Sublimely Difficult

Investigating the relation between aesthetic difficulty and the sublime in video games

Experiencing art can be challenging, difficult, even painful, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps we struggle to make sense of an avantgarde painting, or the technical intricacies of a musical piece is lost on us. We may agonize trying to parse a difficult poem, or surrender making sense of a movie. These are all examples, however heterogenous, of aesthetic difficulty. It is not an easy task to determine the nature or source of these problems – if indeed they be problems at all. Conversely, one artform in particular appears to not only embrace, but exemplify the paradoxical relation between pleasure and pain, aesthetics and difficulty: the video game.

In this paper I want to examine video games and their curious capacity to engender certain types of aesthetic experience *because* of, and not despite their challenging nature. More specifically, I hope to investigate the philosophical concept of the *sublime* and how, if at all, it relates to or can be experienced through the aesthetic difficulty of video games. In essence, I hope to discover and demonstrate a relation between video games as 'the art of failure' and the sublime as 'negative pleasure'.

To sketch out this complex relation, I will in the first part of the paper provide an account of different theories regarding, respectively, the aesthetics of difficulty, the role of failure in video games, and the experience and nature of the sublime. In the second part, I will combine and apply these theoretical considerations, using *Dark Souls* as a concrete object of analysis. In the third part, I will briefly discuss my findings, present contrasting viewpoints, and critically consider the relation between the sublime and aesthetic difficulty, as well as possible implications for the medium of video games.

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-- PART ONE --

Tactical Difficulty

Our lives are continuously subjected to and shaped by varying kinds of aesthetic encounters. John Corner, in his article "Aesthetic experience and the question of 'difficulty': A note", suggests that these encounters "[…] can occur accidentally, casually or purposively and they variously enter the routines of social and personal life, connecting with other, non-aesthetic, aspects (Corner)." We may deliberately bring a book with us to read on our daily commute, or accidentally hear part of a song on a distant radio. Either way, we are surrounded by aesthetic encounters of all kinds.

Similarly, the ways in which we experience aesthetic difficult are many. Whatever the reason for our inability to understand or appreciate some aesthetic encounter or other, our failure to properly 'connect' can arouse a string of personal reflections. Says Corner, we may come to see our difficulty "[…] as in large part a product of deficits in the aesthetic practice itself although a lingering suspicion that shortcomings in our own imaginative capacities, our cultural resources, are a factor might also be present […] (Corner)." A certain ambiguity pervades the issue then, as we remain unsure of who, if any, is to blame for the difficulty.

This ambiguity is only exacerbated by the fact that some aesthetic encounters are made deliberately difficult: "In some kinds of work and encounter, it [the difficulty] figures instead as an intrinsic part of aesthetic satisfaction, not a barrier to a positive relationship with a work, but an ingredient of that relationship (Corner)." This sort of deliberate use of difficulty is what Corner, quoting literary critic George Steiner, calls 'tactical difficulty' (Corner). Steiner coined the term with reference to poetry, but as we shall see shortly it harmonizes neatly with certain perspectives on video games as well.

The Art of Failure

Why would some artists deliberately infuse their work with such tactical difficulty? More relevantly, why do we willingly subject ourselves to such experiences? This, argues Jesper Juul, is the *paradox of failure* in games: that players dislike failing, and yet consistently seek out games in which they expect, and are expected, to fail (Juul 2-5). In his book *The Art of Failure*, Juul compares this paradox to other paradoxes of art: "The shared conundrum is that we generally try to avoid the unpleasant emotions that we get from hearing about a sad event, or from failing at a task. Yet we actively seek out these emotions in stories, art and games (Juul 2)."

Even so, Juul distinguishes games from other artforms or mediums, as the failure experienced in games is intimately personal: "My argument is that the paradox of failure is unique in that when you fail in a game, it really means that *you* were in some way inadequate (Juul 7)." In stressing this paradox of failure as something unique to games, Juul makes a rather sharp ontological demarcation: we may certainly fail to engage with other artforms, or we may find those artforms to be the source of agony, sadness, or unpleasantness. Only in games, however, is the experience of failure not only immensely personal, it is also expected *and* desired (Juul 11-12).

