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The very brink of destruction: The sublime in *Dark Souls*[1]

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Abstract:
This paper focuses on the aesthetic category of the sublime as observed in the 2011 videogame Dark Souls. *In my view, the sublime in* Dark Souls *is predicated on the player's knowledge of the game's mechanics and the game's tendency to challenge and subvert this knowledge, either by presenting new challenges, or by modifying the nature of the game-world and the game mechanics contained therein. In my discussion of the sublime, I rely on the work of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Philip Shaw. In my discussions of videogames, I work with the theories of Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, Gonzalo Frasca, Greg Lastowka, and Markku Eskelinen.*

Epigraph

> "We walk'd [...] upon the very brink, in a literal sense, of Destruction; one S tumble, and both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy'd. The sense of all this produc'd different motions in me, viz., a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled."
>
> John Dennis, as quoted in Vránková, *Metamorphoses of the Sublime*, 2019.

Introduction

Since its release in 2011, the videogame *Dark Souls* has become a cultural phenomenon that soon spawned two direct sequels and a plethora of other, non-direct spin-offs, off-shoots, imitations, and epigones. Much of this popularity can be attributed to the game's uncompromising difficulty, which helped set it apart from other games in its genre and to stand out amongst other game releases of 2011.

Not disregarding the game's difficulty, many other factors also contributed to *Dark Souls* becoming as popular as it did. Beyond the game's seemingly impenetrable exterior, there still lies a wealth of fascinating, novel, and, at times, outright astonishing approaches to world-building, characterization, and narrative that, along with the game's treatment of the fantastic, all helped make the game – and, by extension, its developer, FromSoftware – the turning of the tide that it ultimately became.

Academically, too, *Dark Souls* is hardly a niche title: in its 13 years of digital life, the game has been subjected to much research, focusing on virtually every aspect of the interactive title. And, although attention is often paid mainly to the game's ludic aspects, its aesthetic and textual aspects never go quite unnoticed. One of these aesthetic aspects, specifically the aesthetic category of the sublime, is of considerable note here, then, as it is the subject of this analysis.

Now, it is true that, over the past centuries, many different interpretations of the sublime have been drawn up, and this diversity is accounted for here. However, the principles upon which these definitions stand have never really changed much, or, at least, not substantially. At its core, the sublime has always stood on one, immutable principle: the simultaneous experience of two contradictory emotions (or affects). This paper discusses this simultaneous experience at the root of the sublime in the context of *Dark Souls* and approaches it from the Burkean, as well as the Kantian, perspective. First – much in the Burkean tradition – this paper focuses on the game's juxtaposition of familiarity and obscurity, mentioning terror as an important factor in the formation of the game's sublime. Then, the player's journey through *Dark Souls*' game-world is discussed, with the juxtaposition of the players' pure and empirical knowledge of the game being shown as the in-game basis for the Kantian sublime. In my approach, I rely largely on literature concerned with the aesthetic category of the sublime, as well as literature on ludology, specifically the work of Espen Aarseth.

It must be said, nevertheless, that mine is not the first analysis of the sublime in *Dark Souls*. Daniel Vella, in his article "No Mastery Without Mystery: *Dark Souls* and the Ludic Sublime", has already covered the subject of sublimity in *Dark Souls*. His treatment of

sublimity, while undoubtedly beneficial to the field of game studies in general, is nevertheless quite different from mine. While Vella's focus is mainly on game mechanics and the impossibility of true mastery within the game, I am interested more in the ergodic structure of the game, and the way in which different types of sequence can lead to differing results, while treating complete mastery of the game as a decisive factor in *Dark Souls*' sublimity. In this article, I will attempt to communicate how I understand the sublime to work in *Dark Souls*, and how it stems from both the user's complete knowledge of the game's mechanics and its being subverted by the game-world.

To be on good terms: The ludology vs. narratology debate and the terminology it helped develop

Much of the early debate between ludology and narratology revolved around the nature of videogames, their place among other types of media, their independence from other types of media and, specifically, their categorization by some scholars as narrative media. The emerging field of ludology, i.e. game studies, saw many of its pioneers– for instance the ex-literary theorist Espen Aarseth, the literary scholar-turned-ludologist Jesper Juul, and the ludologist Gonzalo Frasca – point out the fact that narratologists have long had the tendency of "colonizing" (Frasca, 2003) the videogame medium and claiming it as their own, without really acknowledging that there might be a need "to provide independence for [the] new field of study" to study videogames as a medium separate (to an extent) from other media, as an autonomous, self-sufficient one.

The discussion has since moved on, with the field itself being all the better for it. However, remnants of the discussion can still be seen in it today. One of such remnants, coincidentally, is the terminology developed during this discussion that, while by no means all-encompassing with respect to its scope, is still useful and valuable for the discussion of videogames *not* as narrative media, but as textual media that account for the person interacting with them. Several of the terms used in this paper were coined specifically by Espen Aarseth in his now-seminal study titled *Cybertext: Perspectives in Ergodic Literature* (1997). Aarseth's terminology is used to describe the nature of play, the methods players may employ in navigating digital environments, and the description of these environments as such. Different terminology still is taken from Jesper Juul, pertaining almost exclusively to the concept of failure and the consequences inherent therein.

One crucial term – both here and in general – that Aarseth coins and refers to regularly in *Cybertext* is "ergodic literature" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1). Ergodic literature is a type of literature

where “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (ibid., p. 1), and is opposed to types of literature where the text is traversed trivially, by, for example, turning the pages. Traversing an ergodic text requires a lot more involvement from its user/reader.

The concept of ergodicity is a crucial component of “cybertextuality” (ibid.), a type of textuality that “focuses on the mechanical organization of the text [...] as an integral part of the literary exchange”, and on “the consumer, or user, of the text, as a[n] [...] integrated figure” (ibid.) of the reading process. In other words, a cybertext can be viewed as a form of textual communication in which the user’s/reader’s movement through the text affects the actual organization of the text and can lead to the formation of new textual sequences and signs which can, thereafter, be once more accessed/traversed by the user. At its most fundamental, Aarseth explains, the cybertext is a “textual machine,” “a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs” (ibid., p. 21), one that “must contain some kind of information feedback loop” (ibid., p. 19). It should be noted that, while Aarseth is talking about the production of mental signs, the model can also be applied to systems that produce non-verbal signs as well, and has been by Aarseth himself.

