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School of Humanities

# **Swimming Against the Current**

***How a Small Japanese Developer Bucked the Trend in  
Video Games***

**Ritgerð til BA-prófs í japönsku**

**Valdimar Björn Ásgeirsson**

**January 2013**



**University of Iceland**  
**School of Humanities**  
**Japanese Language and Culture**

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***How a Small Japanese Developer Bucked the Trend in  
Video Games***

**B.A. Essay**

**Valdimar Björn Ásgeirsson**  
**Kt.: 080683-6189**

**Supervisor: Gunnella Þorgeirsdóttir**  
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Swimming Against the Current.

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### **Abstract**

Video games have been around for over half a century and game design trends have evolved greatly over time. At the time of the game arcades, technical limitations and economical models forced a design focused on challenge and trial and error on the part of the player. Over the span of the two decades since home consoles became more important than game arcades, the design has evolved to a more simplified form in order to keep owners of home consoles content. In 2009, a new and fresh design trend was introduced by a small Japanese game developer, From Software. This company brought the original excitement of the arcades back into the world of mainstream video games, and had definite characteristics of Japanese culture.



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## Introduction

Video games are an important part of modern society, and their development has followed a path from difficult arcade games to undemanding but ever more elaborate games made for home computers and game consoles. However, there is one notable exception to this broad path of video game development. That exception is epitomised in the games *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* by **From Software** of Japan. We will consider here in which way these games are different from mainstream games, and what qualities characterise these games which are produced by a small development house in Japan.

Video games have in recent decades become a prominent feature of our modern world. Most young people play games. Today, these games include free flash games on internet web sites, games installed on mobile phones or games developed for living room game consoles. In the 1970s and '80s, however, video games were for the greatest part only available on arcade cabinets, either at restaurants or in gaming arcades. These arcade cabinets were each devoted to one game, and required coins from the player to allow a game session. As video game arcades depend on a steady flow of coins from their playing customers, many games were developed with a high level of difficulty to ensure just that.<sup>1</sup>

During the decades that have passed since the invention of the first video games, we can see how their design has been heavily influenced by their outer framework. Arcade cabinets thus called for one type of game, game-consoles for home use called for another, and the most recent online games are given scope by the capability of web browsers and the popularity of new, hand-held devices. The video game industry is still in its adolescence as an entertainment medium, and governed, of course, by the laws of the marketplace. Large production companies have flourished or failed in the decades since its inception, and a large variety of games have been produced.

The production of video games may be compared to the production of films. These two forms of entertainment are widely popular in today's world. From the humble beginnings of Pong<sup>2</sup> on the one hand and silent films on the other, they have progressed to mass-production of costly and detailed blockbusters. In both these genres, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Donovan, T. (2010). *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant. pp. 96-98

<sup>2</sup> Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York: Random House, Inc. pp. 37-48

mass-production tends to lead to stale products and lack the lustre that drew people to them in the first place. Independent film studios present films that are surprise hits, though made on a meagre budget; the Japanese video game producer **From Software** presented the *Souls* games that, though less highly crafted and less user-friendly than games made by larger producers, seemed to tap into the rich vein of the joy of play.<sup>3</sup>

Like the film industry, the video game industry has grown to an enormous size in recent years. In the film industry, popular sequels based on blockbusters tend to lack originality. In the video game industry, the same is true for successful games that sell millions of copies. Because the production of games is an expensive business, it has come to be accepted that in order to ensure the success of a game, it must follow popular criteria of game design, e.g. be like *Call of Duty*, or *Halo* before it. It stands to reason that a game producer whose team of more than fifty developers works full time for two to three years to produce one new game can not take large risks with the game that has to foot the bill for the expensive design process and make profits for the company. On the other hand, a large film studio, such a large team of developers may not have the originality or creative freedom of independent film makers or game designers. Independent films do achieve success despite their humble roots, and indeed, at times inspire large film studios to change course. A case in point is the success of the Dogme 95 movement, originated by Danish film makers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the recent games *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* from the small Japanese development house **From Software** have been successful despite disregarding popular criteria of larger game developers. As a matter of fact, rather than being easy to play and presented with detailed instructions, these games are uncompromising to the player and difficult to understand completely.

The popularity of the first of the two *Souls* games, *Demon's Souls*, demonstrates that game players enjoy the challenge that a difficult game has to offer. The more challenge that the players find in a game, the more pleasure they are likely to experience upon finishing each part of the game. In fact, the feelings involved are even reminiscent

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<sup>3</sup> Dutka, B. (February 2, 2009). *Demon's Souls* Caps Impressive First Week Of Sales In Japan. *PSX Extreme*. Retrieved January 7, 2013 from <http://www.psxextreme.com/ps3-news/4604.html>

<sup>4</sup> Dogme 95. (2012). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1568600/Dogme-95>

of the game that lovers play when pretending to be hard to get. In Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo has overheard Juliet saying that she loves him. Upon realising that, she explains that she can easily take her declaration of love back and play hard to get, if he thinks she gave her love too readily: "O gentle Romeo,/ If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully./ Or if thou think'st I am too quickly won,/ I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay,/ So thou wilt woo" (Shakespeare, W. (1972) Act II, Scene ii, lines 93-97).<sup>5</sup> For a person who is too "quickly won" may cause the loved one to lose interest, and in order to reawaken interest, choose to appear uninterested or "perverse". A film, which in order to fulfil its viewers' every wish boasts expensive special effects and the best actors, does not succeed in keeping the viewers' interest if every event is foreseeable. The viewer needs stimulation in order to continue watching. A video game, which boasts "super-realistic" graphics and a game world that appears to offer a plethora of options, is no fun if its action is completely predictable. Indeed, the unexpected popularity of *Demon's Souls* is a case in point here. **Atlus USA Ltd.**, the publisher of the game in North America sold more than three times as many copies as the company expected.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty of the game and its ability to surprise and challenge its players ensures continued interest and joy of play. As the well-known British game magazine **Edge** stated in a review of the game: "[I]f gaming's ultimate appeal lies in the learning and mastering of new skills, then surely the medium's keenest thrills are to be found in its hardest lessons."<sup>7</sup> In many aspects, we can trace the specific game design choices that made these games difficult to concepts deeply rooted in Japanese culture. The need to try your best in the face of hardship, when Japanese might say "ganbaru,"<sup>8</sup> or that one

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<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, W. (1972). In S. Barnet (Ed.), *The complete Signet classic Shakespeare* (pp. 479-523). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

<sup>6</sup> Yip, Spencer. (April 14, 2010.) *Demon's Souls Sells Triple What Atlus USA Expected*. *Siliconera*. Retrieved December 25, 2012 from <http://www.siliconera.com/2010/04/14/demons-souls-sells-triple-what-atlus-usa-expected/>

<sup>7</sup> Edge Staff. (October 6 2009). Review: *Demon's Souls*. *Edge Online*. Retrieved October 30, 2012, from <http://www.edge-online.com/review/review-demons-souls/>

<sup>8</sup> Blinco, P. M. A. (2002). Persistence and Education: A Formula for Japan's Economic Success. *Comparative Education*, 29(2), p. 173.

can be expected to have to endure great hardships but persevere, that is, to “gaman suru,” is something every Japanese person is familiar with.<sup>9</sup>

In a way which may be compared to inspirational films of independent film makers, within its genre of video games the *Souls* games seem to capture the essence of what makes a game worth playing. The *Souls* games challenge their players at every turn, keeping their interest alive, as young Juliet wants to ensure of her Romeo. The *Souls* games are not as elaborately presented as games produced by larger design teams, but they are challenging to play and are infused with intriguing aspects of Japanese culture, which add to their appeal for Western players. The remarkable success of the *Souls* games makes it worth while to compare them with earlier games, and attempt to pinpoint their distinguishing features. The design trend that began with arcade games, where the level of difficulty was determined by the necessity of a steady flow of coins, and then continued in home console games which offered a more elaborately designed world but less difficulty, seems to me to have come full circle in the Japanese *Souls* games.

In the following chapters, we will look at how successful games have shifted from being difficult and challenging to being guided and overly compromising, and look at the state of video game design when the *Souls* games were first introduced. In order to see that, we will look in some detail at popular video games and describe what it is like to play them. We will outline broadly the history of game design, and indicate the importance of the *Souls* games as a trend setter for future games. First, we will consider the characteristics of classic arcade games.