Complying with Juul's definition of games as "[…] the singular artform that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure (Juul 29)," does afford us certain conceptual benefits. In narrowing our scope of examination to just games, the ambiguity described by Corner is mitigated: within the 'aesthetic practice' of games, difficulty is not the exception, but the rule. By emphasizing the inadequate 'you', Juul makes it clear that the failure of the player is not some lingering suspicion or incidental justification, but a fundamental dimension of games: "This is what games do: they promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy – an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place (Juul 7)."

This foregrounding of the player's experience of failure also brings us one step closer to investigating the sublime and how it relates to aesthetic difficulty. However, before a proper account of the sublime can be given, another major term has remained largely unexplained: difficulty. So far, difficulty has been taken to mean a variety of things, ranging from tragedy, unpleasantness, failure, and inadequacy. Presently, a more sensitive and thoughtful framework for understanding different kinds of aesthetic difficulty within the confines of video games will be provided.

Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect

Previously, Steiner's notion of tactical difficulty in poetry served as segue for considering the role of failure in games. Patrick Jagoda expands upon these considerations in his article "On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect." He writes: "Video games constitute an instructive case for analyzing aesthetic difficulty in our time (Jagoda 200)." Although Juul writes extensively on difficulty in games, his investigation is primarily focused on the concept of failure. Jagoda, on the other hand, presents a more subtle distinction between three kinds of aesthetic difficulty in video games.

All games are mechanical in nature. Says Jagoda: "At the most basic level, any game depends on artificially designed obstacles to which it invites players to attend and respond via mechanics, procedures, and

processes (Jagoda 200)." Jagoda however criticizes the tendency to overemphasize mechanical difficulty, as it is not exhaustive of the aesthetic difficulty found in video games. He argues that in an aesthetic context "[…] the concept of difficulty does not simply mark a series of problems to be solved (Jagoda 200)." Rather, difficulty in video games denotes a broad range of aesthetic experiences.

Deciphering and understanding these types of types of aesthetic difficulty is a valuable undertaking: "In the realm of video games, the types of experiences that are perceived as difficult at a particular moment, as well as the ones that enter less explicitly into cultural consciousness, can help animate the effects of digital media on the contemporary sensorium (Jagoda 200)." As such, examining the aesthetic difficulties present in video games may prove relevant to a wider range of disciplines. Insofar as an investigation of the sublime in video games has any merit, this paper strongly aligns itself with Jagoda's thesis.

The three categories suggested by Jagoda are, by his own admission, merely heuristic and likely to intersect in various ways (Jagoda 201-203). As I aim to apply these categories with respect to a concrete example in the second part of the paper, I will provide a brief account of them in the following.

Mechanics

In line with Juul's understanding, Jagoda describes games as nontrivial artifacts, as something that requires effort, skill, or expertise to use. He writes, with reference to multiple game designers: "A necessary element of a game, then, and one that may motivate continued play, is the required familiarity with the designed system and a cultivation of physical or strategic skills that enable success or mastery (Jagoda 204)." Jagoda suggests three approaches to understanding mechanical difficulty: the formal, the historical, and the sociological.

Formally, games can be shaped in many ways and as such be difficult for many reasons. One game might be difficult because you only get one attempt at beating it, while another might require a large investment of time (Jagoda 204-205). Historically, the expectations of players have changed, and so have the levels and nuances of difficulty made available in games (Jagoda 205-206). Sociologically, there may be any number of idiosyncratic reasons for why someone might find a game difficult. Jagoda suggests an emerging kind of 'gaming literacy', related to the advent of digital technology and the popularity of video games (Jagoda 206-212).