Textuality and cybertextuality

The Aarsethian cybertext is a fairly well-established concept that appears rather regularly in videogame scholarship. In “Planes of Power: *EverQuest* as Text, Game and Community”, Greg Lastowka (2009) employs Aarseth’s terminology while analysing the Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game (MMO RPG) *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive, 1999). However, more important than Lastowka’s analysis of the game – which dwells within the dark realm of legalities and shall not be explored here – is his distinction between the textual and cybertextual aspects of *EverQuest*’s world. For Lastowka, the world of *EverQuest* can be interpreted either as a regular fictional text, “a database and set of instructions containing creatures, cities, and animations that might be laid out as a mosaic of components to be critically analyzed” (Lastowka 2009), or as a cybertext, a sign-producing machine in which the user is of considerable importance.

Lastowka’s distinction between textuality and cybertextuality is discussed here primarily due to how clearly it lays out the way in which these two aspects of videogames both influence and are influenced by one another. More specifically, it is the way in which a videogame’s textuality influences its cybertextual organization and layout that is of interest here, as it is the organization of the cybertext that then influences the user’s/player’s potential methods for traversing the game-world and, in turn, their experience with the game. As for its

relation to *Dark Souls*, the methods of traversing the game-world and their being influenced by the game's textuality are used later in my discussion of the Kantian sublime and its relation to the player's knowledge of and movement through the game-world.

In Lastowka's estimation, the textual world of *EverQuest*, the one that exists prior to the user's/reader's involvement, is just that: a "pre-player" world the existence of which "resulted from the collaborative efforts of many game designers and developers" that functions as "a fictional software society" (2009), much like any other fictional society: Hogwarts, for example. Regardless of their respective media, neither Hogwarts nor *EverQuest*'s Norath[2] are "real", at least not in the physical sense of the word. They are ideas – or, more specifically, *sets* of ideas – realized and communicated through a network of signifiers, which is what they are also consumed and understood as. Just like Magritte's pipe is not a pipe, the scar on Potter's forehead is not a scar, and Norath's ground is not a ground. Hence, the pre-player world of *EverQuest* is a fictional world much like any other, with its own topography, architecture, history, and population that, instead of being represented verbally, is represented through a network of three-dimensional, computer-generated signifiers. And, just like any other fictional world, it cannot be explored without the user's/reader's involvement. Nevertheless, it is the nature of this involvement that is of importance here.

Much like with any other game, the only way for the user/reader to explore Norath in *EverQuest* is through the use of an avatar. An avatar, the term borrowed from "a Sanskrit word […] identif[ying] the god Vishnu's manifestations on earth" (Sibilla, Mancini, 2018), is the vehicle by which the user can explore and is represented in the videogame's world (or "game-world", for short), a portal between the user's reality and the reality of the videogame, the cybertext. Using the avatar, the user/reader is able to interact with the game-world and the signifiers therein of their own volition, and according to the videogame's rules, they can produce a variety of outcomes that do not follow a fixed sequence, but are ordered in accordance with the user's input.

It would, nevertheless, be erroneous to claim that all videogames are the same, that they all follow the same design philosophy, and allow their users the same amount of agency, freedom, and choice. Some of the most popular videogames ever created have their ergodicity scaled back and limited, so as to be more in tune with "traditional", non-ergodic types of textuality; their (potentially) boundless sequentiality is limited in favour of a fixed sequence. "Cinematic" videogames, such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), come to mind, as these are far more interested in having the user experience a fixed sequence of events than they are

in allowing the user to tamper with the sequence as such, limiting whatever agency the user might have to a handful of combat encounters.

Now I, for one, find this revelation to be somewhat self-evident. Limiting the user's agency within the videogame's world in favour of a fixed sequence designed by the developer is a practice that, at least as far as "cinematic", story-focused videogames are concerned, goes with the territory. Having the user/reader experience the cybertextual world as they would a textual one requires embedding the cybertext with textual features, a fixed sequence of signs being one of them. Take the videogame *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), for example. As its name would imply, *Minecraft* allows its users to "mine" and to "craft", a set of functions applicable to, virtually, every object in *Minecraft*'s world: almost every object, be it a tree, the ground, water, meat, etc. can, in some way, be "mined", which means broken apart and collected, and used for "crafting", or creating, different objects like armour, a door, iron, and so on. An object, or, rather, the signifier used as a stand-in for the object, is engaged with by the user/reader and, depending on their input, repurposed, relocated, replaced, or changed. In other words, then, the main function of *Minecraft* is finding and engaging with signs that, based on the user's input, are repurposed and turned into new signs. As such, *Minecraft*'s main function is a cybertextual function.

Upon its release, *Minecraft* contained very little in terms of story, plot, or even general structure or goal. It was, above all, a giant, generative playground that, while confident in "what" it wanted its users to do, was fairly lost on "why" it wanted them to do it; outside of providing the user with hours upon hours of mindless fun, it hardly had a point. Yet, with the release of *Minecraft*'s "Adventure Mode", which arrived through an update after the game's original launch, the nature of what players could do in *Minecraft* and how the game could be engaged with changed. While the basic mode of engaging with the game remained unchanged, the update introduced something that, up until that point, did not exist in *Minecraft*: "The End". And, by endowing the game with its very own ending, *Minecraft*'s developer also inadvertently endowed it with a goal.

In order to reach the end of the game, *Minecraft*'s players could now no longer interact with the game in any way they wished – instead, they had to limit their interaction to a specific set of actions taken in a specific sequence. Certain actions needed doing before others could be accessed, which meant that, since these actions were contextualized and framed by an over-arching goal, a basic narrative structure had now come to be included in the game as well, introducing a textual element into an originally cybertextual title.

This marriage of textuality and cybertextuality can also be found in *Dark Souls*, albeit in a more understated way. As will be discussed later in this paper, *Dark Souls*' approach to blending textuality and cybertextuality shows mainly in the game's level design, game-world design, enemy placement, etc. Enemies are placed throughout the game-world in such a way that the weaker ones are native to the starting areas, stronger ones to the more advanced areas, and so on.[3] All of this is done in congruence with the game's textuality, its fiction, and becomes a valid strategy for the user/player of navigating the game-world through the path of least resistance. It is this method of navigating the game-world – the method of least resistance – that this paper focuses on and that, in the following sections, is examined more closely and forms the basis for my discussion of Kant.