### **1. The Difficulty and Challenge of Classic Arcade Games**

The first video games were created on central mainframe computers<sup>10</sup> at university campuses in the 1950s. One of them, simply called *Tennis for Two*, was a game that used an oscilloscope originally developed to display missile trajectories during the Sec-

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<sup>9</sup> McLendon, R. (March 10, 2011). *In post-tsunami Japan, Zen meets zeal*. Retrieved from <http://www.mnn.com/family/protection-safety/blogs/in-post-tsunami-japan-zen-meets-zeal#>

<sup>10</sup> The first computers developed and usually reserved for calculations used in research. For further information, see: Mainframe computer. (2012). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved December 15, 2012 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/130429/computer/235890/Mainframe-computer#ref829434>

ond World War to show instead a tennis ball moving back and forth, as seen from the side of a tennis field. Players would turn a knob to determine the angle from which to aim and shoot the ball<sup>11</sup>. *Tennis for Two* was originally a pet project of its creator, never meant to be commercialised, and it was in fact only shown to the public two times.<sup>12</sup> However, it was an inspiration for **Atari's** *Pong*, one of the first successful videogames.<sup>13</sup> *Pong* was released in 1972 and sold 8000 arcade machines with the game by the end of the year.<sup>14</sup> It helped **Atari** fund the cost of a home console.<sup>15</sup> But until the 1990s, arcade games were for the most part more influential than home console games because with better hardware they could display better graphics and more complex game play.

At the very beginning, games were designed without permanent computer memory. Each session was an isolated trial in each game, and nothing was stored except for perhaps a few characters for a high score chart. *Pong* had this system, as did games like *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Pac-Man* (1980). *Pong* was played by two players, so it was in fact very similar to a game of darts or pool. *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* were played by one person against the computer, with each stage getting more difficult until the player loses all their lives. The levels were calculated iteratively; in theory they could go on forever. Each coin inserted allowed for one try at surviving as long as one could, but as the public got better at playing the game, coin flow would slow down proportionally and the video game publisher would need to design the game in a different way to that each machine made enough profit.

The Japanese game producer **Namco** released *Pac-Man* for game arcades in Japan in 1980. In this game, the player moves a character around a single maze to collect pellets while avoiding four ghosts that seem to move along random paths through the

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<sup>11</sup> Wolf, M. J. P. (2008). *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*. Greenwood Press, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> DeMaria, R., & Wilson, J. L. (2004). *High Score!: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games*. McGraw-Hill/Osborne, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York: Random House, Inc, pp. 37-48.

<sup>14</sup> Pong. (2012). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved December 7, 2012, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/932625/Pong>

<sup>15</sup> Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York: Random House, Inc, p. 182

maze. Once the corridors of the maze are cleared of pellets, the level counter is raised by one, the maze is refilled with pellets and its colour changes. In order to raise the difficulty of the game, the behaviour of the ghosts changes occasionally between levels. When a ghost catches the player, the player dies, only to reappear in the starting position below the centre of the maze. This uses up one of the three lives players get when they begin the game, and if all three are lost, the game ends and the players must insert a coin to try again from the beginning. To avoid disappointing players so profoundly, subsequent games would allow them to continue with a new coin, but with *Pac-Man* and games of its generation this made getting far in the game all the more valuable and more of an achievement. In a way that brings to mind the memory game *Simon Says*, the players of *Pac-Man* memorise the pattern of the game level by level through repetition, since a failure to complete - losing all three lives - forces them to start over from the beginning, reinforcing the partly experienced game pattern. This takes time and endurance that became less necessary as games became easy, because little effort was needed to experience what a game had to offer.

An example of how the outside world recognised the achievement of players of challenging early arcade games is the 1982 film *Tron*, where the main character is pulled into a computer world, and must now fight for survival with his own life, instead of that of a game character.<sup>16</sup> This emphasises the importance of skill when playing an arcade game. The 2010 American documentary film *King of Kong* commemorates gamers who are able to survive through all of Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* and get to the top of a "leaderboard" (a list of a game's top players) kept by the renowned American private company **Twin Galaxies** and recognised worldwide. At the time the film was made, however, such a leaderboard was hardly relevant any more, since getting through a game had become much less difficult. This was the case with the 2008 French game *Prince of Persia*, for example, about which a columnist of **The Guardian** asked: "Is Prince of Persia too easy?"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Author unknown. TRON (1982) - Plot summary. *The Internet Movie Database*. Retrieved January 11, 2013 from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084827/plotsummary>

<sup>17</sup> Howson, G. (Monday 8 December 2008). Is Prince of Persia too easy? *Guardian*. Retrieved December 14, 2012, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2008/dec/07/retro-games>

Arcade games were at first not designed specifically to be difficult, but the business model depended upon the player paying a small fee for each play, at first 25 cents, and would perhaps offer a few tries, signified as “lives” of the character played. After these tries were used up, the player would need to insert another coin to continue. Each play session cost little compared to the cost of developing the arcade machine, but through repeated play the people that would use that machine would make up the cost and then create profit for the gaming arcade and the game producer. Therefore, it stood to reason that a game must not be too easy, for the players might finish it with only a minimal payout, and not be interested in a second try. However, as the arcade game business continued to grow and some players became skilled enough to play for hours on one quarter, the arcade makers decided to raise the difficulty of the games to stop this trend.<sup>18</sup> “As players got better at them, coin-op games got more challenging in order to keep the coin drop high. In the case of *Sinistar*, the development team actually had an easier version ready to release, but our management insisted on making it tougher to keep it more profitable.” explained Noah Falstein, co-designer of the 1982 arcade game *Sinistar*.<sup>18</sup> At that time this did have negative repercussions for the industry, since the arcade makers made the games so suddenly too difficult, and in the end it contributed to the decline of arcades in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Alain Samson, Phd. at Psychology Today described this phenomenon thus: “Arcade games used to...have a simple mechanism to make players spend more money. Along with the instruction “insert coin(s) to continue”, a count-down timer puts extra pressure on the player to part with another quarter (or several, nowadays).”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Donovan, T. (2010). *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant. p. 96-98

<sup>19</sup> Samson, A. (October 11, 2012). Insert Coin(s) to Continue. Five examples from the psychology and economics of video game play. Psychology Today. Retrieved December 2, 2012, from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/consumed/201210/insert-coins-continue>

By the end of the 1980s, the arcade business in the U.S. had shrunk to a third<sup>20</sup> of its size at the beginning of the decade.<sup>21</sup> Home consoles had been gaining importance since the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System™. However, fighting games caused a resurgence of arcade game popularity in 1991 with the release of *Street Fighter II* from **Capcom**, which sold more than 60,000 machines worldwide.<sup>22</sup> In these games, a one-on-one encounter is taken from an action game and made the main focus of the game. The players are pitted against a series of opponents, one at a time, each more ferocious than the preceding one. At the outset, one 100-yen coin will pay for a game until a battle is lost. Therefore it is possible to win the game on one coin, if the player is skilled enough to win each battle and lose none. If players do lose a battle, it costs them another 100 yen coin to get another chance to win that battle. These games also have a two-player mode, where two human players try to defeat each other. Then, while one person is trying to get through the single player “campaign”, another person can insert a coin to challenge the first to a two-player battle. If the challenger wins, that challenger takes over the campaign, which makes it all the more important for a player to defeat any challengers. In Japanese gaming arcades, fighting game arcade machines are often set up in pairs back-to-back, with the two challengers facing one another. Often, players do not know if someone is preparing to interrupt their single-player campaign. Elsewhere, two-player battles are typically hosted on one machine with one screen and two sets of controls. When players lose their campaigns to a challenger, they must pay another coin to hope to win their campaign back. This creates additional revenue for the game in an interesting manner.