Interpretation

In addition to the mechanical challenges, the process of interpreting or making sense of a video game is an important source of aesthetic difficulty. Drawing on Steiner, Jagoda presents four types of interpretative difficulty (Jagoda 212-213). It is here worth noting that while Jagoda uses the concept of deliberate, tactical difficulty to describe just one of these four types, the overall categories are heuristic in nature and, as will be demonstrated later, likely to overlap.

First, there are *contingent* difficulties based on factual knowledge of the game at hand. Having prior knowledge of similar games may be necessary to understand what the game is trying to 'say' or 'do' (Jagoda 214-217). Second, there may be *modal* difficulties who relate to the historical and material conditions under which the game was created (Jagoda 214-218). Third, there are the *tactical* difficulties that involve "deliberate or stylistic obstructions that may take the form of either idiosyncratic constraints or political tactics (Jagoda 212)." Finally, there are *ontological* difficulties. These are questions about what games are: toys, distractions, rituals, or something else entirely (Jagoda 219-220).

Affect

Lastly, Jagoda argues for the existence of a third kind of aesthetic: affective difficulty. This type of aesthetic difficulty is often ignored or neglected, possibly due to how it may intersect with the mechanical and interpretive categories (Jagoda 220). Games can inspire a wide range of emotions, ranging from boredom, joy, fear, excitement, or disgust. Jagoda stresses the importance of an increased emphasis on the affective aspects of aesthetic difficulty: "If affect describes visceral abstractions as it moves through lived bodies, then video games might offer the opportunity to access, even play with, fields of affective flow that are enabled by digital and networked environments (Jagoda 221)."

Jagoda's examination of affective difficulty is less formalistic than the other two categories, but no less illuminating. He argues that video games are fundamentally participatory, and as such the question of aesthetics becomes one of relations. In video games "[…] participation is not an alternative form of engagement, or one style among many (Jagoda 223)." It is not the exception, but the expectation. "As such, the quality of affective difficulty – affecting or being affected by the game – cannot be as unexpected as when a viewer is asked to participate in a gallery or theater space […] (Jagoda 223)." This is a fundamental part of games: "At some level, a video game is always and fundamentally relational and cannot proceed without involvement on the part of one or more players (Jagoda 223)."

Jagoda's examination of the different kinds of aesthetic difficulty in video games helps recapitulate several important points and considerations made in this paper so far. Namely, the importance of understanding aesthetic difficulty, the notion of tactical difficulty, the unique nature of video games and their capacity to engender certain aesthetic experiences, and the emphasis on the player and their affective relation with the game. Furthermore, in the second part of the paper, Jagoda's framework of aesthetic difficulty will also play an important role in identifying and examining the sublime in video games. Before that, however, a more thorough account of the concept of the sublime is required.

Might and magnitude

An account of the concept of the sublime is found, most famously, in the writings of Immanuel Kant. In *Critique of Judgment*, he argues that the sublime, properly speaking, is not found in any object, but in the mind. "For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility (Kant 266)." The sublime then, is an exceedingly complicated relation between any 'sensible form' and the mind's (in)ability to exhibit the 'ideas of reason' aroused in response to this form or object.

This curious relation between arousal and inadequacy is emphasized by Kant as a kind of negative pleasure: "[…] since the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternatively always repelled *as well* [my emphasis], the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure (265-266)." Kant's notion of a negative pleasure, of the sublime as simultaneously attracting and repelling is of great importance and, I hope, rather suggestive of things already accounted for in this paper, namely the paradox of failure.

However, for the time being this comparison will remain uncultivated. Kant distinguishes between two kinds of sublimity. In exploring the nature of the sublime in video games, these two will prove invaluable, and as such they will be briefly detailed in the following.

The Mathematically Sublime

The mathematically sublime is of absolute *magnitude*. It cannot then be an object, as the size or greatness of objects can only be considered in comparison to other objects. "[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea (Kant 268)." Rather, the sublime must take place in the mind. "Hence what is to be called sublime is

not the object, but the attunement the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment (Kant 268)."