Dark Souls as text and cybertext

Since its publication by Bandai Namco in 2011, *Dark Souls* has gathered a sizeable audience and is largely credited with codifying a new videogame genre, the "souls-like" (it is unclear when the term was first used; most likely, it happened sometime after the publication of *Demon's Souls* in 2009, on the internet). The "souls-like" moniker was bestowed upon *Dark Souls* due to, in part, how difficult it was to categorize the game using existing genre terminology upon its release, as well as its uniqueness: it was, indeed, an action game, but it also included elements of other genres and did not, in fact, focus on combat as single-mindedly as at first it may have seemed.[4] Some of the other generic influences identifiable within *Dark Souls*, such as RPGs (Role-Playing Games), exploration games, and Metroidvanias, all contributed to defining the "souls-like" genre which, at this point, can be broadly characterized by its "unforgiving difficulty", "environmental/contextual storytelling", the "bonfire checkpoint system", and "an interconnected and open world map" for the player to traverse and enemies and bosses to defeat in order to proceed (Guzsvinecz, 2023).

Yet, from the textual, pre-player perspective, to use Lastowka's definition, *Dark Souls* is a fairly run-of-the-mill fantasy videogame that does not stray away significantly from its genre's conventions. Much like any other fantasy game-world, *Dark Souls*' Lordran is a comprehensive pastiche of various well-established fantasy elements, represented through signification and organized – or distributed, perhaps – in a way that makes the world come across as a tangible, believable whole, distinguishable, mainly, by its unique topography, architecture, population, and lore. Mimicking, in a manner of speaking, the layout of "a real world", *Dark Souls*' Lordran is divided into several areas, each with a different purpose and style. In fact, it is possible to view Lordran as a collection of interconnected, self-contained

locations, or levels, the existence of which fulfils both a narrative and a formal, functional role, in a near-Tolkienesque fashion.

Lordran's layout as a world is noted, chiefly, for its verticality and interconnectedness. This, too, fulfils a formal and narrative role – the two are, in fact, intertwined. The vertical layout of the world is rooted in and reinforces the game's mythic influences, complete with a mock-Mount Olympus and Hades (the realm). Following the tutorial, which I will touch on shortly, the user/reader is plunged into Lordran, starting their journey at the Firelink Shrine, one of Lordran's many self-contained areas and the defacto centre of *Dark Souls*' world, both horizontally and vertically. The Firelink Shrine is a place of peace and tranquillity, a place mostly safe from danger, and a place where almost every major plot-point/goal is revealed. It is, also, a fully realized and explorable three-dimensional space that, much like *EverQuest*'s Norath, is not subject to fixed exploration. The Firelink Shrine can be explored rather freely, with the user deciding what to see and what not to, which part of the area to try and search first, what path to take, and whether to explore the area at all. The sequence of exploration is, really, the key, for regardless of the user's initial choice, the game's end can always be reached, simply by exploring and engaging with the world.

In controlling their avatar, the user assumes the role of "the chosen undead" (*Dark Souls*, 2011), a warrior destined, by an ancient prophecy, to defeat the evil Lord Gwyn (*Dark Souls*' partial stand-in for Zeus) and restore order to the universe. To do so, they must first defeat Lord Gwyn's henchmen, absorb their power, and grow stronger. Defeating the henchmen requires the user to take their avatar across the majority of Lordran, from Firelink Shrine to Anor Londo, the city of the lords built atop a great mountain, to an underground lake filled with lava and the city of Lost Izalith, a system of catacombs, and a realm-between-realms, The Abyss.

Leaving the Firelink Shrine, the player is presented with three unique options, three unique routes to pick and explore. The default route, the one of least resistance, is the one leading "up", to a walled-off township called the Undead Burg, inhabited, for the most part, by the undead. The other two routes, both non-default and leading "down", will, if explored, almost certainly lead to the player's death, as the challenge they pose at the start of the game is beyond what the player can realistically handle. This, however, does not make them secondary.

A common "rule" regarding videogame exploration and design – whether it is a written or an unwritten one is unknown to me – is that, if something appears as if it can be reached by the player, such as a passage, a ledge, or an item, then the player will attempt to reach it. This "rule", identifiable in a great deal of videogame design is, perhaps, most prominent in Metroidvanias. The term Metroidvania, "a portmanteau of Metroid and Castlevania", is used in

reference to the videogame genre popularized by *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami, 1997), "characterized by gameworlds with multidirectional navigation and obstacles that require specific skills or weapons to be surmounted" (Igarzábal, 2019, p. 72). When playing a Metroidvania, the user will routinely come across passages that are, in some way, blocked-off. Either they will require a weapon to traverse it that the user has not yet found, or an ability they do not yet possess. Still, the presupposition is that, upon realizing that the passage is untraversable, the user will try and look for a way to make the passage traversable in some way, and will return to it at a later point. Therefore, finding a blocked-off passage does not discourage the Metroidvania user from pursuing it; it encourages them.

Multi-directionality, then, is handled similarly in *Dark Souls*. There are multiple routes through the videogame's text for the user to choose from and take, and some of these routes are blocked-off, either by a door, a magical wall, or both. Mostly, however, the user's progression is halted by a skill/strength requirement that the user must reach before exploring the world further. Not reaching the skill/strength requirement – that is, being too weak or inexperienced – can, and quite regularly does, result in the user's in-game death, a point at which all of their health is depleted and the user is forced to either repeat the challenge, explore a different part of the world, or quit the game.

You died: The death and terror of *Dark Souls*

Dying in a videogame is not dissimilar to failing in a board-, card-, or dice-game; to die is to fail, and, as Jesper Juul notes, to fail is to engage inadequately with the game's system (Juul, 2013, p. 7). To die in a videogame, the user must either disregard its system entirely, be ignorant of it, or engage with it inadequately, improperly, or wrongly. Death, then (and, by similar logic, failure), is a form of feedback, a way of letting the user/player know that they are engaging with the game in an erroneous manner. It is, therefore, a cybertextual function, and an extremely common one, at that. By no stretch of the imagination is dying a function exclusive to *Dark Souls*. It is, however, *Dark Souls*' iteration on the function itself that is of note here.

It is not uncommon for a (video-) game to have failure accompanied by punishment. A punishment, in this sense, is a sort of sanction imposed on the user by the game for not succeeding in it, for failing at it. In *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), the user's/player's failure (death) is punished by the game detracting a "life" (a possible attempt) from the player's overall total, limiting the number of times the user can attempt to beat the game (and fail) in the future. In *Dark Souls*, death is punished by the user's avatar disintegrating into a cloud of ash, before

being relegated to and resurrected at the checkpoint most recently interacted with (which, depending on the user's diligence, can either be very close to or very far away from the place where they have died), and leaving the user's souls at the place where they have died for the user to try and retrieve.