Other companies released fighting games like *Virtua Fighter* from **Sega**, **Namco** released *Tekken* & *Soul Edge* and the American publisher **Midway** released *Mortal*

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, T. (April 3, 1992) Are Arcades Archaic? Business down, owners add zip and zap to lure players. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved January 10, 2013 from <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/boston/access/61734163.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Apr+03%2C+1992&author=Tracy+Johnson%2C+Contributing+Reporter&pub=Boston+Globe+%28pre-1997+Fulltext%29&desc=Are+Arcades+Archaic%3F+Business+down%2C+owners+add+zip+and+zap+to+lure+players>

<sup>21</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer Staff. (February 3, 1984) CAN LASERS SAVE VIDEO ARCADES? *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved January 10, 2013 from [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_product=PI&s\\_site=philly&p\\_multi=PI&p\\_theme=realcities&p\\_action=search&p\\_maxdocs=200&p\\_topdoc=1&p\\_text\\_direct=0&EB29715971BCAA2&p\\_field\\_direct=0=document\\_id&p\\_perpage=10&p\\_sort=YMD\\_date:D](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=PI&s_site=philly&p_multi=PI&p_theme=realcities&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&p_topdoc=1&p_text_direct=0&EB29715971BCAA2&p_field_direct=0=document_id&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D)

<sup>22</sup> Donovan, T. (2010). *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant. p. 221



*Kombat* to directly compete with *Street Fighter II* arcade machines.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence of this new interest, companies continued to develop technology for arcade machines. Throughout the 1990s, many games were first developed for arcades and home consoles would thus get many “ports,” where the code of the game is not written specifically for the console but adapted from the code from the arcade version, which resulted in code that did not run as well. It was not until the release of *SoulCalibur* from **Namco** on the Sega Dreamcast® game console in 1999 that a home console game looked better than its arcade counterpart.<sup>24</sup> Since the turn of the century game arcades have continued to decline all over the world except in Japan. The arcade scene there has remained constant and constitutes roughly a third of the total size of the local video game industry,<sup>25</sup> but compared to the rest of the world the market in Japan is quite small, representing only about ten percent <sup>26</sup>, so arcades have overwhelmingly been in decline. In addition to that, Japanese game developers used to rely on exporting arcade machines or games for such machines, and this avenue for profit has been lost with the decline of arcades. Fighting games do though remain prevalent in gaming arcades today, and are one of the few genres of games being released first in arcades and later for home consoles, for example *Tekken 6*, which was released in Japanese game arcades in November of 2007<sup>27</sup> and in October 2009 on consoles in Japan<sup>28</sup>.

The arcades were no longer attractive enough for consumers, when more tantalising games could be played in the comfort of the home. Game makers had to shift their focus to the home consoles from there on.

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<sup>23</sup> Donovan, T. (2010). *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant. p. 227

<sup>24</sup> Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York: Random House, Inc, p. 565

<sup>25</sup> Sambe, Y. (2009). Japan's Arcade Games and Their Technology. In S. Natkin & J. Dupire (Eds.), *Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2009* (Vol. 5709, pp. 338-338). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

<sup>26</sup> Cieslak, M. (November 4, 2010). Is the Japanese gaming industry in crisis? *BBC Click*. Retrieved January 4, 2013 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click\\_online/9159905.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/9159905.stm)

<sup>27</sup> Doree, A. (December 11, 2008). Interview: Tekken 6: Bloodline Rebellion. *VideoGamesDaily.com*. Retrieved January 3, 2013 from <http://archive.videogamesdaily.com/features/tekken-6-bloodline-rebellion-katsuhiro-harada-interview-p1.asp>

<sup>28</sup> AmazonStaff. (2009). Amazon.co.jp: Tekken6(Regular Edition)(Non-limited): Games, from (the japanese webpage) <http://www.amazon.co.jp/%E3%83%8A%E3%83%A0%E3%82%B3-%E9%89%84%E6%8B%B36-%E9%80%9A%E5%B8%B8%E7%89%88-%E7%89%B9%E5%85%B8%E7%84%A1%E3%81%97/dp/B002SW3N0M/>

## 2. Game Consoles Take over the Reins

The Japanese developer **Nintendo** presented the game *Super Mario Bros.* in 1985.<sup>29</sup> This game presented the players with a gradual but steep increase in difficulty, so it quickly required them to be intimately familiar with the game mechanics to survive. The game was amongst the first to be called a “side-scroller”, due to the fact that the environment would scroll along with the characters as they traversed each level, instead of being static and only changing once the players reaches the edge of the screen. This game also fits the description of a “platformer”, a term that refers to the various platforms suspended in the air that the player can jump up on and off to evade danger or progress. The players control Mario, a moustached little plumber in overalls, steering him through "the Mushroom Kingdom" to try and save its kidnapped princess. The goal of each level is to reach the flagpole next to a castle in one piece. Each level is littered with enemies of many sorts, but the explicit goal of the players is not to kill them; survival is what matters. In this sense, it is an obstacle course. As a character, Mario is quite weak. At the beginning and after using an extra life to restart a level, Mario will die as soon as he touches an enemy from the side or if he gets hit by a fireball. The players have a chance to collect a mushroom to make Mario big, at which time he can take one hit and survive. Moreover, each level has a timer that counts quite fast down from 300, which pressures the player into moving along. This was clearly a game designed in an environment of arcade sensibilities, where difficulty was lauded and gamers were expected to try again and again in order to progress.

At this time the gaming industry had been moulded by game arcades, and their design ethos were applied to games for home consoles. The important difference between arcade games and games for home consoles was the fact that the latter games were paid for in full up front and played thereafter for free on the owner’s game console. Gradually, the fact that a game was intended for a home console would make producers skew the design towards becoming more of a festive journey through the different environments of a game, as the player was now expected to get a certain amount of playing time out of a game without inserting coins, and the length was calibrated to a

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<sup>29</sup> Kent, S. (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokemon - the story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York: Random House, Inc, p. 299

certain difficulty. It stood to reason that not everyone could get very far in games on their home console, let alone finish them, if those games were designed to have the same level of difficulty as in the gaming arcades. Therefore, games became easier over the years, in order to allow as many home console owners as possible to get the most out of their games.

“Creating one of today's video games is a lot like making a feature film, bringing together many different talents of people in specialised careers,” states a web site for computer schools.<sup>30</sup> Shooting a film might even be perceived to be easier than creating a product in the video game industry, since high end games can have “hundreds of characters with tens of thousands of lines of dialogue.”<sup>31</sup> The reason for such a large number of characters and such quantity of dialogue is the fact that these games are interactive and a simple-looking game project can have a branching storyline at many points throughout the game. Those must all be carefully taken into account if the gamer is to walk away satisfied with the experience. This is a challenge that Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin of the American developer **Telltale Games™** mention when describing their experience in writing the story based on the world of the comic book *The Walking Dead*. There, the game series largely revolves around the choices made by a player, and must come together in a cohesive whole by the end.<sup>32</sup> Keeping in mind the diversity that follows complex storylines and varied and numerous characters, it is not surprising that the creation of a game requires many specialists, as does the creation of a film. The list includes level designers, concept artists, visual artists, texture designers, audio engineers to name a few, a creative director to focus the design effort, and finally a director to oversee each game project.

More specialists are required today than before, because computer technology has advanced to accommodate ever more complex systems. Simulations of artificial intelli-

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<sup>30</sup> Explore the Variety of Careers in Game Design. Learn about the roles in a game design team. Retrieved December 10, 2012, from <http://www.all-computer-schools.com/computer-careers/video-game-design/game-design>

<sup>31</sup> Explore the Variety of Careers in Game Design. Learn about the roles in a game design team. Retrieved December 10, 2012, from <http://www.all-computer-schools.com/computer-careers/video-game-design/game-design>

<sup>32</sup> Crecente, B. (August 30, 2012). *PAX Prime 2012: All the games and news, live from Seattle*. Retrieved November 25, 2012, from <http://www.polygon.com/gaming/2012/8/30/3280324/pax-prime-2012-all-the-games-and-news-live-from-seattle>

gence have become more realistic, allowing for life-like computer-controlled characters for the players to interact with. The number of elements that the hardware is able to draw on screen at once has increased over the years, and the overall fidelity of the visual representation has gone up. Instead of only being able to display a few cars driving down a city street, as was the case with *Driver* in 1999, games now offer busy streets with every car rendered in detail, an example being *Grand Theft Auto IV*, released in 2008. Therefore, developing games has become more complex and has required ever larger teams of developers to create. With so many people on the payroll, it became necessary for video game companies to sell more games than before to be profitable. This has led to developers taking fewer chances with game design than before, and trying instead to design for the lowest common denominator. By necessity a trend of game design has evolved where the aim is firstly not to scare away newcomers, secondly to incorporate previously established game concepts, and thirdly to feature subject matter that most people can relate to, in order to appeal to the masses. In other words, create popular sequels based on blockbusters, as frequently happens in the film industry.

