

Giantness and Excess in *Dark Souls*

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ABSTRACT

Using the *Dark Souls* series as an example, I examine how a frame of ‘monster of excess’ can be used to read giantness in digital games. The monster of excess finds a paradigmatic example in the giant, an age-old mythic figure still prevalent within digital games. Many elements are directly borrowed or translated from other artistic forms such as film and literature. But, in this paper, I focus on how excess is encoded ludically, and how that links with the more representational and aesthetic depictions of excess within the games. I find that elements such as the camera and the game’s interface, along with the player-character are all affected by giantness, with giants seeming to exist in excess of the games’ established frames.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Applied computing → Media arts.

KEYWORDS

Dark Souls, giants, monsters, excess, abject, sublime

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many monsters can be considered ‘monsters of excess’, but giants can almost always be seen through this lens and tend to be paradigmatic examples. This manifests at the physical and visual level: giants tend to be humans (usually men), but bigger. Their proportions and general size are all in excess of typical human limits. But excess is also seen in their traits, behaviours and actions. Using the monster Grendel from *Beowulf* [Donoghue 2002] as an example, Dana Oswald remarks that “[h]e is both a monster and a man — a creature characterized by an excess of masculinity in terms of size and strength, but also by clear human needs and desires” [Oswald 2010, p. 76]. She continues:

Grendel is not just here [at Heorot] to kill but to consume; this is a hall for feasting, and he does just that. But Grendel’s eating is more than ravenous, and even more than bestial. He devours every part of this body,

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as the poet tells us, even the hands and feet – such excess reveals indiscriminate consumption. This is not the work of any familiar predator. [Oswald 2010, p. 76]

By noting that Grendel’s feasting is “not the work of any familiar predator” [Oswald 2010, p. 76], Oswald hits upon what troubles us most about these giants of excess masculinity: man is capable of far more terrifying acts of evil than any natural enemy, any familiar predator whose urges and behaviours can be explained by necessity and nature. The only thing keeping people from such barbarism would seem to be the cultural and societal boundaries demarcating the acceptable from the unacceptable, but in these giants those boundaries are shown to be weak and arbitrary. Grendel in this scene embodies typical—even celebrated—masculine traits: immense physical strength, large size and a big appetite. But by taking them to horrific excess, Grendel demonstrates the paradox that these traits are simultaneously desirable and aspirational but also abject and monstrous. Grendel’s physical appearance is not given much description in the text, which focuses more on his desires, evil spirit and the fact that he is descended from Cain [Donoghue 2002, l. 99–114], and so whether or not Grendel can be considered a giant is debatable (although his head is later described as requiring four men to carry with difficulty [Donoghue 2002, l. 1638–1639]).

Oswald’s reading of Grendel also feeds into her later analysis of giants more broadly:

The giant is that which man both abjects and desires: his physical excess is both gross and aspirational. He is the self that man longs to be, the ultimate patriarch and the perfect vision of masculinity and unity that he wants to achieve. The giant’s body is the more complete self to which the human man never can measure up. [Oswald 2010, p. 160]

This extends too to yet more typically masculine traits, such as sexual desire. The Giant of Mont Saint Michel in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* [Benson and Foster 1994] has such excess of male sexual desire and power that, Oswald notes, “his penis not only penetrates, but tears her in half” [Oswald 2010, p. 167]. This excess of the desirable traits of sexual desire and power means that the giant is unable to produce an heir at a time when the continuation of the family line was seen as greatly important. A culturally agreed balancing and limiting of valued traits becomes necessary by the existence of giants such as these.

In this paper, I look at how giants in the *Dark Souls* series [From-Software 2011, 2014, 2016] are constituted by the game’s system. How do the game’s systems, procedures, mechanics and interfaces render excesses and create and demarcate the giant?