Souls are *Dark Souls*' main currency, a score rewarded to the user/player for successfully engaging with the game's challenges. For every enemy felled, the user is rewarded a certain number of Souls, which they can then use to make their avatar stronger, more durable, less susceptible to danger and less likely to be inadequate when facing future challenges. If the user can reach their Souls before or without dying again, then the Souls can be retrieved and used. If, however, the user dies before reaching their Souls, then the Souls disappear, are lost, and can no longer be retrieved or used, costing the user their progress, their time, and sanity.

It should also be noted that, in *Dark Souls*, it truly is very easy to fail. In addition to the game's challenges being visceral and requiring a high degree of skill to surmount, *Dark Souls* also has the tendency to keep its user in the dark, revealing little about how it is meant to be engaged with, traversed, or even what the correct form of engagement and traversal is. It is, at times, also extremely unpleasant to engage with, especially for a first-time user. No matter how much the user may try to escape the game's danger, they cannot, as the danger is ever-present, to the point where it is even implicit in the act of resting. As such, a question could be asked as to why would anyone even bother with it, seeing that the experience of playing the game borders on being terrible? According to Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Irish politician and philosopher, that is exactly why.

Were the in-game death in *Dark Souls* nothing but terrifying, it would not be much fun to engage with. According to Burke, "[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (1990, pp. 36-7). It is, therefore, important to remember that death in *Dark Souls* and, by extension, any other videogame, is not real death. While the fail state may be real within the world/the fiction of the game, it does not bleed over into the world proper, the world outside the videogame. This does not mean, however, that experiencing failure in *Dark Souls* is the same as experiencing it in film or literature. In purely non-ergodic, representational media, death is always experienced at a distance and is, by virtue of that, quite impersonal. In *Dark Souls* – and ergodic media in general, it would seem – death is not only ever-present, but close and claustrophobic, possible and personal.

For Burke, the terrible is the main source of the sublime, which, in turn, is the strongest emotion (affect) any human being is capable of feeling (ibid., p. 36). Does that mean, then, that

each and every terrible experience, be it an in-game experience or a real one, can, in some way, be regarded as a precursor to the sublime? Is dying/failing in *Dark Souls* sublime? Not quite. It is, for example, very easy to see how dying could terrify the user/player the first time it is experienced. But what of the second, the third, or the fourth time? In my experience, dying repeatedly during a particular challenge has never made me feel more terrified. What it did do, however, was make me feel lethargic, tired, and annoyed – as is often the case with videogames. Instead of an exacerbated feeling of terror, I experienced a feeling of either frustration or indifference and, judging by multiple accounts on the internet, I was hardly the only one.

It is, I think, not outside the realm of plausibility to claim that after repeated exposure, most stimuli (in this case, the challenges in *Dark Souls*) lose their original "charge", stop inciting terror, awe, joy, etc., and are reduced to producing a neutral, or even an adverse effect. Or, in other words, the less novel a stimulus is, the less likely it is to fulfil its main function. This sentiment can also be found in Burke, where if "the same things make frequent returns, […] they return with less and less of any agreeable effect" (Burke, 1990, p. 29):

> In short, the occurrences of life, by the time we come to know it a little, would be incapable of affecting the mind with any other sensations than those of loathing and weariness, if many things were not adapted to affect the mind by means of other powers besides novelty in them, and of other passions besides curiosity in ourselves. (ibid., p. 29)

As such, it would seem unwise to categorize terror as the sole proprietor of *Dark Souls*' sublime, as doing so would provide not only a very small, but also a very flimsy window for the sublime to appear in, to take shape in. In the best-case scenario, it would restrict the possibility of arriving at the sublime to the user's initial experience with the terrible, the most potent one, while in the worst-case scenario, it would make experiencing the sublime exclusive to only a handful of people, those who do find dying/failing in a videogame terrifying, or to only a handful of videogames, those that actively try to make their fail states terror-inducive. In addition, Burke's view of "terror [as] a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (ibid., p. 42) is not exactly applicable here, either; for, if the game's terror can, in fact, be "lessened" through repetition and made to feel more "distant", and if doing so results in frustration rather than delight, then Burke's view is either amiss, or demonstrably wrong.

To play devil's advocate for a while: one way of mitigating the "loss of terror" resulting from repeatedly exposing oneself to *Dark Souls*' terrifying stimuli, is by providing the user with

a stimulus/experience that is, at the same time, both terrifying and novel. Novelty, in this sense (or, at least, a variation on it), can either be achieved by presenting the user/player with a brand-new stimulus, or by modifying an already existing stimulus in some way, e.g. by obscuring it. Obscurity, by Burke's own admission, is an enhancing factor for the sublime. To make a stimulus, a concept, or a thing obscure is to make it unclear, or uncertain (ibid., pp. 54–55). In *Dark Souls*, death is regularly very uncertain, very unclear and, therefore, obscure. This, in turn, makes it much more terrifying to experience.

Dark Souls does not tell its user where on their journey they will experience a challenge, what the challenge will be, or how difficult it will be to complete. During the tutorial (a preparatory section of the game), the game informs the user of its general structure: there is an area for the user to traverse and explore, and to reach the end of. In order to reach the area's end, the user must complete a set of challenges, either traversal- or combat-oriented, before making their way to the area's boss. The boss is the area's strongest adversary, the most difficult challenge. After defeating the boss, the user is allowed to reach the end and move on to another section of the game. Should, however, the user fail at any point in completing these challenges (die), then their progress will be annulled, their score "seized" and made volatile, and their avatar relegated to the most recently interacted-with checkpoint, a "bonfire".

The bonfire is an object of respite and restoration: a checkpoint, available in every area of the game-world that the user/player can choose to interact with rather freely. Upon interacting with a bonfire, the user's health is replenished, their armour is repaired and their weaponry, too, and the game-world is re-set to its pre-play state (partially, at least), with every non-essential enemy (other than the boss[es]) that the user has defeated being resurrected and returned to their original position. And, while interacting with the bonfire is somewhat optional, it can also be used to mark the user's position within the game-world, functioning, essentially, as a bookmark. Outside of the tutorial, as long as they interact with at least one bonfire, then every time the user dies, their avatar is returned to the bonfire they last interacted with. If they die prior to interacting with a bonfire, their avatar will be returned to the start of the area.