### 3. Streamlining Gone Too Far

From the notion that gaming used to be a niche hobby for “hardcore” players, it is not surprising that game companies have usually taken the route of making games easier and more accessible when tasked with increasing the market. Over the years this has led to a gradual simplification in video game design, where less effort is required of the player to succeed.<sup>33</sup> Trip Hawkins, the founder of **Electronic Arts and 3DO**, when asked about the difference between games today and in the arcade era said:

[M]odern games don’t want to let players fail, which was “part of the deal” in the old days. Now, you want everyone to feel like a winner. One of the best tools for making that happen is to completely eliminate any need for timing or hand-eye coordination. Too many people find it intimidating or embarrassing to fail on that basis. By contrast, everyone has brain cells and can enjoy basic decisions and tac-

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<sup>33</sup> Hartup, P. (August 15, 2012). The problem isn't 'girlfriend mode', it's making games easier then blaming it on women: Why are developers so afraid of challenging players? *New Statesman*. Retrieved January 3, 2012 from [http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/sci-tech/2012/08/problem-isnt-girlfriend-mode-its-making-games-easier-then-blaming-it-women?quicktabs\\_most\\_read=1](http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/sci-tech/2012/08/problem-isnt-girlfriend-mode-its-making-games-easier-then-blaming-it-women?quicktabs_most_read=1)

tics, and will even develop pet strategies. In comparison, the traditional arcade games have typically been about hand-eye coordination. While these arcade games were easy enough to play for everyone in the beginning, within a few years, they became too difficult to play, especially in the everlasting pursuit of the next quarter.<sup>34</sup>

As an example of this, the console version of the first person shooter game *Call of Duty 2* from American company **Activision** in 2005 introduced an ‘auto-aim’ feature. This feature snaps the centre of the screen to the nearest assigned target, as players push the button to aim down the sights of a gun, helping them to hit their targets. Though perhaps intended to make up for the accuracy of a computer mouse when compared to a thumb-controlled joystick on a video game console, this feature turned the game from being purely focused on gamer skill to being more akin to a walk through a gallery, with situations strung together to give the players the impression of being a soldier in the Second World War, with the minimum amount of effort on their part. The 2010 title *Call of Duty: Black Ops* became notorious for not actually requiring the player to participate in the firefight the first chapter focuses on; the player’s computer-controlled team mates will dispatch all enemies encountered on their own.<sup>35</sup> This sort of design has become widespread in the industry due to the immense popularity of the *Call of Duty* games. For five years in a row, each new release in the *Call of Duty* series of games has topped the last in being the most successful launch in the entertainment industry.<sup>36</sup> This has had an impact on game design in all parts of the world, with other companies trying to make one of their game series into a successful yearly franchise. The American company **Electronic Arts** has two popular shooting game brands: *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor*, which it has tried to turn into a *Call of Duty*-level of success. Though *Assassin’s Creed* by the French company **Ubisoft** is not a shooting game, the company has been able to produce games that sell millions yearly since 2007. The American company **Mi-**

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<sup>34</sup> Ramsay, M. (February 8, 2012). *Gamers at Work: Stories Behind the Games People Play*: Apress, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Francis, T. (March 6, 2011). Editorial: How mainstream games butchered themselves and why it’s my fault. *PC Gamer*. Retrieved January 11, 2013 from <http://www.pcgamer.com/2011/03/03/editorial-how-mainstream-games-butchered-themselves-and-why-it-s-my-fault/>

<sup>36</sup> Bedigian, L. (November 26, 2012). Can Any Video Game Top Call of Duty? Retrieved December 5, 2012, from <http://www.ibtimes.com/can-any-video-game-top-call-duty-898972>

Microsoft followed suit and had two exclusive game series, **Bungie's** *Halo* games and **Epic Games'** *Gears of War* games published in alternate years. Making a mainstream video game does put these publishers in a difficult position. "Mainstream game design has become a game of tug of war between keeping the fans (or core gamers) happy, while expanding the appeal of the game with the designers caught in the middle. Pulled too far one way and you have a game that keeps the fans happy, but has limited appeal. Go too far the other way and the designer can have a worse situation: a game that is too watered down for fans to enjoy, yet too inaccessible to attract a larger audience" says Josh Bycer, owner of Game-Wisdom.com, in his article on game industry news magazine *Gamasutra*.<sup>37</sup>

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this pattern of game development has been very common. Every big company in the business is trying to reach a bigger market penetration, eventually reaching mainstream status. While the first few generations of home consoles existed in the shadow of immensely popular arcade games, their sixth generation can truly be said to have allowed home consoles to come into their own. This included consoles by Japanese producers such as PlayStation®2, Xbox™ and GameCube™. The developer teams behind these consoles were much larger than earlier teams. Again, in 2005 and 2006, the consoles of the seventh generation required larger teams both because of ever more complex graphics complexity and because of the move to a High Definition<sup>38</sup> standard which required games to have at least a resolution of 1280 x 720 pixels. The higher resolution requires three-dimensional models to be more finely detailed and the textures of the models, i.e. the drawings that cover the 3D models to turn them from grey blocks into a convincing approximation of reality, to be of much higher quality than before. As a result, more artists and designers were required for each game in this generation. Industry analysts predicted the average budget of three to six million dollars for a game could rise to ten million dollars according to a

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<sup>37</sup> Bycer, J. (October 20, 2011) The Abstraction Of Skill In Game Design. *Gamasutra*. Retrieved January 4, 2013 from [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134886/the\\_abstraction\\_of\\_skill\\_in\\_game\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134886/the_abstraction_of_skill_in_game_.php)

<sup>38</sup> HD or "high definition" and refers to a standard for TV screens with higher resolution than common in CRT-displays (common lamp televisions). Such TVs and DVD-media could not accurately display content of higher resolution than 640 x 480 pixels, so displays that could display higher resolutions were marked "HD". With the Xbox 360™ and the PlayStation3 of the 7th generation of video games, a resolution output of at least 720p was required by the console makers.

BBC report in 2005,<sup>39</sup> but time showed this to be an underestimation. In 2009, M2 Research conducted a study that showed the average budget to be 18 to 28 million dollars.<sup>40</sup> Robert Wash, CEO of **Krome Studios** in Australia, said in an interview with *Develop Magazine* that the rising price of making games put ever higher stakes on each release.<sup>41</sup> The game *The Assassin's Creed* from 2006 demonstrates this point, for few publishers have gone to such lengths in the number of design teams working on the same game as the French company **Ubisoft** has done in producing *The Assassin's Creed* series. They have established a worldwide collective undertaking, with up to six development studios working on each instalment. The 2012 game *Assassin's Creed III* has over five hundred people working on it, according to Ubisoft Montreal Chief Yannis Mallet.<sup>42</sup> The number of people needed to make a video game grew enormously due to the switch to an HD-standard. Thus game design focused more and more on graphic design. The picture quality and ever increasing picture detail was the main goal, many were of the opinion that this impacted game play quality, if judged by what Mark Kern, who was a team lead on **Blizzard Entertainment's** successful "massively multi-player" on-line PC game *World of Warcraft*, said in an interview with *Computer And Video Games* online magazine: "There's no middle ground [...] You're either an indie game or you're a massive AAA, IP-backed sequel with derivative gameplay, as it's the only safe bet you can make when you're spending hundreds of millions of dollars. All the games in the middle have been squeezed out and we've seen all these independent studios get closed down."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> BBC Staff. (November 17, 2005). Cost of making games set to soar. *BBC News*. Retrieved January 5, 2013 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4442346.stm>

<sup>40</sup> Crossley, R. (January 11, 2010) Study: Average Dev Costs as High as \$28m. *Develop*. Retrieved January 5, 2013 from <http://www.develop-online.net/news/33625/Study-Average-dev-cost-as-high-as-28m>

