessel bars the passage to transcendence, their own purity a symbol of the violence of philosophical *scission* that such overcoming requires.[^63] Unlike the larva at the heart of the Bed of Chaos, the Pure Vessel does not in itself signify corruption, infection, or disease; instead, the story that the Pure Vessel tells cuts across such appropriation to deconstruct the tropism of the other through its own subservient deployment as "pure" other, a purity that is the nothingness, the split origin, of the child birthed from light and Void, a purity required for its own sublation in and by the God of Gods as *totalizing difference.*

The syntax of *Hollow Knight*, its tactical story, is constantly in opposition to such unifying, transcendentalizing logics, refusing the metaphysics of sameness *and* difference that would use either of these terms for the authorization of power, the ideality of auto-position—a refusal that directly challenges the narrative thrust that implicitly drives the player character forward throughout the game. The self-obliviating narrative that such ideality requires is deprived of its necessity, returned to the space of its groundlessness and contingency. Neither the Absolute Radiance nor the God of Gods is the *true* god, nor even the *good* god—the very fact of their transcendence requires the domination and unification (whether by "infection" or "focus") of the radical, *immanent* otherness of the plurality of bugs populating Hallownest. This is a critique of transcendence as such more damning than any that might naively be leveled against the Radiance from the position, the *place*, of the Void, a critique that, in the last instance, *does not co-opt otherness to justify its authority.*

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[60] "Void Entity," Hollow Knight Wiki, *Fandom*, accessed June 17, 2020, https://hollowknight.fandom.com/wiki/Void_Entity.

Conclusion

From *Dark Souls* to *Hollow Knight*, the trajectory of the insect is a trajectory from *difference* to *multiplicity*.[61] *Dark Souls* establishes an identity that is revealed to be a dichotomy by way of the difference, the corrupting influence, of the insect and its related others. In the sequels to *Dark Souls*, the story of the insect is mobilized to other ends, in various attempts at escaping from the recurring violence of this original dichotomy. But, given the terms that frame the *Souls* games from the beginning, the insect never quite manages to escape the curse of metaphysics, remaining on this side of the leap into a true pluralism beyond the logic of difference, which would finally emancipate it from the burden of otherness, the curse of purity, through an entry into the immanence of an absolutely generic otherness, otherness as the proliferation of the *absolutely other*. It is this vision of emancipation that *Hollow Knight* welcomes, presenting a bug-filled future in which the *generic, finite one* is liberated from the shackles of the universal, the insect freed from the stereotypical role of horrific other, that other which has been historically instrumentalized as a vessel for the realization of the transcendental, the auto-position of ideality. In this way, the insect vision of *Hollow Knight* tells the story of an *absolute particularity*, weaving a profoundly posthuman and generic ethics concerned with the plurality of individuations dwelling in, traversing, and transforming the world of their coexistence.

In gaming, such a vision opens a path forward for insects along which the figure of the insect might be explored on its own terms, not as a tropic exploitation of human revulsions, but as distinctly valuable in its own right, productive of unique modes of existence that demand we human players reconsider our own limited perspectives by asking the question, *how should the real be structured so that subjects such as these might emerge*?[62] This would be an intervention in gaming *beyond* the dichotomy of human and other, an intervention beyond the reductive and universalizing formula of the dichotomy itself.

For the insects, *Hollow Knight* depicts a world of plural becomings, the kingdom of Hallownest home to such a host of differences that the claim to universal rule has never, nor ever could, be realized. In Hallownest there is not *subjectivity* but *subjectivities*, a multiplicity of ways of making do in the world irreducible to the tyranny of the same or the terror of difference. Certainly, Hallownest is no utopia when the player character comes upon it, but even in this crisis, what *Hollow Knight* envisions for its insects is a future in which their existence requires no justification and their otherness no reason—in short, a future of bugs for the bugs.

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[61]This trajectory was first formalized for me by Terence Blake. See Terence Blake, "Laruelle and Deleuze: From Difference to Multiplicity," May 2016, https://www.academia.edu/11652059/. Most of his other writings can be found at *Agent Swarm*, https://terenceblake.wordpress.com/.

[62]A revision of Zizek's formula, "how should the Real be structured so that it allows for the mergence of subjectivity"? See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2012), 905.

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