This, however, is the only thing that the user knows for certain (regarding their in-game failure/death); the user knows that, should they fail in their traversal of Lordran, their punishment will be harsh and uncompromising. In fact, it is the certainty of this punishment – the game's feedback to the user's inadequacy in traversing the game-world – added to the uncertainty/obscurity of when will it be dished out that makes death in *Dark Souls* truly terrifying. Death, and the punishment embedded therein, is a functional certainty within the cybertext of *Dark Souls*. What, on the other hand, is uncertain about it, is whether, when, and

how it will occur. The user, on their first tour of Lordran, has no way of knowing whether a challenge will kill them or even what it will be and, therefore, finds the prospect of facing a challenge curious, rather than terrifying. But after facing a challenge and failing at it, and after learning of the feedback function of the cybertext (the punishment), the user is, in my view, more susceptible to start treating every subsequent challenge as a potential failure, instead of a potential victory. Death, in this sense, becomes less of a functional certainty and more of a trace in the mind of the user/player, a terrifying possibility present in every challenging encounter. Additionally, since the challenges presented to the user by the game are not invariable but grow with every iteration in their complexity and difficulty, and differ in presentation and placement, the user is unlikely to become tired of them, or frustrated with them. They appear new, despite following the same template of defeating enemies with a sword. Therefore, while repeated exposure to a single terrifying stimulus might (and does, I find) lessen the terror inflicted by it, the same does not seem to hold for multiple such stimuli, spread across the game-world and revealed to the user gradually. In the case of the latter, the (apparent) novelty of the encounters does seem to enhance the user's feeling of terror, or at least conserve it, as does the obscurity of death in general.

By now, the way in which *Dark Souls* produces (and conserves) the feeling of terror in its user should be clear. But what of the delight that Burke mentions? Surely, indulging oneself consistently in terror by being reminded of it at every combat encounter is not exactly delightful. Neither, I think, is substituting terror for frustration. Still, delight is one of the core aspects of the Burkean sublime and the relation between it and terror is worth exploring further. One could argue that the feeling of delight arises when the user is able to complete a challenge, and it does. The problem, however, is that this particular feeling of delight appears only after the feeling of terror subsides, and is not as much related to the terrifying stimulus as it is to the sudden lack of it. Unfortunately, in Burke's conception of the sublime, the relation between terror and delight is not a progressive one – where the person experiencing it moves from terror to delight in one fell swoop – but one of simultaneity. Here, as Philip Shaw points out, "Burke is indebted […] to John Baillie, whose 1747^{5} treatise described sublimity as a 'contradictory' sensation of pleasure and pain" (2006, p. 54). Considering this, it becomes even harder to view death in *Dark Souls* as capable of producing the Burkean sublime, regardless of how terrifying it may be. But perhaps the sublime can be found elsewhere in *Dark Souls*.

If one were to think of death not as the sole source of the sublime in *Dark Souls* but rather a prerequisite for it, a single part of a two-part whole, then all it would take for the sublime to take shape is an aspect of the videogame from which the feeling of delight could be derived,

simultaneous with and contradictory to the feeling of terror; that is, an aspect, a function, or a part of the game that would both terrify and delight the game's user, both at the same time. Here, I cannot help but to think about Baillie's notion of "viewing", of arriving at the sublime through "viewing what is great and awful" (Baillie, 1747, p. 97), instead of interacting with it. That, by and large, is Baillie's point: it is the viewing of terrifying stimuli that allows for delight to be simultaneous with terror as, compared to interaction, viewing is distant (Shaw, 2006, p. 54). However, it is not so much what Baillie meant that intrigues me, but the language that he chose to describe it. While, for Baillie, interaction and viewing are opposed to one-another, in ergodic media they are intertwined and not only that; they complement one another. The user's input, their interaction with the cybertext, is often decided based on what they see, hear, or read in the text. As such, it would make much more sense to look for the sublime not only in the ergodic, cybertextual aspect of *Dark Souls*, but in the non-ergodic, textual aspect of it as well.

Kant

The textual and cybertextual elements of *Dark Souls* are, for the most part, clearly defined. The textual, pre-player world of *Dark Souls* is a fully realized, three-dimensional world that the user/player can explore as a cybertext, a textual, sign-producing machine that forms different sequences of signs depending on the user's input. The game's world, Lordran, is formed of multiple areas, most of which the player must explore in order to reach the end of the game, but that can be explored in any order, at any time, and with differing rates of success. It is, in fact, only after they finish the game that the entirety of Lordran is made available to the player – until then, the user/player is more or less confined to the areas that either they explored already, or that were available from the start.

What I refer to as an "area" is not at all dissimilar from what Aarseth termed "the event space" (Aarseth, "Aporia and Epiphany," p. 33). The event space is a "space determined by the content and the infrastructure of the ergodic system", where the sequence of signs that the user experiences "does not emerge in a fixed, predetermined order", but rather as "one actualization among many possible routes" (ibid.). In *Dark Souls*, this notion of forming a sequence through interaction is not exclusive to a single area/event space, but is applicable to all of them. By extension, it is also applicable to the game-world as a whole, as the user's path through the individual spaces eventually adds up into their path through the world, a collection of all of the game's event spaces.

The approach that the user can choose for traversing *Dark Souls* (as well as any other videogame, for that matter) is two-fold. On the one hand, the user can base their approach purely

on the information presented to them in the immediate act of playing the game. This approach – which is mostly pronounced at the earlier stages of game-playing – relies not on the user's knowledge of the game, but on their ability to correctly and immediately parse the game's system, analyse the game's output, and act on it quickly. On the other hand, the user can also base their approach on the knowledge they accumulate while playing the game, devising a strategy that compiles the user's knowledge of the game's system after it has been interacted with (such as their knowledge of the game's inadequacy feedback function, i.e. death). This way, if the user encounters a challenge that they are able to surmount while traversing the game, then the next time that a challenge is encountered that, in some way, is similar to the last one, the user may try to resolve it in the same way, using the same strategy. As such, this strategy can be described as empirical: a conditioned response, formed through the user's interaction with the videogame's textual and cybertextual elements.