<sup>41</sup> Crossley, R. (May 26, 2009). Dev Budgets 'Doubled or Tripled' From Last Gen. *Develop*. Retrieved January 5, 2013 from <http://www.develop-online.net/news/31949/Dev-budgets-doubled-or-tripled-from-last-gen>

<sup>42</sup> Takahashi, D. (June 5, 2012). Venture Beat. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from <http://venturebeat.com/2012/06/05/ubisofts-montreal-chief-yannis-mallet-on-putting-more-than-500-developers-on-assassin-games-interview/>

<sup>43</sup> Dawkins, D. (July 4, 2012). Consoles, as we know them, are dead. But core games aren't. *ComputerAndVideoGames.com*. Retrieved January 5, 2013 from [http://www.computerandvideogames.com/356492/features/consoles-as-we-know-them-are-dead-but-core-games-arent/?page=2#top\\_banner](http://www.computerandvideogames.com/356492/features/consoles-as-we-know-them-are-dead-but-core-games-arent/?page=2#top_banner)

#### 4. The Mainstream and the Casual

The trend of making games easier reached its height with the release of the French game *Prince of Persia* (2008) for the Xbox 360™ and the PlayStation®3 in 2008. Since its re-introduction of 2003 with *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, the series has been known for complex three-dimensional architecture and puzzles which incorporate a time-reversal ability. Sales of the game, on the other hand, had never really reached the top tiers of video game blockbusters. With the release of the 2008 version, French publisher **Ubisoft** wanted *Prince of Persia* to become more accessible. In a series of promotional videos<sup>44</sup>, game developers explained the creative process and design decisions, for example how it can be decided that a "fail-state" in a game is really unnecessary, and how "death" is only a phenomenon that forces the player to wait through a loading screen. Moreover, they simplified the control scheme greatly: No longer was it necessary to stop at each traversal juncture (i.e. when the titular prince hangs from a ledge or a beam) to consider which command to choose. Perhaps **Ubisoft** was on to something, but the players would have none of it. *Prince of Persia* was openly berated on internet forums and dismissed by some reviewers, resulting in a bad reputation that caused sales to drop.

In the first *Prince of Persia* game from French publisher/developer **Ubisoft**, navigating the environment is moderately complex, with many different buttons on the PlayStation®2 controller being used for various acrobatic moves to get the main character to climb up walls and jump between them. In the first *Assassin's Creed* game, itself having begun as a new kind of Prince of Persia game, the player was no longer required to remember the different buttons for each type of wall-jump or wall-movement. It was enough to hold down a shoulder button and one of the face buttons, and simply point in the direction the character was supposed to move. He would climb up tall buildings, jump across rivers and go wherever possible, and the player only had to hold down two buttons, and point. The game was therefore relatively easy to play.

In *Prince of Persia* (2008) it was rather simple to navigate an environment that would have been very challenging in the 2003 game. In addition to this streamlining, the main character had a magical companion character that was always near, and would

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<sup>44</sup> Available at SamFisherForEver's YouTube Channel, video 1 from 3:00. Retrieved December 13 from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThH69j\\_7FFY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThH69j_7FFY)



grab the character if they fell down into a hole, and refill their health should they be overcome by an enemy. Something many players balked at, since they felt the challenge was completely removed if one could never really die from falling off a wall or being hit too many times by an enemy. The unpopularity of *Prince of Persia (2008)* made this game into a pivot point for the industry, which began to turn away from making games too easy.

The design changes described above did not spell an end to the *Assassin's Creed* series, for the developers of those games shifted the challenge away from jumping and climbing to exploration, time-restraints and requiring stealth in a crowd while completing an objective.

To react to that, the publisher quickly abandoned that new method of imagining the *Prince of Persia* series, and the next game in the series was made with the design principles of the *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* from 2003. The design trend of focusing on simplification and accessibility was beginning to backfire.

## **5. An Excitement of a Different Sort**

*Monster Hunter* is a game series with complex design and a steep difficulty curve for newcomers. It features a fighting system similar to the one in *Demon's Souls*, where attacks take a pre-determined amount of time that the players must take into account before initiating an attack, and where orientation matters more than in many other games. *Monster Hunter* began its life as a game made for the PlayStation®2 in 2004. It has a single-player mode, but is more geared towards four-player co-operative play. Since the network module was optional for the PlayStation®2, not everyone was able to enjoy the “co-op” mode, which may have contributed to the game’s lax sales. In 2005, the game was ported to the PlayStation®Portable, the handheld gaming device from Sony which has a built-in wireless modem, and there it was an instant success. Each subsequent release has sold millions in Japan. For example, *Monster Hunter Portable 3<sup>rd</sup>*, released on December 1, 2010, has sold 4.78 million units to date.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Note: *Monster Hunter Portable 3<sup>rd</sup>* is known as *Monster Hunter Freedom 3* outside of Japan. VGChartz Ltd. (2012) *Monster Hunter Freedom 3 - PlayStation Portable*. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.vgchartz.com/game/44133/monster-hunter-freedom-3/>

Learning to have fun in *Monster Hunter* is said to take at least 10 hours of game time, according to the *8-4 Play* podcast.<sup>46</sup> This is perhaps the barrier to entry that has prevented the series from gaining popularity outside of Japan, but there, experienced players will help new players get into the game and groups of friends that start playing at the same time will discover its intricacies together and help each other along. Even those who don't have many friends will easily find people to play with on the daily commute to or from work and school. In Japan many people spend 2-4 hours in trains every day, so this is also where they find their game time. If two players are a few cars apart, their PlayStation®Portable consoles will find each other through a so-called "ad-hoc wireless network" and they can join up and help one another. In addition to that, since so many people play games on their handheld game systems while on the train to work, the opportunity for co-op play is far greater than elsewhere in the world.

*Monster Hunter* is not only difficult as far as its fighting system is concerned; the secondary gaming systems are also hard to fully grasp. Though one can purchase better weapons and armour, it is very important to craft items within the game. Not only can players create more potent healing items than the standard fare, but players can also create strong gear from the hide and bones of monsters they have defeated. However, the recipes for crafting items are not simply listed in the game; the player must discover them through trial and error, or learn about them from another player. Each new player must persevere, ganbaru, and endure the hardship of being a newcomer, gaman suru, before really getting to appreciate the game.

While *Monster Hunter* is a testament to Japanese game design, the fact that it has failed to catch the same audience outside its home country may indicate that the game relies too heavily on Japanese cultural habits, instead of just using them for inspiration. *Demon's Souls*, like *Monster Hunter*, emphasised patience and battle awareness in its battle design, but unlike *Monster Hunter*, they did not depend as much on ad-hoc multi-player modes and thus managed to gain a strong foothold in the international market, where situations like those that favour *Monster Hunter* don't exist.

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<sup>46</sup> 8-4 Play Ltd. (2012, December 10). 8-4 Play 12/10/2010: JUMP THE SHARQ. Retrieved December 14, 2012 from <http://8-4.jp/blog/?p=132>.

## 6. From Software Makes its Case

In 2009, the success of the game *Demon's Souls* released by **From Software** showed that modern games need not be easy and accessible. Instead of featuring a gallery-type design, *Demon's Souls* expected gamers to fail repeatedly before progressing. Set in a fantastical world which is inspired by mediaeval European design and sprinkled with Asian historical influences, the game features a player that is one of only a few sane humans left in a country ravaged by a cursed fog and monsters that prey on mankind. Instead of the usual video game design, where dying and restarting from "saved games" exists outside the game fiction, in *Demon's Souls* the game auto-saves every few seconds. Every time the player dies, the world is repopulated with any monsters that have been slain, and the player must re-embark on his voyage through any area he has not reached the outer limits of. Furthermore, the player loses all currency accumulated during their journey that has not been used to make the character faster or stronger, or to make better weapons or armour. Since such improvements can only be purchased in the hub area, chances are that the player will lose everything "gained" since venturing from the hub area. This gives more weight to every action performed, for mistakes cannot be corrected through reloading a save-state since the game does not allow that. Instead, the players must live with their mistakes.