2 GIANTS IN GAMES

A vital difference in giants in digital games compared with literature, for example, is how the giant is manifested in the text. Jaroslav Švelch makes the comparison between monsters in literature and digital games using a dichotomy between “the *sublime thesis* and *encyclopedic containment*” [Švelch 2018, p. 10]. A term borrowed from Stephen T. Asma [Asma 2012], who applies Immanuel Kant’s conception of the sublime to monsters, Švelch sums up the sublime thesis as a “prominent strand of monster scholarship [which] emphasizes the fact that monsters confound our perceptive and cognitive abilities, and fill us with awe and terror” [Švelch 2018, p. 1]. “But video games present us with a different kind of monster”, he claims, “a monster that is designed to be confronted and (usually) defeated by the player. Unlike the ideal ‘sublime’ monster, it is encoded in computational systems and well defined in the game’s rules” [Švelch 2018, p. 1]. This is the notion of encyclopedic containment, which “is connected to a general urge to control and contain the unknown, and the contingencies of the chaotic world” [Švelch 2018, p. 3].

For Švelch, the computational nature of games is the primary reason for this. In an earlier work, he draws on Wolfgang Iser’s notion of *indeterminacy*: the written word conjures an image only in the reader’s imagination. Such indeterminacy which allows for the fundamentally unknowable is not possible in a rule-based game. For a monster to exist in a game, it must have predetermined (or procedurally determined) appearance, mass, behaviours, abilities, stats and so on, all of which are codified and computed, and which can therefore be *learned* and *comprehended* by the player.

So while giants in games do draw from a large range of literary, aesthetic, visual and cinematographic vocabularies in their construction, those aspects cannot tell the whole story. They cannot fully account for how the giant is defined, manifested and demarcated in games. To illustrate this issue, I explore the bosses of the *Dark Souls* series.

Much has been written on FromSoftware’s iconic *Souls* series. Perhaps most pertinent to this paper is Daniel Vella’s conception of the *ludic sublime*, exemplified for him in *Dark Souls* [Vella 2015]. Vella’s notion of the sublime might offer a counterpoint to Švelch’s reading of videogame monsters, that they (thus far, at least) fail to capture the sublime due to their computational nature.

For Vella, the ludic sublime manifests in *Dark Souls* through the interplay between mystery and mastery. He highlights a central tension in digital games:

The player is driven onwards by the *expectation* of the perfectly-ordered, rule-bound *cosmos* that proceduralism locates in games, but, faced with the impossibility of obtaining direct knowledge of the underlying game system, she is constantly drawn to confront the necessarily tentative nature, not only of her interpretation of her experience of the game into the ordered form of a cosmos, but of her direct phenomenal experience of the game object itself. [Vella 2015]

The ‘black box’ nature of game systems – a disconnect between our inputs and how the system interprets and reacts to them – generates an unknowability. “Even after extended play has resulted in mastery of the game, there remains at least an opening for the

possibility of surprise and further revelation”, Vella states [Vella 2015], underscoring how although games invite us to, in Švelch’s terms, “devise and perform a winning strategy” in response to its challenges and monsters [Švelch 2013, p. 197], the player never gains a *complete* understanding of the system – at least in more complex games such as *Dark Souls*.

This mechanism, Vella argues, forms the basis for how *Dark Souls* fosters a ludic sublime. The game works to

arrest the player’s judgment and prevent her from arriving at a stable cosmic understanding, preserving a sense of mystery and gesturing towards a whole that escapes the player’s conceptualizing grasp. In various ways, *Dark Souls* works to actively remind the player of the limits and the inadequacy of her perceptual opening onto the milieu of the gameworld, the computational systems underlying it, and the space of possibilities they structure. [Vella 2015]

The mystery of the game’s cosmos combined with the player’s inadequacy lies at the heart of *Dark Souls*’ sublimity. Švelch argues that Vella’s conception of the ludic sublime might manifest temporarily – when the system is not very well-known – but mastery of the game combined with extensive information on fan wikis and similar resources ultimately dispel this, even if every minutiae of the system is not understood [Švelch 2018, p.10]. So where do giants specifically fit into this dynamic?

3 DARK SOULS

3.1 Lore and Gameworld

The player’s entrance into Anor Londo, which marks roughly the middle of *Dark Souls*, is an aesthetically sublime one. The player-character carried by gargoyle-esque Batwing Demons following the arduous trials of Sen’s Fortress culminating in a fight with the giant Iron Golem, the camera zooms out to reveal the vista. Grey clouds loom overhead, cast back by intense sunlight battling in from the distance. The city itself is shrouded in darkness, remarking both upon its mysteries and upon its insignificance in the awesome presence of nature. Only the cathedral forces itself into view, piercing the sky. This sublime introduction to Anor Londo befits the fact that this is the city of the gods, Gwyn’s seat of power when the Age of Fire, now spluttering and fading, was at its zenith. And the architecture of the city does not let the player forget that fact. Passing through rooms many times larger than necessary, flanked by statues of heroic figures, and climbing staircases with separate tracks for player-character-sized entities and larger denizens (figure 1), it is clear that this is a city of and for giants.