It should, therefore, be possible to categorize the actors in this relation as follows: the immediate response of the user to the game is the intuitive, rational one. Even without knowing much about the videogame in question, the user/player is able to pick it up and interact with it, based on the information communicated to them by the game. The empirically conditioned response to the game – the strategy that the user forms based on their traversal of the game-text – is the empirical aspect of game-playing. It is the aspect where, by engaging with the game's system consistently enough and succeeding/failing at it repeatedly, the user is able to form a general idea of how the game works, how it is supposed to be played, and how to succeed in it. Additionally, following the formation of this idea, this strategy, every subsequent challenge that the user encounters is subject to being parsed through it, as opposed to being parsed independently. Every interaction informs a certain bias, and this bias is then applied to the interactions that follow.

This categorization of the rational and empirical also appears, although not in relation to videogames and with different wording, in the work of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, namely his discussion of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The Kantian sublime, as Phillip Shaw remarks, can be seen as "the struggle [...] between the evidence of the senses (what philosophers refer to as the empirical domain) and the supersensible power of reason (literally over or above sense)" (Shaw, p. 6). Here, the idea of the empirical is, I think, clear enough: the empirical is that which is built upon the senses, that which was experienced by either sight, smell, hearing, tase, or touch; essentially, it is knowledge based on evidence, on experience.

In Kant's view, true to the rationalist tradition, the reason he is writing about in *Critique of Judgement* is the pure, idealistic, a priori reason, free of any previous experience. This kind of reason includes, for instance, concepts such as time, space, and number, concepts that do not need to be experienced empirically in order to be understood/known. By way of example: for a person to recognize that they are looking at one tree instead of three, or at three trees instead of one, the concept of number, of something that allows the person to recognize multiplicity, must already be present in their mind before they start looking at trees (Shaw, 2006, p. 73). Even if they do not know what different numbers are called (that is, if they lack the empirical knowledge that one is called "one", instead of "eno"), they are able to, intuitively, distinguish between "oneness" and "threeness". And, if the pure, idealistic reason is an a priori reason, then the empirical reason, based on the evidence of the senses and experience, is an a posteriori reason.

Interestingly enough, Kant's distinction between a priori and a posteriori reason does not seem to be too far removed from the one that can be identified between the different traversal approaches in *Dark Souls*. Also, since it is from this relation (or this contrast, perhaps) that the Kantian sublime develops, it is worth exploring in a little more detail. The Kantian sublime, while developed from both the rational and the empirical, appears to have a stronger connection to the rational than it does to the empirical, as it is that which:

> cannot be contained in any sensuous [empirical] form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous [empirical] presentation. (Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, 2007, p. 76)

This connection of the sublime to the rational is also noticed by Shaw, for whom the Kantian sublime "refers to things which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form" (Shaw, 2006, p. 78). For Kant, empirical (or, in this case, sensuous) knowledge is more than just the collection of one's empirical experiences. Much like with the formation of strategies in *Dark Souls*, experiencing different phenomena in Kant leads to the experiencer creating ideas/concepts regarding these phenomena. A lack of empirical experience, in this respect, results in a certain conceptual anaemia that makes it impossible for the experiencer to "imagine" (ibid., p. 74), to fully grasp that which they are experiencing. For example, in a person standing

on the seashore at night, a sea-storm may evoke the feeling of sublimity not because it is incomprehensible rationally, but because it cannot be comprehended conceptually. While rationally, the mind can easily comprehend what it is seeing, conceptually it has no point of reference. It is, then, in trying to create this concept from scratch, while lacking the empirical experience, that the Kantian sublime is rooted. As such, the Kantian sublime can be viewed as that which affirms pure reason over empirical reason.

Having mentioned the formation of experience-based strategies in game-playing, identifying an instance of a posteriori knowledge within the game should not be an issue. However, identifying a priori knowledge may be a little more difficult. For now, let us agree that a priori knowledge exists within *Dark Souls*, and it is the knowledge according to which the player judges the initial challenges they encounter.

While the Kantian sublime can be said to develop from the inability of the empirical (sensory) reason to grasp that which it is trying to comprehend, the world of Lordran and the combat challenges contained therein never quite present their user with a situation/event in which this would be the case; at least, not in the world proper. The challenges, despite being consistently terrifying by virtue of uncertainty and novelty, are never exactly incomprehensible, or resistant to conceptualization – in fact, for the most part, they all follow the same concept quite regularly.

I realize that this assertion may come across as rather contradictory, especially considering what I previously argued. After all, the very quality of being novel should point to a certain "a prioriness" in terms of how these challenges are experienced and, to an extent, it does. But while it is true that the challenges in *Dark Souls* manage to remain consistently terrifying due to, in part, being made variable and novel, and by changing in accordance with the user's position in the game-world, this does not mean they are also made to change conceptually. Regardless of how they are executed, the nature/concept of *Dark Souls*' challenges is kept generally the same – the user traverses the world, encounters an enemy, and is tasked with defeating the enemy using whatever means are available to them. Whether the enemy is a snake or a knight, a skeleton or a god is, in this sense, fairly irrelevant; the challenges encountered in the game-world all follow the structure introduced in the tutorial and, as such, are far from being incomprehensible on the conceptual level. However, not the entirety of Lordran is structured in a way that is reminiscent of the tutorial. Aside from containing areas that are clearly accessible by the user, the world of *Dark Souls* also contains a slew of hidden areas, hidden event spaces, that the user must either deliberately search for, or that they stumble upon by chance. One of these areas/event spaces is the ephemeral Ash Lake.

There are two possible configurations in which the user can reach Ash Lake.[6] The first one, where the user reaches it by chance, prior to completing their exploration of Lordran, is not of note here. It is the second configuration, in which Ash Lake is reached only after the game has been explored in full that I am going to focus on, as it is here that the Kantian sublime can be identified most clearly.

The default way of exploring Lordran – here understood as the way of least resistance – is to set out from the Firelink Shrine and head up. After reaching Anor Londo, the game's topmost point, the user receives an item that allows them to reach areas that, previously, had been inaccessible and are, coincidentally, situated in the lower reaches of the game-world. This verticality is not accidental. The column-like shape in which Lordran is constructed not only echoes the game's setting (a fantastical kingdom ruled by gods and daemons), but also contextualizes its various archetypal elements, with the gods inhabiting a city above and separate from the world at large, and the daemons lurking within lava-filled ruins at the world's centre. Yet, aside from elaborating on the game's textuality, the world's construction can also be seen as a potential set-up for the Kantian sublime.

