

## Inhabiting Demon's Souls – My Memories of a Haunted World

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Brutal, beautiful, and bizarre... *Demon's Souls* has been called the best dungeon crawler in years, but to me this seems like a silly way to describe a game of such rich and haunting subtlety. Calling From Software's silent masterpiece a great "dungeon crawler" is like calling *Portal* a great "first-person shooter" or *Braid* a great "platformer". While these games nominally follow certain conventions, the experiences they evoke go far beyond genre craftsmanship. They may present themselves on the surface as genre experiences, but spending an amount of time with them reveals something else: dark, wonderful worlds of such meticulous thought and feeling they make normal games—even well-crafted ones—feel like wastes of time by comparison. There are deeper, more mysterious organizing forces at work in these games.

I played *Demon's Souls* for 100 hours, which is I believe is the most time I've ever spent on a videogame. Even the longest of the long RPGs I've played, *Oblivion*, I didn't get over 70 hours into. The most time I think I've ever spent on an RPG I actually finished was *Xenogears*, which was around 80. *Odin Sphere*, which I also finished, was 72. *Dragon Quest VII* would have probably been over 100 had I finished it, but I topped out at 85 before moving on.

However you slice it, I've spent more time on a single play-through of *Demon's Souls* than I have on any other game I've ever played. I am just realizing this—that *Demon's Souls* is, in fact, the most time I've ever spent on a game in my entire life. The game has a strange and terrible gravity, a kind of gravity I haven't felt in a long time, not since the first time I played *Ultima Underworld* 16 years ago. I remember that game like it was something that happened to me. It was me that bumbled around in those caves, straining to see in the dark, wondering what I'd do to escape. It was me that gradually learned the layout of those tunnels, using only my wits and the tools I could find. It was me who survived that place and emerged triumphant into the light of day, after what felt like years in the dark. The feeling was, I imagine, what Mark Twain wanted his readers to feel of his own experience of being trapped in a cave as a child. But *Underworld* was a thousand times more vivid than those passages in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and exemplifies,

I think, what well-designed virtual spaces do. It's not necessarily "interactivity" that makes them interesting. It's the sense of being somewhere. The most memorable videogames I've played made me feel like I've been to a place I've never been, a place that isn't real. *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock 1*, *Metroid Prime 1*, *Ultima VII*, *Majora's Mask*, *Ico*, *Shadow of the Colossus*—all these games are like lucid memories hacked directly into my brain. *Demon's Souls* now belongs on this list as well.

I could talk forever about how the game creates a sense of place, how its use of ambient sound recalls the best work of Looking Glass Studios, how its level design strikes a masterful balance between fictional coherence and designed experience, how its sense of scale is on par with the sublime landscapes David Lean or Peter Jackson or—more relevantly—Fumito Ueda. *Demon's Souls* in many ways belongs in the same class as *Shadow of the Colossus* and not just for the reasons I describe above. It has a similar sense of anguish to *Colossus*, a despair that fuels everything. Each location is an elegiac monument to one sad story or another, carved into virtual space. The sense at all times is of a gangrene world, a ruined civilization that lingers in a state of living death. From the moment you arrive at the abandoned ruin of Boletaria Palace, from the moment you imagine the wind—the only sound in that place—biting at your skin you feel the intangible emptiness. In this place everyone has lost their souls, and the way the game manages to make such a magnificent landscape seem so haunted, so aching with loss, is something I think only *Colossus* had previously achieved.

The despair lurking under the surface of *Demon's Souls* is one of its most important features. Like the best games, its metaphysics are quite intentionally woven into its gameplay system. In this sense it echoes the terrible introspection encouraged by *Majora's Mask*. That was the greatest *Zelda* game because it was about heroism in ways no other game in the series was. When you arrive at the final moment, inside *Majora's* dream, and are asked by the children if you cared about the people you saved, you are being told to reflect on whether your own desire to "win" the game renders your heroism insincere. Would you have helped those people if it had been counter-productive to winning the game? If not, can you honestly call what you did heroic?

*Demon's Souls* gives the player a similar quandary: is your greed for more souls—for better powers, for better weapons, for a badass character—is it really all that different from what demons do? The evil

afflicting Boletaria is that of demons attacking people for their souls, because taking one's soul grants the user power, making them stronger, faster, or allowing them to use incredible magic. The only way to fight this process is to copy it, to attack these demons and steal the souls back in order to make yourself as powerful. Harvesting souls in order to give one's self god-like powers is known in Boletaria as practicing the "soul arts", and is forbidden for obvious reasons. Demon's Souls makes clear that greed is the ultimate sin in this world, and that the player is no less subject to its consequences than story-characters are. Practicing soul arts tends to make people behave like The Old One, the ultimate demon that started the whole mess. When people are consumed by greed to the point that they lose all morality they become what are known as "black phantoms", mass-murdering soul-harvesters who attack anyone they see. NPC black phantoms attack the player during "black world tendency", a special gameworld state in which the player's wanton murder has resulted in a location being tainted by—and therefore "tending" toward—evil. As the story informs us, these NPCs are champions from all over the world who came to Boletaria seeking, like you, to gain power and slay The Old One. In a state of white world tendency these NPCs appear as friends and allies, more interested in the welfare of others than in gaining souls. But in black world tendency you often find the exact same people turned into black phantoms. Consumed by greed, they will try to kill you on sight. To them you are just a soul piggy-bank waiting to be broken.

