This is a pre-print draft for:
Gualeni, S. “A World Beyond our Understanding: Madman’s Knowledge,” in Ford, D., Gualeni, S., Van de Mosselaer, N. & Vella, D. (eds.) *Scholar’s Codex*.
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The commercial and critical acclaim of FromSoftware video game titles such as *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* is due – to a large extent – to their being extraordinarily challenging and intricate. One could even argue that the Souls videogames successfully leverage an ‘aesthetics of failure,’ in that they systematically put players in situations that are not only punishing and difficult to overcome, but also bordering on the inscrutable, where the meaning is hard (and sometimes impossible) to grasp fully and unambiguously. FromSoftware games are characterized by convoluted level topographies and vague and fragmentary information about their fictional worlds. The Japanese developer’s intention to make players feel lost and unwelcome is evident in several aspects of their approach to game design and worldbuilding (see, for instance, Bonfire Ascetic [p. 124]). Secret passages, perplexing descriptions, and the occasional illusory wall also add to the feeling that the Souls videogames were deliberately designed to resist being traversed and understood.

Discussing the kind of aesthetics of failure outlined above, game scholar Daniel Vella introduces the notion of the *ludic sublime*. The experience of the sublime has been traditionally associated with emotions of awe and astonishment that arise from encountering an object (or a phenomenon) whose greatness defies our rational comprehension. In line with this understanding, Vella presents the ludic sublime as an overwhelming feeling that emerges from the players’ “drive towards mastery of the game coming face-to-face with the impossibility of obtaining complete, direct knowledge of the underlying system.” [1] Analyzing *Dark Souls* in particular, he observes that various ways of obfuscating in-game information are at work in FromSoftware’s pursuit of the ludic sublime. Among these design strategies, Vella focuses on how the developers intentionally made the boundaries of the game world fuzzy and difficult to identify and on the methodical vagueness which consistently shrouds FromSoftware’s descriptions of its in-game items and their effects. Design decisions that involve the obfuscation of information abound in all the games in the Souls series. The in-game item that was chosen for this entry of *Scholar’s Codex* – Madman’s Knowledge – is particularly useful for discussion, in that it highlights a few such design decisions.

Madman’s Knowledge appears in multiple instances throughout the game world of *Bloodborne*. Evidently of Lovecraftian inspiration, the item description

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tells of a (human) mind that came into contact with the arcane wisdom of obscure, ancient beings. That description also informs players that this knowledge is unearthly and unfit for human brains, leading to madness. The in-game depiction of Madman’s Knowledge consists of a human skull that – unable to contain the eldritch wisdom it received – cracked open. Inside the fractured skull shines the silhouette of a slug-like creature known as a ‘phantasm.’ The visual rendition and the textual description of this in-game item exemplify FromSoftware’s ambition to evoke a sense of the sublime. Neither aspect of this in-game object could be considered an attempt to

present the contents of that arcane wisdom to the players, or to explain to them what coming into contact with Great Ones feels like for the characters inhabiting the fictional world of *Bloodborne* (also see Pearl Slug [p. 166]). A similar *Bloodborne* item that appears to have been designed with this kind of aesthetics of failure in mind is Great One's Wisdom, which is depicted as a shattered skull teeming with several small mysterious phantasms.

In *Bloodborne*, Madman's Knowledge and Great One's Wisdom are not merely indications of the presence of "an ineffable whole that extends beyond [the player's] necessarily limited perception and cosmic understanding of the game at any given moment." [1] They are also in-game resources that can be used and sold like any other consumable in the Souls series. If traded, Madman's Knowledge grants the player a few Blood Echoes. If consumed, instead, Madman's Knowledge raises Insight, which negatively affects the (fictional) mental stability of the Hunter, making them more vulnerable to certain kinds of threats and allowing them to see and hear elements of the game world that they would not ordinarily be able to perceive.

In the game, the variable Insight has obvious ties with the wisdom of the Great Ones. What it denotes precisely inside the fiction is never explicitly presented to the players. The mysterious and divine gift of Insight is, however, not only an ineffable part of *Bloodborne*'s narrative; it is also a player-related variable that is banally enumerated in the game interface. The tension between a game element's fiction and function is a hallmark of horror videogames and the Souls series. It arises from the clash between the developers' desire to evoke overwhelming, awe-inspiring emotions and the need to convey those feelings through a computational system. In this regard, it might be revealing to observe that games and videogames typically quantify extraordinary

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status effects such as madness, frenzy, and terror through commonplace interface indicators such as bars, counters, and gauges of various kinds. The same tension is evident in *Dark Souls*, where a variable called Humanity refers to the inscrutable darkness at the heart of every human being, while also serving ordinary, practical purposes within the game (among other effects, those of progressively increasing the player-character's resistance to deadly curses and the chance that enemies will drop useful items).

Returning to an earlier point, it is important to emphasize that the *ludic sublime* – in line with its Romantic origins – is an aesthetic experience that is both subjective and temporary. In our daily lives, we encounter the world around us in various ways and over a certain period of time. We typically acquire knowledge of the things that surround us by perceiving them via our senses and through the rational organization of those perceptions. As we experience the same phenomena repeatedly, we typically start to recognize patterns, form expectations, and develop a sense of familiarity with them. This way, even the most dramatic landscapes eventually lose their initial impact, becoming habitual, ordinary sights. Poets express a similar sentiment when they lament how their once-powerful verses turn into trite drivel and drivel after being read too many times.