In late 2011, **From Software** released a follow-up to *Demon's Souls* called *Dark Souls*. *Dark Souls* became an even greater success than its predecessor, and has been said to be even more challenging, with ruthless boss enemies and treasure chests that "eat" the player. At the same time, the game was more inviting to new players because of the new bonfire-system. Instead of giving the player a safe hub world from which to warp to the different enemy areas, *Dark Souls* had one persistent world with special bonfires that rejuvenated the players and made them safe while they rested there. Instead of collecting healing grasses, each player had an "estus flask" with a set number of swigs that filled a portion of the "life bar." Instead of having a "magic point" bar next to the life bar, each spell had a specific number of uses that refilled at a bonfire. This gave the player a kind of reference when travelling through dangerous areas, for if they were half way through their reserves, they should be able to find a bonfire or head back to the last one.

The *Souls* games' unconventional online system is very Japanese in design. It is one that is quite limited compared to most online games: Instead of players being constantly in the same world as in *World of Warcraft*, *Souls* players will see apparitions of other players sometimes shift in and out of reality while they move through the world. Meeting up with other players is possible, but only in certain spots, and only in human form. In those places one player can summon another to help them travel safely through an area or defeat an enemy boss. This is immensely useful to new players. Experienced players may offer their services by putting down a summoning symbol, and the game would match together players of a similar experience level and bring the summoned into the world of the summoner. Getting this sort of help did come at a cost, however, since "soul" rewards from defeating a boss would be split between the players, and to be able to summon in the first place the player must be in human form instead of the default ghoul form, and to that end the player must use up a rare, expensive item. Additionally balancing out this accommodating bit of game design, a player in human form could have his world invaded at any time by malicious players, looking to kill other players and steal their reserve of souls instead of working with them. Such a player manifested as a red-black spirit in the human player's world and was ignored by all the monsters in it; this could lead to particularly nasty situations where an invader might trail a summoner as he made his way through the world and stab them in the back right after they defeated a difficult enemy and thought themselves safe.

In most video games with multiplayer modes players are able to play together for as long as they like and use voice chat or written messages to communicate at will. In the *Souls* games, these interactions between players are limited by design. Instead of showing a menu option in the pause screen like most games with multi-player do, in *Demon's Souls* multi-player can only be initiated by finding "summon signs" other players have elected to put on the ground. Such a symbol is only available while the player is in the area in their game and disappears if they venture too far from it. This means that in order to play with another player, one must actually find their sign while they are adventuring in the same small area, which reinforces the feeling of "haphazardly running into" a fellow survivor. Once another player has joined, communicating with them is a task unto itself, for one has only a handful of gestures, like pointing, bowing or cheering. Each summoned ally can only help until the next main "boss bat-

tle,<sup>47</sup> after which the summoned ally is sent back to their world by the game. The fleeting nature of the time that two or three players spend with each other and the difficulty of communicating thus serve to enhance the grim atmosphere of the world created in the game, and the need to persevere in the face of difficulties. This feeling, along with the overall dark design of the games, in turn, makes the players feel more kinship with each other than in other games, and pushes them towards helping each other.

Aside from the ability to play together, players can also leave messages for each other. The messages are put together from predetermined phrases and words, and placed on the ground where the player is standing. Thus they are not free-form, which Director Miyazaki says is to keep the game from becoming a chat-room because that would ruin the austere atmosphere of the games.<sup>48</sup> Though voice-chat is common in Western online games, such predetermined speech characterises Japanese online games. From *Phantasy Star Online* to the *Monster Hunter* games, only predetermined phrases are available for players to communicate with, and this is because most Japanese game players don't want to talk to fleeting strangers on short notice. Whether this is due to shyness or quiet pragmatism is debatable, but in this the *Souls* games follow the cultural norm in Japan. The messages mostly allow for hints about the environment or upcoming enemies, and as such, cover the world with a positive communal layer that blunts the brutality of the game world and game mechanics. When playing the game online, one gets the feeling that there is an army of allies out there somewhere, even though they do not manifest at all times.

All these complex online functions required servers which were run by the publisher to facilitate these interactions between different players. The company that published the *Demon's Souls* in North America, **Atlus Inc.**, is a very small publisher known for releasing niche products in small production runs with little ability to support them in the long run. The online servers were intended to run for a year after *Demon's Souls* was originally released, until the summer of 2010. However, the title continued to sell well enough to keep the servers in operation. Again, in 2011, the servers were to be

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<sup>47</sup> A difficult enemy that serves as a final challenge in a given area are called the "area boss." Most of the time defeating such an enemy will open the way home or a temporary respite from fighting.

<sup>48</sup> Spencer (July 10, 2009) *Demon's Souls* Director Didn't Think *Demon's Souls* Was \*That\* Hard. *Siliconera*. Retrieved December 3, 2012 from <http://www.siliconera.com/2009/07/10/demons-souls-director-didnt-think-demons-souls-was-that-hard/>

turned off, but in the end they were not.<sup>49</sup> On May 25<sup>th</sup> 2012 **Atlus Inc.** stated that they would keep the servers on for the foreseeable future, since the game had continued to sell well alongside its spiritual successor, *Dark Souls*.<sup>50</sup>

## 7. A Still Standing Mid-Sized Independent

**From Software** is a small Japanese development house that has managed to stay independent on account of a few relative successes, with series like *Armored Core* which spawned many sequels, one of which was *Armored Core 2* for the **PlayStation®2** in the year 2000 and sold around 800 thousand copies.<sup>51</sup> For a long time it was best known for this series of games, where the player controls a huge robot fighting other huge robots in a battle arena. It has also been known for its action game series named *Otogi*, and a few one-off successes, for example the games *Enchanted Arms* and *Shadow Tower*. It was founded in 1986 for the development of business application software, only entering the game software development in 1994 when Sony released the original PlayStation home console. Their first game was called *King's Field* and had sold 80 thousand copies by the end of 1995<sup>52</sup>. This was deemed popular enough for the company to stay in the new area of game production.

**From Software** is not a big company any more than the Danish film producers who signed the Dogme 95 Manifesto<sup>53</sup>. In April 2012, the total number of employees of

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<sup>49</sup> 2010: Andrew Gaskill (December 21, 2010) Demon's Souls Servers Get Extended Life. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.co-optimus.com/article/5147/demon-s-souls-servers-get-extended-life.html>

2011: Andrew Gaskill (September 23, 2011) Demon's Souls' Servers Refuse to Die. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.co-optimus.com/article/6839/demon-s-souls-servers-refuse-to-die.html>

2012: Andrew Gaskill (April 12, 2012) Demon's Souls Servers Permanently Shutting Down Next Month. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.co-optimus.com/article/8050/demon-s-souls-servers-permanently-shutting-down-next-month.html>

Indefinite: Evan Narcisse (May 25, 2012) Demon's Souls Servers Will Stay Alive Indefinitely. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://kotaku.com/5913404/demons-souls-servers-will-stay-alive-indefinitely>

<sup>50</sup> Continued to sell 700,000 copies in 2011 and 2012, by which time the sequel had been announced and released.

VGChartz Ltd. (2012) Demon's Souls - PlayStation 3. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.vgchartz.com/game/31689/demons-souls/Global/>

<sup>51</sup> VGChartz Ltd. (2012) Armored Core 2 - PlayStation 2. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.vgchartz.com/game/2856/armored-core-2/>

<sup>52</sup> VGChartz Ltd. (2012) King's Field (Japan) - PlayStation. Retrieved December 14 2012 from <http://www.vgchartz.com/game/3595/kings-field-japan/>

<sup>53</sup> Trischak, E. (January 15, 1999) Dogme 95: The Vow of Chastity (abridged) Retrieved November 11 2012 from [http://cinetext.philo.at/reports/dogme\\_ct.html](http://cinetext.philo.at/reports/dogme_ct.html)

**From Software** was 218,<sup>54</sup> out of which a team of 43 programmers and designers worked on *Demon's Souls*,<sup>55</sup> excluding the localisation team, musicians and project managers at Sony. The small size of **From Software** is in stark contrast to the size of the video game industry's heavyweights, as is the size of the Danish film industry when compared to Hollywood film producers. The heavyweight game companies include the American **Blizzard**, makers of the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, the action adventure *Diablo III* and strategic army management game *StarCraft 2*. They employed over 4,600 people as of 2009<sup>56</sup> and are thus in a completely different league than **From Software**. Another large company is **Activision**, the other subsidiary of **Activision Blizzard**, which has several development houses under its roof. One of them is **Treyarch**, makers of 2012's entry in the *Call of Duty* series, named *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. The number of people working for **Activision** is around 7.300.<sup>57</sup> The employees of the development house **Treyarch** are around 250, all of which worked on *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* for two years. **From Software** also had a team working on their game, *Demons Souls* for two years, but only forty nine people in all.