Again, this kind of sublimity has less to do with the nature, shape or form of some object, than with certain relations or revelations of the mind: "*Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense* [original emphasis] (Kant 268)."

The Dynamically Sublime

If the mathematically sublime is of great magnitude, the dynamically sublime is *mighty*. According to Kant, in nature is found a source of this kind of sublime experience: "Hence nature can count as a might, and so as dynamically sublime, for aesthetic judgment only insofar as we consider it as an object of fear (Kant 271)." Again, the paradoxical nature of the sublime is made apparent. We seek to evade what makes us fearful, yet we still admire the dangerous waterfalls, tornadoes, and volcanoes of nature. Says Kant:

"Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. And we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allows us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence (Kant 272)." However, as stated earlier, it is not the objects themselves that are sublime. "Whatever arouses this feeling in us, and this includes the *might* of nature that challenges our forces, is then (although improperly) called sublime (Kant 273)."

Clearly then, the character of the sublime, as described by Kant, is a fascinating, if paradoxical concept of attraction and aversion, magnitude and might, inadequacy and arousal. In the second part of the paper, I will attempt to relate these understandings of the sublime to the aesthetic difficulties of video games. Before that, however, I will attempt to compliment or expand Kant's concept of the sublime with another, more contemporary and readily applicable theory of the sublime.

The Ludic Sublime

In the article "No Mastery Without Mystery: Dark Souls and the Ludic Sublime", Daniel Vella argues that the experience of the sublime "[…] constitutes a necessary moment in the aesthetic encounter with digital games […] (Vella)." The role or existence of the sublime, argues Vella, has been largely ignored in favor of formalistic analyses of games as rules, systems, and procedures (Vella). This critique in some ways mirror

the one put forward by Jagoda: the (affective, phenomenal) experience of the player is of major significance in understanding games, and as such should receive more attention.

The player, in Vella's view "[…] remains aware of an essential, and unbridgeable, gap, between her experience of the game, her understanding of the game as a system, and her awareness of an underlying implied game object (Vella)." It is in this hermeneutical relation, argues Vella, that the operations of the *ludic sublime* are to be found. As the player engages with the game, a process of interpretation and organization takes place. As we play, we become increasingly aware, not just of the things we know, but also of the many things of which we are ignorant. In a Socratic twist, the mystery remains.

To master a game is to attempt to replace the "[…] limited, situated, bottom-up perspective from which the game is made available as an experimental route […] (Vella)" with "[…] the total, omniscient perspective achieved through mastery, which acts as a top-down map (Vella)." This supersession, however, is illusory. After all, we do not experience the inner workings of the game object directly. Says Vella:

"Here, the objective artwork cannot be equated with the shifting, moment-to-moment configurations made available to the player's perception – instead, these perceptions are understood as being merely the products of the *actual* text, an underlying 'textual engine' of objects in formal relations that can never be glimpsed directly – only extrapolated from the set of configurations that a player perceives (Vella)."

Vella argues that this is a unique trait of video games. The player experience is necessarily tentative in nature, arbitrary even. "This grants the game object a sense of fundamental unknowability, with the boundaries of the *cosmos* that the player's understanding has formed as an interpretation of her phenomenal experience of the game being surrounded by the implied shapes of that which has still not been explored or accounted for." The ludic sublime then, is defined by Vella "[…] as the aesthetic effect resulting from the foregrounding of this sense of mystery (Vella)."

With this final account of the ludic sublime in place, it is time to venture an analysis of a concrete game object, applying the numerous theoretical frameworks and considerations presented in this paper so far. Importantly, in the following, the different accounts of the sublime will be used, not interchangeably, but complementarily.