The rationale for this change in NPC behavior can be found in the difference between white and black world tendency, in how their different rules encourage different sorts of player behavior. White tendency actually cripples one's ability to farm souls and build power. Enemies yield far less souls in white tendency, and enemies drop less material for soul-weapon forging. In other words, greed is punished for doing good and rewarded for doing evil. The more innocent people die, the more the world tendency goes towards black, and the easier it is to gain souls and become a badass. As a player it is simple to follow this path, to game the system in this way. The result, of course, is that you become a creature of bottomless greed, and because your behavior infects the world around you, nearby NPCs also get caught up in the same cycle and spiral down the same moral path. It's a giant domino effect, the ultimate expression of which is invading other players' games and murdering them for their souls. When you do this you always appear on their screens as a dark shimmering ghost, a black phantom.

The genius of this system is that the multiplayer community inevitably acts out the moral dichotomy *Demon's Souls* bases its entire single-player narrative around, giving it an uncanny resonance in the real world. *Demon's Souls* hands us a hideous world consumed by greed, in which everyone is killing everyone for the ultimate spiritual commodity, and this is what's going on with online player behavior as well. Unlike many games, *Demon's Souls* has no "online multiplayer mode". Its single-player mode is always online, with the possibility that another player will brutally invade your world at any given moment. The game's escalating ruminations on greed as the story reaches its conclusion are therefore far more striking than they would have been otherwise. In the final moment, when the Black Maiden—the greatest practitioner of soul arts, who's been your ally through the entire game, converting all your souls into power and granting you life after life—thanks you for subduing The Old One and turns away from you, you have the opportunity to kill her, to stab her in the back and take her soul, the most powerful soul of all. I didn't do this, of course. I turned around and walked out. But it was impossible not to wonder, in the moment, what I would gain by doing so.

I walked out and watched The Old One float back into the sky. I was standing there in my best armor, which I'd brought with me expecting The Old One to be the fight of my life. But, like many of the "big" boss fights in *Demon's Souls*, it wasn't. I had walked into this weird tree, that was seemingly under the ground but appeared to be in a vast desert under an open sky, and found a sorry, pathetic, diseased looking creature flopping around in the muck. It was King Allant, the man who'd unleashed The Old One on his country to begin with by dabbling in soul arts. He (like us all) wanted power, and he had in the end become this sickening shell. I still expected the worst, so I pulled an arrow and aimed, and suddenly heard the king's voice in my head. He said something about God creating The Old One to save us from ourselves, that The Old One was doing God's Will. I began riddling the misshapen form with arrows, and it did nothing. As it died I heard the king's voice damning me for defying God, and that was it. The game was over.

The easiness of this "last boss" is partially, I think, what puts the player in the frame of mind to actually kill the Black Maiden when she thanks you. It is anti-climactic in any conventional videogame sense, and the gamer in you wonders what the pay-off is. But this sort of anti-climax appears to be a deliberate, reoccurring aspect of *Demon's Souls*. The game is so difficult, with normal enemies and bosses being so absurdly hard, that the bizarre ease of all the so-called "arch-demon" fights is

obviously no mistake. I think, rather, they are designed more for reflection than challenge. The Dragon God seems scary... until you realize he is basically chained up in a cave, with two gigantic spears forever aimed at his throat. After you use them—which involves simply flipping some switches—the “god” is so wounded all he can do is lay his head on the ground and gasp. I expected him to make one last attack, but no. He is just helpless and dying, and in the end it’s not a fair fight at all. The same goes for Lady Astraea and her lover, whom you kill after fighting your way through what appears to be a massive leper colony. After battling hoards of deformed, diseased people you arrive at a small cave in which you find Astraea, the fallen maiden of The Church. Earlier in the game you hear rumors from Saint Urbain (a member of The Church) that Astraea turned against God and now sides with the demons. In the dank mud you come upon her, expecting a “boss”. But she just sits there, lamenting the fact that you killed her lover to reach her. She holds a glowing demon soul in her hand. She confesses that she turned away from The Church because she was moved by the suffering of the sick in the valley, whom The Church had forsaken. She stayed to help them and was branded a heretic. Now that her lover is dead, she can’t go on. She scorns you for wanting the demon soul she holds, spitting “this is what you want, isn’t it?” She gives it to you and kills herself. There is no fight. There is only her suicide... or her murder, if you are feeling impatient.

Demon’s Souls is a brutally difficult game that follows many familiar game conventions, but what’s great about it is these conventions always serve its rich fictional world... and it isn’t afraid to deviate from convention to enhance the experience. Expecting a boss and not getting it, ending this epic journey—one of the most difficult of my lifetime—with an introspective whimper rather than a spectacular bang speaks to the developer’s willingness to follow the logic of the world they’ve created to the bitter end. Such coherence really makes the game feel like it’s about something other than its genre, that some organizing force different from other games is at work, shaping your experience around contours that are fresh and unexpected at exactly the right moments.

Even though I suspect the same sort of experience with the same sort of richness might have been achievable in a shorter game, I am so thankful to Demon’s Souls just for being so textured and interesting that any frustrations I had over my 100 hour play-through simply melt away upon reflection. My lingering impression is that it’s one of the most

haunting (and haunted) games I've played in years, instantly overshadowing nearly all other games in recent memory.

When I think about this game in the future I'll remember things like the sight of a massive walled city viewed from atop a mountain, a magnificent tangle of buildings and streets I will never explore. I'll remember standing at a rocky shoreline, with the shafts of light cutting through the cloud blanket over the sea, and looking back to see a broken castle I once explored hanging off the cliff a thousand feet above me. I'll remember the smell of the sea even though I didn't smell it; the cold of the wind even though I didn't feel it. I'll remember the sadness, the death, all the lost people, all the ruins. I'll remember the chill I felt when I encountered a boss or black phantom, all those countless moments when I instantly thought "I could die here". I'll remember when I did die, over and over again, and how I never ceased to marvel at my own corporeal body, at the weight and sound it suddenly made, after being resurrected. These memories of place and time and feeling are palpable in the face of their unreality, the same way dreams are... and no less important to our waking lives.