By traversing all of the game-world's mandatory event spaces, the player is able to delineate the world's limits, with Anor Londo as its highest point and the Tomb of the Giants as its lowest. The Tomb of the Giants, a mandatory area at the end of one of the routes accessible from the Firelink Shrine, is, as far as I am concerned, the game-world's lowest-set mandatory event space.[7]

Since *Dark Souls* does not provide its user with a map, delineating the game-world's limits can only be done through exploration and traversal, i.e. empirically. Even after only traversing from the Firelink Shrine to Anor Londo and back, the user will likely have understood the concept of verticality and how prevalent it is in the videogame's design. As such, experiencing the subsequent event spaces that share in this verticality should be neither surprising to the user, nor should it come across as incomprehensible rationally and empirically, as it is both experienceable and rationally sound with respect to the game's fiction. But what is it, then, about Ash Lake that produces so competently the feeling of the sublime? In short, it is how decisively it throws the user's empirical knowledge of the game out of the window.

By the end of the game, the user's knowledge of Lordran and the strategies required to traverse it is, for the most part, complete. Any challenge encountered from that point on, in one of the game's mandatory areas/event spaces, that is (since the game-world can be traversed even after the final boss has been defeated), is likely to only be a rehash of a challenge already

completed previously and, as such, is neither terrifying nor novel. But since Ash Lake is not a mandatory area and, in this case, has not been encountered before, it is not known to the user.

In the case of Ash Lake, the user has no other choice but to approach it in the same way they did the rest of Lordran and expect it to function the same, too. Ash Lake, however, is very much unlike the rest of Lordran. It can, to a certain extent, be even said to exist outside of Lordran, as it is quite out of tune with the rest of the game-world. In fact, when compared to the relatively grounded, fantastical aesthetic of Lordran, Ash Lake's aesthetic is likely to come across as eerily dream-like; much unlike its name would suggest, Ash Lake is a seemingly endless ocean, sporting giant trees that grow out of the water and, like pillars, carry the entirety of Lordran on their branches. It is situated, quite explicitly, below the rest of the world, even farther down than the game's lowest mandatory event space. It is a primordial space the "otherness" of which is both aesthetic and topographical, as it resides outside of the mandatory space that the user has to traverse.

Although the only way to reach Ash Lake is through a hidden passage in Blighttown, a part of it can also be seen from the Tomb of the Giants. This part, however, is merely a distant vista that cannot be traversed, only looked at, a "sneak peak" into what Ash Lake is and what it looks like that can be seen as a way of contextualizing the user's future discovery of it. One could argue, theoretically, that by confirming with the user the in-game existence of Ash Lake, the game effectively rids it of any novelty/obscurity it could have had and prevents the future formation of the sublime from taking place, by providing the user with an empirical experience of it. I disagree. While it is true that *Dark Souls* points out the existence of Ash Lake prior to the user's reaching it,[8] its reveal does not make the future discovery of the space itself any less impactful. Quite the contrary, I would say, as the Ash Lake that the vista represents, with respect to the column-like layout of the game-world, is a topographical impossibility. The way it is shown, it simply cannot be a part of it. The portion of Ash Lake that is shown in the vista is, quite clearly, parallel to the traversable, column-like game-world that the user has come to recognize and, as such, is explicitly not a part of it. The idea that the vista conveys, then, is not that of a possible space, but of an impossible one. It is a space that is not to be expected in-game, a hint at the game's lore, a textual aspect, and not much more. Additionally, the vista's portion of Ash Lake is only partially visible, thereby remaining relatively obscure even by the time it is actually discovered.

In addition to using the area's structure and position within the game-world to disorient the player, *Dark Souls* also uses Ash Lake's (and the area's leading up to it) layout as a means of terrifying them. In fact, it is from this relation, between the obscurity and terror of it, that the

sublimity of Ash Lake is born. As for the terror: the entrance to Ash Lake, hidden behind two illusory walls (which sometimes appear in *Dark Souls*, and can be dissolved by being attacked or rolled through), is an area/event space called The Great Hollow, a hollowed-out space in one of the great trees that spring out of Ash Lake. This area, which, in essence, is a multi-track downward spiral that the player must move through very carefully lest they fall to their death, is one of the very few platforming (or, semi-platforming) segments in *Dark Souls*. There is only one bonfire in The Great Hollow, placed at its beginning. And, since the area's topography does not match any one previously traversed, traversing The Great Hollow is exceedingly stressful. Interestingly enough, it does not take much traversal to reach the end of The Great Hollow. The distance to be travelled between its beginning and its end is rather condensed, compared to the game's other event spaces. Yet, it appears that the more condensed the space is, the more stressful (and, by extension, terrifying) traversing it becomes.

The platforming in The Great Hollow is made more difficult by the presence of enemies, who attack as the user tries to make their way down the hollowed-out tree and raise the level of challenge substantially. Instead of focusing on the platforming only, the user must split their attention between both platforming and defence, which leaves them with less time to assess the situation/challenge and produce an appropriate approach. Considering Burke's view on terror and its relation, in his view, to danger, traversing The Great Hollow can be seen as one of the more terrifying experiences in *Dark Souls*. Not only does it present the user/player with danger on all sides, it also contradicts their existing strategies for dealing with danger and forces them to form a new one on the fly, so-to-speak.

The terror that the user feels while traversing The Great Hollow is, in my opinion, strongest at its end, the point at which The Great Hollow leads into Ash Lake. There are two reasons for this: the first one is that, after reaching the bottom of the hollowed-out tree, the player encounters the space's strongest enemy so far, that is, its most adverse challenge. Considering that they may have been weakened while traversing the hollow, this is an incredibly dangerous prospect. Facing the strongest enemy while weakened might lead to death (more decidedly than traversing The Great Hollow itself might), which, in turn, would return the player's/user's avatar back to the beginning of The Great Hollow, to the bonfire. Thus, by reaching the event space's end, the user actually exposes themselves to danger the most.

The second reason for the final stages of The Great Hollow producing the most terror in the user, is that The Great Hollow does not lead into Ash Lake directly. Instead, the entrance to Ash Lake is hidden behind a fog wall, which, over the course of traversing the game-world, the player would have learned to associate with either a boss encounter, or a challenging area. Yet,

since the user cannot see beyond the fog wall, they have no way of knowing what is in store for them after they pass through it. Hence, the potentially weakened user/player is faced with a choice: they can either return to the bonfire, replenish their health, and attempt to traverse The Great Hollow again without being weakened, or to pass through the fog wall, face whatever it is that is waiting for them there and, potentially, die and face the punishment for it. In the case of the latter, it is likely that the user will be entering Ash Lake in a state of terror, conscious of the danger that might be waiting for them there and of the punishment they are going to face should they fail. In both cases, however, there is a strong chance that traversing the fog wall will see the user terrified, as what they likely expect from passing through the fog is yet another challenge, with quite the severe punishment.