But the world the player enters is a ruin, an echo of former glory. The game’s cryptic lore offers some hints as to why these giants fell from glory, each to do with excess in some respect. Manus, for instance, is a human turned grotesque and giant due to an excess of humanity. Gwyn, first of the gods and bringer of the Age of Fire, is brought down by the constant struggle for light and fire over darkness. The final boss of *Dark Souls*, Gwyn, is a ragged husk, brought down in his desperation to never let the fire fade. Instead of the usual bombastic score of boss fights, the final fight with Gwyn is set to a melancholic, understated piano track [Sakuraba 2011]. Instead of the Lord of Fire, he is now named the Lord of



Figure 1: The main stairs to the Anor Londo cathedral.

Cinder. Eschewing an epic culmination of the player’s arduous journey, *Dark Souls* instead paints this figure of legend as a pathetic, scrabbling husk who fights not for any purpose anymore, but rather for lack of knowing what else to do.

Through these depictions, *Dark Souls* instils in the player a sense of futility. The grandest cities can be reduced to shadowy ruin, the most powerful entities reduced to pathetic husks devoid of purpose. The giant becomes a figure that represents the towering grandeur and influence of a past that has fallen so far. The giants in the story are emblematic of that fall from grace, and their presence in the game in their ragged state forces the player to see the living, human cost of their excesses.

The position of the giants of *Dark Souls* within the lore, however, is not my central point, but rather serves as the context for the impact giants have on gameplay. In this analysis of giants in the gameworld, they take on functions similar to the tradition monster of excess: desirable traits are embodied and taken to a grotesque extreme, displaying the need to limit that trait. In what follows, I look more closely at how giants are positioned within the games’ systems and gameplay mechanics.

3.2 System and Gameplay

The game’s first boss in the tutorial area, the Undead Asylum, unexpectedly falls from the ceiling and takes up most of the room (figure 2). For new players unfamiliar with this part of the game, the most direct and obvious route to this point leads the player there equipped only with a Straight Sword Hilt, an exceptionally weak weapon. Due to this and the small size of the room compared with the towering demon and therefore a lack of manoeuvrability options, it is an encounter designed for failure in the first instance.

This moment teaches the new player of *Dark Souls* that bosses are intentionally difficult and will likely take multiple attempts to defeat. Death is inevitable, and the player must accept this early on. It teaches the player that through perseverance, alternative tactics can often be found. By dodging one or two of the boss’ attacks and running into a small corridor down the side, the player will then find a proper sword and shield. Following the path further, they will find a balcony overlooking the hall from which they can perform a plunging attack, dealing massive damage to the boss.



Figure 2: The Asylum Demon boss near the beginning of *Dark Souls*.

This encounter early on is formative for the player of *Dark Souls*, establishing from the outset the game’s main loop: the player encounters an enemy, is quickly and easily killed by it – engendering feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness – but then, with some experimentation and persistence, eventually builds their knowledge of the boss and hones their skill sufficiently to defeat them. An inadequacy is instilled in the player, but to overcome that the game ensures that the player is able to find potential solutions within the mystery of the surrounding area. The game’s first boss encounter embodies Vella’s spiralling mastery–mystery dyad.

This inadequacy is reinforced in three key ways by the series’ giant bosses. First, the giants simply dwarf the player-character. Second, they severely restrict the player’s movement by simply taking up more of the arena. The room in which the Asylum Demon is fought, for example, is relatively small and peppered with pillars, so avoiding the giant’s large swings is simply more difficult due to its size relative to the environment. Thirdly the series’ giants also work against the player’s interface.

As a game that uses a third-person camera perspective, combat with more or less equally-sized opponents is well afforded. The player can see their avatar, the opponent and their surroundings with ease. Environmental hazards can be anticipated and planned around concurrently with observing the enemy’s patterns of movement. The games’ giant bosses work against this, however. Their sheer size is not accounted for by the camera and interface. The camera could, for instance, zoom out or turn parts of the enemy translucent, but it does not. And so in many boss fights the player is never able to position the camera such that they can attack the boss *and* observe and anticipate its attacks and movements *and* watch out for environmental hazards.