This small design team at **From Software** benefited unexpectedly from designing a game that turned out to be so difficult. According to interviews with members of the team they did not aim to create such a difficult game.<sup>58</sup> However, in doing so, they made better use of each environment in the game, for a player has to try many times to get through them. When venturing into unknown areas of the game, an enemy might be lurking behind any corner, one blow from which might be lethal. In most other games, the player would be allowed to suffer a few hits from a sword or a machine gun (or perhaps, the character in the game is programmed to automatically dodge the first few attacks) while the players get their bearings and adjust to the new combat situation. Most

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<sup>54</sup> FromSoftware, Inc. (2010) Corporate Profile. Retrieved November 11, 2012 from <http://www.fromsoftware.jp/en/corpinfo/>

<sup>55</sup> MobyGames Staff (2012) *Demon's Souls*. Retrieved November 11, 2012 from <http://www.mobygames.com/game/ps3/demons-souls/credits>

<sup>56</sup> Gamasutra Staff (September 17, 2009) *GDC Austin: An Inside Look At The Universe Of Warcraft*. Retrieved November 11, 2012 from [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=25307](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=25307)

<sup>57</sup> MacroAxis Staff (2012) *Activision Number of Employees*. Retrieved November 11, 2012 from [http://www.macroaxis.com/invest/ratio/ATVI--Number\\_of\\_Employees](http://www.macroaxis.com/invest/ratio/ATVI--Number_of_Employees)

<sup>58</sup> Famitsu Magazine Staff. (April 2, 2009) *Demon's Souls Developer Interview* (author's translation). *Weekly Famitsu*. Retrieved December 3, 2012 from [http://www.famitsu.com/interview/article/1223217\\_1493.html](http://www.famitsu.com/interview/article/1223217_1493.html)

other games, in fact, allow the players great leeway in getting through an area in one piece, so they usually only need to go through it once. The design in *Demon's Souls* allows for a pragmatic use of an artist's time, making the most of limited company resources while creating a varied game full of fateful, unforeseen encounters.

The designers at **From Software** aimed at creating a real sense of accomplishment for the players, and in doing so left out design ideas that in many other games soften the repercussions of not succeeding, but tend to take away the joy of the unexpected.

## 8. Game Design Cast in Japanese Culture

The concept of perseverance through difficulties is very Japanese. The entire nation of Japan has a couple of words very high on its list of those most frequently used: "Ganbaru", which translates roughly to "I will work hard and try my best", and "gaman suru", which translates to "I will persevere", or "I will endure." These concepts are very important to the Japanese psyche and can do much to explain some aspects of Japanese culture. Thus trying your best and enduring hardships is an expected norm in all corners of life, and succeeding after much hard work is a feeling everyone understands to be a communal one.

Davies and Ikeno say that “[g]ambari reflects an essential component of the modern Japanese character as it has developed since historical times. In daily life, the Japanese use the term gambari very often...”<sup>59</sup> which indicates that the phrase is culturally important. Furthermore, “the Japanese use these expressions at least once a day with good-bye and also write them at the end of letters. With this usage, they encourage one another with the implication “Please keep up your hard work until your goals are achieved.” The term connotes high achievement, motivation, and orientation to group harmony.”<sup>59</sup> Citing Amanuma, they say he “further states that even the Chinese and Koreans have no equivalent word for gambaru,<sup>60</sup> although the word is indicated by a Chinese character that was introduced to Japan from China through Korea. Both Chinese and Korean have the characters that make up gambaru, but they do not have expressions

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<sup>59</sup> Davies, R. J., & Ikeno, O. (2002). *The Japanese mind: understanding contemporary Japanese culture*. Tuttle Pub, p. 83.

<sup>60</sup> The Japanese word がんばる is alternatively romanised as “ganbaru” or “gambaru”. Due to the ‘b’ sound that follows the character ん, it tends to sound more like ‘m’ in speech.



that possess the same nuances. This suggests that gambaru is an expression that is unique to Japan and expresses certain qualities of the Japanese.”<sup>61</sup>

In the wake of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, the phrase “gambaru” or variations on “gambarou Japan” were commonly heard on TV and appeared in other media.<sup>62</sup> The same was true after the Kobe earthquake in 1995, when people encouraged each other to rebuild the devastated city with the words “gambarou Kobe.”<sup>63</sup>

Priscilla M. A. Blinco of Stanford University says in her paper on education in Japan that educators there “believe that all students can achieve if they continue to persevere (*gaman suru*), be patient and endure hardship, especially in the pre-school and elementary years. For example, Cummings noted that one of the five major goals for one elementary school faculty in Japan was “to encourage the will to endure whatever is attempted”[8]. The Japanese believe that effort and hard work are essential to task mastery. Hess and his colleagues’ 1986 study confirms the importance placed on effort by the Japanese.”<sup>64</sup>

It makes sense that when designing a game like *Demon’s Souls*, the people of From Software were willing to focus more on the challenge, and not softening the design for the masses like most big game developers do. The culture the game sprang from teaches “[y]oung children very early that all accomplishments and achievements require sacrifice and effort. This makes the achievement much more worthwhile.”<sup>65</sup>

## 9. Influence and the Zeitgeist

As different as the *Souls* games are from mainstream games produced by large game publishers in the U.S. and Japan, they could have been expected to become a so-called niche title, and unlikely to sell even a hundred thousand copies. By the fall of

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<sup>61</sup> Davies, R. J., & Ikeno, O. (2002). *The Japanese mind: understanding contemporary Japanese culture*. Tuttle Pub, p. 83 - 85.

<sup>62</sup> Kashiwagi, S. (April 28, 2011). We Help Each Other. Kitsuna: Nikkei Stories from the 2011 Japan Earthquake & Tsunami. *Discover Nikkei*. Retrieved January 8, 2013 from <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2011/4/28/we-help-each-other/>

<sup>63</sup> Davies, R. J., & Ikeno, O. (2002). *The Japanese mind: understanding contemporary Japanese culture*. Tuttle Pub, p. 83 - 85.

<sup>64</sup> Blinco, P. M. A. (2002). Persistence and Education: A Formula for Japan's Economic Success. *Comparative Education*, 29(2), 172.

<sup>65</sup> Blinco, P. M. A. (2002). Persistence and Education: A Formula for Japan's Economic Success. *Comparative Education*, 29(2), 174.

2012, however, *Demon's Souls* had sold 1.65 million copies all over the world, with 340 thousand copies sold in Japan, a country where most games sell from ten to around a hundred thousand copies in their opening week.<sup>66</sup> Through word-of-mouth, *Demon's Souls* gradually grew in popularity in gamer communities around the world in the latter half of 2009, and became a cult hit. While it did not initially garner much attention in the Western gaming press, GameSpot gave it its "Game of The Year" award for 2009, and thus incited more publications to pay attention to this new game.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, *Demon's Souls* became one of the most discussed games in the video game community. It was often included in discussions on video game podcasts or video shows.<sup>67</sup> It is interesting to note that a search for *Demon's Souls* on Google yields 4.3 million results and one for *Dark Souls* yields 21.8 million results.<sup>68</sup> Both games continue to be referenced in 2012 and have inspired game designers around the world to make more challenging games.

*Demon's Souls* was a game that grew popular through word of mouth, without any promotional campaign. Because of its popularity, game publisher **Namco** was confident in promoting its sequel *Dark Souls*, and that game did indeed get on to the playlists of many people. Among those people are game designers from other game companies, like Brad Muir of **Double Fine Productions**, lead designer of the action strategy game *Iron Brigade* (also known as *Trenched*), who placed the game at the top of his list of the best games of 2011. Greg Kasavin, of **Super Giant Games**, placed it second on his list of top games of 2011. The success of the *Souls* games does not equal the success of *Call of Duty*, mentioned above; however, they are amazingly influential when we keep in mind how small the team behind this Japanese game is.