– PART TWO –

Dark Souls

The present object of analysis is *Dark Souls,* a third-person action-roleplaying game released in 2011 (FromSoftware). The game was developed by Japanese FromSoftware and features components for online play. The game takes place in a rather typical pseudo-medieval fantasy world, with dragons, giant rats, and spooky skeletons. The player, taking on the role of an undying warrior, is faced with overcoming a great variety of different challenges in the game, ranging from battling gruesome monsters, navigating labyrinthine dungeons, avoiding fatal traps, spontaneously encountering hostile players, and piecing together a coherent storyline from a series of obscure events.

As Vella suggests in the aforementioned article, it is not that *Dark Souls* exhibits a truly unique kind of sublimity, inaccessible to other games. Indeed, that would greatly limit the usefulness of the forthcoming analysis. "What sets *Dark Souls* apart is arguably a matter of degree, not of kind: it simply foregrounds a sublime quality of mystery that […] is integral to the formal structure of digital games (Vella)." While Vella provides an excellent analysis of the game, his examination revolves around the concept of mystery. This paper, however, is concerned with questions of aesthetic difficulty, even if it aligns itself with the contributions of Vella.

A Mixture of Difficulties

Arguably, *Dark Souls* is most famous for its difficulty, but in the context of aesthetics, what kind of difficulty would that be? Using Jagoda's framework, the game is certainly challenging from a mechanical viewpoint. Player death occurs frequently, either at the hands of powerful and aggressive enemies, or due to the numerous traps and pitfalls that comprise the sprawling world of the game. The scarcity of healing items, combined with the devious placement of enemies and sensitive timing of critical actions, means that the player is expected to fail often and unexpectedly.

However, the game frequently subjects the player to interpretive and affective difficulty as well – and as expected, there are cases in which the three are deeply intertwined and difficult to separate. One particularly complex sequence is the encounter with 'Artorias of the Abyss', an optional boss found circa halfway through the game – if at all. To even access this confrontation, the player is expected to have found an unassuming item in one part of the world and brought it to another, thus opening a portal to Artorias – an unlikely occurrence, and a prime example the game's use of unclear causes and/or effects, as described by Vella (Vella).

The battle against Artorias is difficult in all three ways suggested by Jagoda. Mechanically speaking, Artorias is a formidable opponent, capable of defeating the player in just a few seconds if precautions are not taken. Interpretively, the boss is another difficult piece in the narrative puzzle of the game. His hostility contradicts the heroic image previously presented to the player, while his epithet and physical appearance is suggestive of Nietzschean deicide and man-monster dualities. Furthermore, Artorias is retrospectively revealed to be the character featured on the game box and most promotional art, further complicating the character's interpretive relation to the rest of the game.

And finally, Artorias is a great source of affective difficulty. Being mechanically difficult, Artorias is likely to inspire feelings of frustration, anger, fear, and self-doubt. Interpretively, his subversive role as a fallen hero is shocking, confusing, disturbing. Affectively, the player is bound to experience a range of complex emotions: anger at the developers for making the boss so difficult, sadness that it falls to the player to destroy this once-noble warrior, ambiguity as to the players own complicity in this state of affairs, and profundity upon realizing that a considerable amount of other players will not have this revelation.

The Sublimely Difficult

Clearly, aesthetic difficulties of all kinds pervade *Dark Souls*, but how does this relate to the sublime? According to Vella, there is a kind of 'ergodic irony' present in all games, as "[…] the player always has a sense of the contingency of her own experience of a game, which necessarily constitutes only one of a possibly infinite number of divergent 'playings-out' of the same implied game object […] (Vella)." This is exemplified in *Dark Souls* by the interactable tombstones scattered around that, when activated, holographically recreate the deaths of other players in the same area.

This looming sense of contingency, I argue, is sublime in nature and accentuated (not created) by the aesthetic difficulty of the game, insofar as every player death, every instance of failure signifies a comparatively tangible 'collapse' of one contingent path through the game, and the beginning of another. Similarly, the interpretive difficulty of piecing together the obscure narrative is enhanced by, and in turn highlights the labyrinthine structure of the game. Players are unlikely to navigate through the world, discover certain items, engage in conversations, encounter enemies, and thereby formulate concrete interpretations in the same way – and certainly not in the same order.