This, however, does not happen. After passing through the fog wall in a state of terror, or a state expectant of terror, the user is presented with the vast, eerie expanse of Ash Lake, its bluish air and endless trees, and no perceivable danger in sight. Above, there is a vast cloud that the tops of the giant trees get lost in, and the "lake" itself spreads out far over the horizon. So do the giant trees, which, in the far distance, can still be seen clearly. This is an impossible space, and the more it is observed, the more impossible it becomes. The initial impression that Ash Lake leaves the user with goes against everything that the user has come to expect from the game: the danger, while present in Ash Lake, is kept at bay until the user approaches it, and not visible from the entry point. Even the placement of the event space is strange, as it breaks away from what the user is likely to believe are the game-world's limits.

Unsurprisingly, the user may find themselves in a state of conflict when faced with this revelation: the space that they currently inhabit, the one that they can rationally comprehend, is a space that, empirically, is outside of their grasp. Functionally, the space appears to be peaceful, while their knowledge of the game requires it to be not. Topographically, it is an entirely new frontier, one that they should not have been able to reach, as it breaks-away from what was previously established, experienced. The concept of Ash Lake that the user formed after it has been discovered is, for the most part, irreconcilable with the user's empirical knowledge of the game-world. It is a space that they should not be in, yet it is perfectly reachable and inhabitable. Including the user's feeling terror being immediately and unexpectedly met by the space's serenity, it is in Ash Lake that *Dark Souls* is at its most sublime.

Conclusion

The feeling of terror that the player enters Ash Lake with is met with serenity and awe, and the ensuing conflict of these contradictory feelings ultimately produces the feeling of the sublime. As such, the particular terror that is felt by *Dark Souls*' user is mitigated not through distance, during the formation of the sublime, but through an opposite (and, perhaps, even equally strong) feeling, which in this case is tranquillity. Still, it is not merely the terror and the topographical knowledge that seem to come together in creating the game's sublime. The game's aesthetic also plays a role in the undermining of the user's empirical knowledge of the game, as perceiving Ash Lake from the point of view of the game's fiction renders it alien and near incomprehensible.

The player's journey through the game-world primes them for a number of expectations, many of which are subverted after their arrival to Ash Lake. Ash Lake, as an event space, represents a place that, within the context of the game's fiction, has more of a mythological connotation and, cybertextually, exists outside of the game-world proper. As such, the very possibility of reaching Ash Lake is already at odds with the player's empirical knowledge of the game-world, and leads to this knowledge being challenged and, eventually, altered. In experiencing Ash Lake for the first time, the player is forced to try and place the event space according to what they understand the game-world's layout to be. As a result, the player's experience with the space is sublime, as their empirical knowledge at the moment of entry directly contradicts their immediate, pure experience of the event space.

Even textually, Ash Lake is an impossible space. The vista that the player witnesses when first entering Ash Lake invites them to imagine a space beyond not only the ones they can access, but also beyond what is attributed for by the game's fiction. The presence of the giant trees begs to be made sense of, and the player can, of course, try, relying again on their empirical knowledge of the game. However, while one can easily determine that the trees – much like the one housing The Great Hollow – connect Ash Lake to the world above, one cannot be sure of much else. Unlike The Great Hollow, the player cannot be sure whether the trees connect Ash Lake to Lordran, or to some other, yet-unidentified place. As a result, the player is left to guess and to try to complete the concept implied by the vista presented to them. Ultimately, though, this attempt is bound to be unsuccessful, as nothing about the player's empirical knowledge of the game, nor the game's fiction, provides them with sufficient information to reach a conclusion. The player is trapped in a state of unknowing, of attempting to grasp that for which their empirical knowledge of the game simply is not enough. They are, quite literally, trapped in the Kantian sublime.

Terror, certainly, plays a role in the player's first experience with Ash Lake. Nevertheless, its application as the decisive factor for the game's sublime is, at best, tricky. If one goes by Burke's understanding of terror as being delightful at a distance, and of this delight as being sublime, then virtually every combat encounter, every new area assumed to be dangerous, and every potential mistake that the player could make could be viewed as sublime. This, needless to say, is probably not the case. The terror that the player feels as they enter Ash Lake is almost entirely empirical – it stems from the player's experience with the game and their ability to recognize the patterns that the game uses. In encountering the fog gate that leads into Ash Lake, the player mostly fears what the fog gate represents: a challenge. A level of obscurity is undoubtedly present, however, and is the reason why Burke's approach cannot be easily discarded.

Much like with the player's knowledge of the game-world, Ash Lake subverts the player's expectations of what will be waiting for them beyond the fog gate. As such, one can conclude that the way the sublime works in *Dark Souls* – specifically if viewed ergodically – is mostly through subverting the player's knowledge of the game's mechanics, their knowledge of the game-world, and the game's fiction/textuality itself. Vella's approach, which approaches the game from the opposite perspective, finds sublimity in "the game system preclude[ing] the player from direct knowledge of the game system" (Vella 2015), that is, in the inherent unknowability of the game as such. It is a valid and, I find, interesting approach, and is of great help in understanding just how vast the scope of the potential applications of the aesthetic category of the sublime really is – not only for *Dark Souls*, but videogames in general.

Endnotes

[1] This publication was made possible thanks to targeted funding provided by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports for specific research, granted in 2023 to Palacký University Olomouc (IGA_FF_2023_062).

[2] Norath is the fictional world of *EverQuest*.

[3] Such an approach to game design is by no means exclusive to *Dark Souls*; it does, in fact, appear in a myriad of different games and is, by and large, the standard.

[4] This, of course, is not to say that combat does not play a significant role in *Dark Souls*. Rather, it is to say that combat is hardly the game's sole focus.

[5] John Baillie's "An Essay on the Sublime", which was published posthumously in 1747 and in which the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain in the context of the sublime originates.

[6] Not including searching for the instructions online.

[7] Disregarding The Abyss.

[8] In this playing of the game.

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