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<sup>66</sup> Media Create. Weekly Ranking. Retrieved September 18, 2012 from [www.m-create.com/ranking/](http://www.m-create.com/ranking/)  
Secondary source available at <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=492088>

<sup>67</sup> Downin, J. (October 21, 2009) Idle Thumbs 48: In Space. *CastMedium*. Retrieved December 19, 2012 from <http://www.castmedium.com/2009/10/21/idle-thumbs-48-in-space/>

1up.com (October 29, 2009). Active Time Babble II: Nostalgia and Demon's Souls. *Active Time Babble*. [podcast]. Retrieved November 13, 2012 from <http://www.1up.com/do/minisite?cId=3176689>

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Whiskey Media (October 27, 2009). Giant Bombcast 10-27-2009. *Giant Bombcast*. [podcast]. Retrieved November 13, 2012 from <http://media.giantbomb.com/podcast/giantbombcast-102709.mp3>

<sup>68</sup> Google Search for "Dark Souls." Retrieved on December 7, 2012 from <https://www.google.com/search?q=%22Dark+Souls%22>

The *Souls* games have more indeed already inspired bigger Japanese game developers with their games. This year, industry giant **Capcom** released the game *Dragon's Dogma* for modern consoles. This game has a dark atmosphere in common with the *Souls* games as well as a mediaeval European world design. Another game named *Soul Sacrifice* by **Marvelous** and **Sony Computer Entertainment Japan** is in the works, to be released on the portable game console PlayStation®Vita later this winter. It takes place in a similar fantastical mediaeval world, but it is focused on co-operative play.

It is evident that the unexpected success of the *Soul's* games has inspired other producers to follow suit, and challenge their players by including difficult and unforeseeable twists, some of which are based on a characteristic of the Japanese people.

## 10. Conclusion

Over the last two decades, video game design has been on a trajectory towards creating a smoother, easier experience for the player, due to the extreme risks increasingly associated with game development and the economic need for catering to the mainstream audience. The larger size of development teams, required to reach the standards of technological advancement expected by the public, called for increased investment. That, in turn, called for simplification in game structure in order to appeal to a larger audience to ensure profits. As a consequence, a certain charm has been lost, one that came as a result of the primitive state of game design in the era of game arcades and the business model they thrived on. Indeed, this simplification in game development that has occurred as a consequence has begun to turn players away, as was indicated in the disappointing sales figures of *Prince of Persia* in 2008.

The games in the *Monster Hunter* series, while incredibly popular in Japan, never found fertile ground outside that country, despite the cleverly designed battle system which so many in Japan found rewarding. With the release of *Demon's Souls* and subsequently *Dark Souls*, the Japanese designer **From Software** has demonstrated that deliberately designing a game to be challenging instead of following the large producers' pervasive trend of ever more simple games can indeed succeed internationally. That fact brings to mind how Dogme films became a success through deliberately challenging the conventions of the film industry in the 1990's. For many players of video games, the effect that the *Souls* games had was to reawaken the joy of play that oversimplified

games had put a damper on. For joy of play needs challenge and withers away if too much can be taken for granted, or the game is "too quickly won," to quote Romeo's Juliet.

The popularity of these games has demonstrated that their kind of game design can fully compete in a market dominated by simplified mainstream games and sell more than a million copies. In doing so, **From Software** utilised not only "old school" design ethics, but also sensibilities born of Japanese culture, namely the concepts of "ganbaru," or "to work hard and keep at it," and "gaman suru," "to persevere through hardship," and promoted these ideals through game design. These ancient, deeply-ingrained values call for an effort on the part of the players that turned out to have an appeal not only in Japan, but all over the world. **From Software** also demonstrated pragmatism that followed from their design choices, something that surely many game developers will take note of. Game trends die slowly, and new ideas spread gradually through the community. The *Souls* games by **From Software** did not end up as a niche product; they inspired players in the general public as well as within the industry. Therefore, we can expect to see games, both large and small, that take cues from these pivotal games. Though the market in Japan is small, the wealth of ideas for game design that originates from that country has proven invaluable in the past, and will most likely continue to affect the industry for many years.

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and Beyond*: Greenwood Press.



## Game Bibliography

Year of Release	Game Name	Platform(s)	Publisher (Region)	Developer	Country of Origin
1958	Tennis for Two	Donner Model 30 analog computer	William Higinbotham	William Higinbotham	USA
1972	Pong	Arcade	Atari	Atari	USA
1978	Space Invaders	Arcade	Taito	Taito	Japan
1980	Pac-Man	Arcade	Namco	Namco	Japan
1981	Donkey Kong	Arcade	Nintendo	Nintendo	Japan
1982	Sinistar	Arcade	Williams Electronics	Williams Electronics	USA
1985	Super Mario Bros.	Famicom, Nintendo Entertainment System	Nintendo	Nintendo	Japan
1991	Street Fighter II	Arcade	Capcom	Capcom	Japan
1992	Mortal Kombat	Arcade	Midway	Midway	USA
1993	Virtua Fighter	Arcade	Sega	Sega	Japan
1994	Tekken	Arcade	Namco	Namco	Japan
1994	King's Field	PlayStation®	From Software	From Software	Japan
1996	Soul Edge	Arcade	Namco	Namco	Japan
1997	Armored Core	PlayStation®	Sony Computer Entertainment	From Software	Japan
1998	Shadow Tower	PlayStation®	Agetec	From Software	Japan
1998	SoulCalibur	Arcade	Namco	Namco	Japan
1999	Driver	PlayStation®	GT Interactive Software	Reflections Interactive	UK
2000	Phantasy Star Online	SegaDreamcast™	Sega	Sonic Team	Japan
2000	Armored Core 2	PlayStation®2	Agetec	From Software	Japan
2002	Otogi	Xbox™	Agetec	From Software	Japan
2003	Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	PlayStation®2	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Canada
2004	Monster Hunter	PlayStation®2	Capcom	Capcom	Japan
2004	World of Warcraft	PC	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment	USA
2005	Monster Hunter Portable	PlayStation®Portable	Capcom	Capcom	Japan

<b>Year of Release</b>	<b>Game Name</b>	<b>Platform(s)</b>	<b>Publisher (Region)</b>	<b>Developer</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>
2005	Call of Duty 2	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Activision	Infinity Ward	USA
2006	Enchanted Arms	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	From Software (Japan), Ubisoft (Europe, USA)	From Software	Japan
2007	Tekken 6	Arcade	Namco	Namco	Japan
2007	Halo 3	Xbox 360™	Microsoft Game Studios	Bungie	USA
2007	Assassin's Creed	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Canada
2008	Grand Theft Auto IV	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	UK
2008	Gears of War 2	Xbox 360™	Microsoft Game Studios	Epic Games	USA
2008	Prince of Persia	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Canada
2009	Final Fantasy XIII	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Square Enix	Square Enix	Japan
2009	Demon's Souls	PlayStation®3	Sony Computer Entertainment (Japan)	From Software	Japan
2009	Demon's Souls	PlayStation®3	Atlus (USA)	From Software	Japan
2010	Demon's Souls	PlayStation®3	Namco-Bandai (Europe)	From Software	Japan
2010	StarCraft II	PC	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment	USA
2010	Medal of Honor	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Electronic Arts	Danger Close Games	USA
2010	Call of Duty: Black Ops	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Activision	Treyarch	USA
2010	Monster Hunter Portable 3rd	PlayStation®Portable	Capcom	Capcom	Japan
2011	Dark Souls	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Namco-Bandai	From Software	Japan
2011	Iron Brigade	Xbox 360™, PC	Microsoft Studios	Double Fine Productions	USA
2011	Battlefield 3	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Electronic Arts	EA Digital Illusions CE	Sweden
2012	Call of Duty: Black Ops II	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC	Activision	Treyarch	USA
2012	Diablo III	PC	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment	USA

<b>Year of Release</b>	<b>Game Name</b>	<b>Platform(s)</b>	<b>Publisher (Region)</b>	<b>Developer</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>
2012	Dragon's Dogma	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Capcom	Capcom	Japan
2012	The Walking Dead	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™, PC, iOS	TellTale Games	TellTale Games	USA
2012	Assassin's Creed III	PlayStation®3, Xbox 360™	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Canada
2013 (Unreleased)	Soul Sacrifice	PlayStation®Vita	Sony Computer Entertainment	Marvelous AQL, SCE Japan Studio	Japan

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