As we encounter difficulty, we experience setbacks. Or as Corner suggests, a tactical slowness of aesthetic understanding "[…] designed to introduce greater resistance to meaning-flow, greater uncertainty and thereby perhaps increased thoughtfulness and depth in the response […] (Corner)." Artorias' difficulty

does not only force us to change our mechanical approach or current interpretation; it reveals the existence of such precarious, idiosyncratic attitudes to begin with. Attitudes, that are necessarily relational and contingent in nature.

As we reflect on the choices made, the choices not made, and everything in between, we approach a vague understanding of the unfathomable complexity or boundlessness of the game, leaving us, as Vella explains, with the feeling that "[…] the game system contains many more entities, mechanics and moving parts than the player's cosmic understanding of the game […] can account for (Vella)." This feeling then, is that of the supersensible power that Kant describes in relation to the *mathematically* sublime, as we strive to comprehend the absolute magnitude of the game, thus proving "[…] that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense (Kant 268)."

It is not that we have somehow managed to sense the game in its entirety. On the contrary, the game becomes something of a *formless object*, as it presents us with a kind of *unboundedness* to which we add, as Kant says, "the thought of its totality (Kant 265)." We only sense a small sliver of the game's magnitude, and through a combination of the faculties of the mind, prompted by the many sources of aesthetic difficulty, we extrapolate the manifold hidden dimensions. We do not then perceive the game as whole, but we attune ourselves to its nebulous 'form' […] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment (Kant 268)."

Kant's notion of the *dynamically* sublime, I argue, can also be related to aesthetic difficulty in video games. In *Dark Souls* the player is expected (and expecting) to fail on some level. This mixture of arousal and inadequacy is the paradox of failure, as described by Juul (Juul 2-5). More importantly, the player is expected to improve, to rise to the challenges of the game, and, eventually, succeed. By subjecting ourselves to the difficulties of the game, be they mechanical, interpretive, or affective, we are allowed a chance to "[…] discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence (Kant 272)."

Of course, it is not the omnipotence of nature that we are here faced with, but the simultaneous attraction and danger of the game. Games can, by virtue of their aesthetic difficulty, frustrate, confuse, or scare us but we tolerate them, admire them even, "[…] provided we are in a safe place," as Kant says (Kant 272). This safe place is not behind a window, watching the thunderstorm outside, but in front of a computer screen, through which we are allowed to "[…] experience and experiment with failure (Juul 29)." It is in this way that video games, the art of failure, relates intimately with the 'negative pleasure' of the sublime.

This concludes my analysis of *Dark Souls* as an example of a video game in which can be found a strong connection between aesthetic difficulty and qualities of the sublime. In the third part of the paper, I will briefly discuss my findings, drawing on multiple perspectives on games, difficulty, and the sublime.

-- PART THREE --

Sublime Discussions

Previous, I rhetorically asked why we subject ourselves to playing video games. It is not within the scope, nor ambition of this paper to fully answer that question, though the argument that I have presented here – that the experience of the sublime is intimately related with aesthetic difficulty in video games – may play a small part in resolving the paradox. I must remain modest *and* critical of my findings, however. This space is reserved for being just that.

It can certainly be argued that Kant's concept of the sublime is not so readily applied to video games. After all, Kant lived in a time without video games (though not without games), and in detailing the dynamically sublime he explicitly states that "[...] not every object that arouses fear is found sublime when we judge it aesthetically (Kant 271)." The validity of identifying aesthetic difficulties in video games as facilitators of the dynamically sublime then depends on accepting video games as an object of fear and thereby a "[...] might that has no dominance over us [...] (Kant 271)."