In a 2011 paper, game scholar Paul Martin notes that the habituation process described above also affects our embodied, interactive experience of artificial worlds. He argues that – much like real-life experiences – players are given the means to explore game worlds in a variety of ways and on several occasions. With familiarity, Martin writes, places and events that initially felt mysterious and awe inspiring become mundane. [2] Playthrough after playthrough, a game world transitions from being unknown and challenging to feeling commonplace and boring. Once experientially consumed in that way, the players' experience of a game world can engender a feeling of *Weltschmerz*. This term originates from the Romantic era and is often translated as "world-weariness." It indicates a sense of disappointment that arises from recognizing that a world – be it actual or virtual – is finite, banal, and ultimately inadequate to satisfy one's intellectual and emotional aspirations. To mitigate the prospect of dissatisfaction with their work, game developers adopt a number of design strategies aimed at slowing down the experiential erosion of

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videogames. [3] Those solutions typically involve obfuscation strategies (e.g. making the spatial finitude of the game world less conspicuous) as well as various narrative devices that rely on unreliability, instability, and vagueness. These design decisions are not only meant to elicit a sense of the ludic sublime, as argued by Vella, but also invite the players to imagine an expansive and often ambiguous world that lies beyond the limited amount of information that constitutes a videogame world.

As outlined above, information about the fiction and the functioning of a game world can usually be directly obtained via in-game experience. Knowledge about the game can, however, also be gleaned indirectly from secondary sources: players can get to know and understand the effects of a particular consumable on the player-character, the meaning of a certain in-game variable, or the significance of a particularly obscure narrative passage by reading official walkthrough guides, perusing game community websites, watching Let's Play videos, or datamining the video game's source code. Take a practical example: in *Bloodborne*, the effects of the in-game variable Insight are never explained to the player. Its meaning and functioning can be inferred by experimenting with the game system (i.e. gathering ludic knowledge) or learned indirectly (i.e. acquiring relevant information through meta-ludic means, that is from online forums, fan wikis, developers' interviews, playthroughs on YouTube, and so on). [4]

To summarize, video games typically present us with incomplete information about their game worlds. Some video games, like those in the Souls series, are particularly reticent in that regard. FromSoftware's approach to game design, in its deliberate reliance on obfuscation, evidently aspires to evoke feelings of uncertainty in the players, and maybe even sublime ones. It also invites players to look for clues and piece together answers to their questions through individual research as well as via the communal sharing of game-related information, an aspect of the experience of the Souls games that is central to several other entries in this codex, such as Pendant. Information about a game world and its functioning can be obtained by players even if it is not directly communicated by the game in question or by its para-ludic material. From playing the game as well as from secondary sources, for example, players of *Bloodborne* can learn that the variable Insight cannot exceed the limit value of 99. They can also learn that when their Insight is equal to or greater

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than 60, the distant cry of a baby will be heard in almost all game locations. Certain omissions and gaps in a work of fiction, however, can never be compensated for, not even through collective interpretative efforts or datamining. There are, in other words, aspects of the game that are bound to remain indeterminate and mysterious. *Bloodborne* players cannot, for example, ever discover who the Great Ones are, where they came from, or what arcane knowledge they imparted to human beings. The information needed to answer those questions is simply not in *Bloodborne* to be discovered. There can be speculation and suggestions, but certainty about those narrative aspects of the game cannot be achieved through gameplay, nor are they buried somewhere in the millions of lines of code that constitute the game's underlying logic. This irreparable incompleteness bars the audience from ever attaining a complete understanding of the fictional world in question, and while some of this missing information might be experienced as annoying plot holes, it should be emphasized that – although undoubtedly posing limits to our appreciation of fiction – incompleteness is not in itself a detracting quality or a blemish in a work. French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot considered informational 'poverty' to be the 'very essence' of any kind of fiction. Fictional incompleteness can also have evocative effects, and can be deliberately employed to elicit desirable feelings like the aforementioned sublime. One of the most common expressive uses of fictional incompleteness is that of open endings. [5] Unsurprisingly, several of the finales of Souls games are precisely this: inconclusive, and only paving the way for further speculation.

The distinction between redeemable and irredeemable absences of in-game information also maps onto another dichotomy: that between logical/mechanical aspects of a videogame and its aesthetic/narrative elements. This parallel might suggest that the missing information on the logical/mechanical functioning of a videogame can always be reverse-engineered or dug out of its source code while aesthetic/narrative kinds of incompleteness are forever irredeemable. Although this is usually true, as was the case with Madman's Knowledge, there are exceptions to this general rule that are worth considering. For example, examining alternative or older versions of a work of fiction (be it an alpha version of a videogame, the early draft of a novel, or the 'director's cut' of a movie) can provide clues and information

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about narrative or aesthetic elements of the work that are not present in versions that were released to the public. Dialogues, scenes, and details that were excised from previous versions of a work may be helpful in piecing together a more comprehensive understanding of the authors' intention and of the final work itself. In literary studies, this is commonly referred to as the practice of 'genetic criticism' (see Bramd [p. 46]). In conclusion, the *Bloodborne* item Madman's Knowledge (together with the related variable Insight) is a game element that contributes to FromSoftware's pursuit of a ludic aesthetics of failure. This particular object leverages two kinds

of obfuscation of game-related information: one that places it forever beyond the player's grasp, and one that can eventually be dispelled through direct experience and recourse to secondary sources. While the latter can be turned into familiar drivel, the former (often referred to as fictional incompleteness) is a mystery that is meant to remain unsolved. In their unique ways, both kinds of informational deficiency evoke fictional worlds whose mystery and greatness extend beyond the limited scope and content of any creative work.

-- REFERENCES --

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[4] Nele Van de Mosselaer and Stefano Gualeni, 'The Implied Designer of Digital Games', Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics 60, no. 1 (2023): pp. 71-89, https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.303.

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