With The Last Giant boss in *Dark Souls II* [FromSoftware 2014] (figure 3), we see an example of a further fundamental interface difference between giant and non-giant opponents, which began in the second game of the series. The giant’s limbs are each assigned a separate lock-on point. Rather than locking onto the centre of the boss’ torso no matter its size, against bosses like The Last Giant the player may instead lock onto specific limbs.

In this way, the perhaps frustrating behaviour of the camera against giant opponents makes the player *aware* of it. This breaks down a barrier between the game and the player that is usually



Figure 3: Fighting the *Dark Souls II* boss The Last Giant.

mediated by the player-character. Typically, the player-character can be thought of as the means by which the player can interact with the gameworld and have presence within it. The camera primarily allows us to observe the effects of our interactions and to gather visual information used to inform our further interactions. The disjoint between avatar and player in this sense becomes even more clear in a game such as *Dark Souls* which uses a third-person perspective. The camera does not represent or stand in for the player-character's eyes, rather it is a disembodied view on the world. Michael Nitsche makes a similar distinction here in his analysis of the virtual camera. He observes that the videogame camera represents "a hybrid between architectural navigable space and cinematically represented space" [Nitsche 2008, p.85]. The camera in a digital game acts both as a tool for the player to navigate space and for meaning to be conveyed by reappropriating cinematic and photographic techniques. The camera is at once tied to the avatar, the player and the gameworld.

Such a distinction, Daniel Black remarks, means that "the player can be looking at the game body as a separate, externalized entity while still feeling that her capacity to act on and in the game is expressed by that separate, externalized entity" [Black 2017, p. 191]. This creates a barrier of sorts between the gameworld and the player. Although the giants of *Dark Souls* do not interact with the camera directly nor acknowledge its presence, they do bring to the fore the limitations of the camera. Their excessive size forces the player to consider the camera and how it is used, drawing their attention out of the gameworld and onto the framing device for that gameworld. In a sense, then, this extends the threat of the excessive giants beyond the avatar to the player as well. The player's informative control, their "ideal viewpoint" [Black 2017, p. 191], by way of the third-person camera is challenged when, for instance, a part of a giant's leg covers the entire screen. This can be described as a sort of metaludic ontolepsis, to appropriate a term from Raine Koskima [Koskima 2000, chap. 4]: a leaking of ludic aspects through the boundaries separating gameworld from player. The player is made to feel small, both by comparison of their avatar to the giant and small themselves in their view of the gameworld.

This effect which can perhaps be described as 'breaking out of the camera' can be read as a form of excess. The camera does not accommodate the giants' large size, and so the giant is seen to exist in excess of the game's frame – the frame through which the player

sees the game environment. This further underscores the giant as the monster of alterity. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, the giant is the "Intimate Stranger" [Cohen 1999, p. xi]: too monstrous to be human, but too human to be so easily cast out.

The excess encoded in the game's interface here reflects the diegetic lore of many of the giants of *Dark Souls* too. Manus, for instance, was born of an excess of humanity, his "humanity went wild", the in-game description of the Soul of Manus reads [FromSoftware 2012]. But unlike other representations of excess within the game (Seath the Scaleless' obsessive thirst for knowledge which drove him to lose his sanity, for example), the excess of size that the giants exhibit has this effect of drawing the player's attention to some of the conditions of their gameplay, such as the camera and its limitations.

4 CONCLUSION

Giantness in the *Dark Souls* games is close to the series' core, acting as a key embodiment of the broader theme of excess that permeates its gameworld. Crucially, it's an embodiment which feels all the more visceral as it pushes at the boundary of the game's frame in the form of the camera. This example shows how excess can manifest ludically. By pushing at the game's frame, the relationship between game, avatar and player is disrupted, or at least brought to the fore.

Indeed, the game's frame itself is brought to the player's attention by that which exceeds it. The result is that the games' themes of inadequacy, futility, hopelessness and the sublime are brought forward by the representational and aesthetic elements, but find a particularly powerful *ludic* embodiment in the games' giants, underscoring also their centrality to the gameworld.

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