This paradoxical composite of 'might without dominance' does align itself with games as the exemplary art of failure, where failure is real, yet safely experienced and experimented with (Juul 29). Juul does suggest a number of reasons for why we might want to engage with games, knowing that failure on some level is expected: as an emotional gamble, a way to test ourselves, to achieve a sense of having reached a goal (Juul 9-25). Alternatively, we play games hoping to experience the sublime – a negative pleasure but pleasure, nonetheless. After all, Kant himself concludes that ultimately, the sublime is less about fear, and more about finding our own strength (Kant 272-273).

Other sublimities

"Even war has something sublime about it if it is carried on in an orderly way [...] (Kant 273), writes Kant. Certainly, an investigation of the possible relation between violence in video games and the sublime would make for another fascinating study. This is an important consideration as it brings up the notion that other kinds of sublimity may not only exist but also relate to video games in other, significant ways. Eugénie Shinkle presents a series of illuminating perspectives on the *digital sublime*. One perspective comes from

Sianne Ngai, who identifies in video games a kind of uneasy hybrid between the sublime and the banal (Shinkle 99-102).

Ngai coins this term *stuplimity*. Ngai explains this phenomenon with reference to late-stage capitalism in which "[…] the experience of the limitless potential of human ingenuity is lodged within artifacts whose materials existence is fleeting and insignificant (Shinkle 106)." A similar critique by Paul Martin is referenced by Vella (Vella). According to Martin, the experience of the sublime is destined to slowly transform into one of banality, as the player becomes more familiar with the game, annihilating the initial sense of mystery and wonder (Vella).

Martin is here discussing the visual and spatial aspects of video games, but it might be argued that this applies to dimensions of aesthetic difficulty as well. Insofar as the player is expected not only to fail but also to improve and learn, the levels of difficulty (mechanical, interpretive, affective) are bound to change. However, as Vella argues, the player's understanding of the game remains necessarily incomplete (Vella). The act of playing is wrapped in Socratic ironies. It is not that the veteran player is more knowledgeable than the novice, he is simply aware: of the things of which he knows, and of the many of which he remains ignorant.

There may indeed exist other kinds of sublimity relevant to video games. I should hope to investigate those someday as well. However, the topic of this paper has been to relate the aesthetic difficulty of video games to that of the sublime. This was not only to limit the scope of the paper but also to examine something uniquely relevant to video games: their paradoxical nature as the art of failure, their tendency to foreground the mechanical, interpretive, and affective aesthetic difficulties, and, by virtue of this, their unique capacity to engender in us the experience of the sublime.

Games instill in us a sense of inadequacy, as does the sublime. And yet both also arouse a mixture of curiosity, stubbornness, or a desire to resist. This fascinating dynamic lies at the heart of this investigation and is the key, I believe to gaining a better understanding of how video games, difficult aesthetics, and the sublime all interrelate.

Conclusion

> "I admit that this principle seems farfetched and the result of some subtle reasoning, and hence high-flown […] for an aesthetic judgment."   (Kant 272)

Ultimately, this paper has concerned itself with investigating the relation between aesthetic difficulty in video games and their capacity to engender the sublime. This connection has been demonstrated, or at least attempted, through an analysis of the video game *Dark Souls*. Video games can be identified as the art of failure, an aesthetic practice in which difficulty is foregrounded. It is possible to distinguish between various kinds of aesthetic difficulty, but they all intimately relate to video games, and their fascinating capacity to facilitate or express the sublime. Investigating the affective, phenomenal, and sublime qualities of video games may provide valuable insights on the relational aesthetics between digital artifacts and the people whose lives are surrounded by them.

The sublime is aroused by the inadequacies of the faculties of the mind. In being unbounded, contingent, and indirect, video games harbor qualities like that of the mathematically sublime. In being difficult, dangerous, yet safely approachable, they exhibit the characteristics of the dynamically sublime. It is no small paradox that we subject ourselves to video games – artifacts that offer us the chance to repair a personal inadequacy that they produced. Recalling Kant, however, we may suspect that this not a compromise but a premise: *if they did not arouse our fear, they could not call forth our strength*.

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