

Identity Crisis of a Genre

The concept of a “souls-like” game means something different to any two people. For some, it means the aesthetics of the Dark Souls series created by From Software, whereas others envision difficult and methodical combat. Others, still, identify the genre as something far more vague, such as an accumulation of different aspects of the original games from which the genre gets its name. This lack of consensus among players and industry members over the definition of a genre is not unheard of, and one day souls-like might have its own version of rogue-like’s Berlin Interpretation which will come with its own controversies and rejections amongst the public. Souls-like, much like the concept of a rogue-like, stems from people’s perceived similarities between one game, or a franchise of games, and other games made afterwards, often in spirit of the namesake. A souls-like game is one that *feels* like Dark Souls or Demon’s Souls, regardless of the specific mechanics put in place. However, to achieve that feeling many pieces of the Souls experience must be used, each with different importance to the feel. That feel is achieved mostly through combat, which is what characterizes the genre and defines it.¹

To begin to define souls-like as a genre, it is important to discuss the role of aesthetics. While not every souls-like may be dark and foreboding, that sense of hopelessness characterized in Demon’s Souls and later From Software titles are a staple of the genre and works in tandem with the mechanics of each game. Souls-like is a *vibe*² which must be coherent throughout differing titles with their roots within the original souls games, and one popular method is to adhere to the aesthetics of those games in an attempt to bridge that gap within the player’s mind

¹ 1. Joseph Allen, “Soulmates - How the Souls-like Genre Has Changed Combat in Gaming,” TechRaptor, September 27, 2019, <https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/soulmates-how-souls-like-genre-has-changed-combat-in-gaming>.

² 1. Austin Wood, “What the Hell Is a Souls-like? Game Devs Break down FromSoftware’s Accidental Genre,” gamesradar, February 22, 2022, <https://www.gamesradar.com/what-is-a-souls-like-developers-explain/>.

between what they are playing and the source material. This effort, although powerful and certainly a strong part of the genre, does not define what it means to be a souls-like, however. Jedi: Fallen Order, for example, does not share the same aesthetics at most points in the game, although there are a few exceptions. For the most part, however, you are in vibrant color schemes or ultra clean and geometric architecture. Additionally, the characters' attitudes throughout Fallen Order are often more energetic, full of life, and determined than the hopeless NPCs of Dark Souls. Despite this, Fallen Order is undeniably welcomed among most as being a souls-like game, mostly due to its rest point system and combat. Even From Software themselves prove this not to be a necessary component of souls-like games, with many areas of Dark Souls: 2 being styled in vibrant and glossy textures, or with Elden Ring's entire first area bright with sunshine and beautiful landscapes. There's no denying that dark aesthetics are heavily considered when making souls-likes, however. If it's unnecessary, though, then perhaps it is in other parts of the game's presentation that we will find a defining feature.

When asked to think of a souls-like, many people picture 2D games alongside the 3D classics. One such game which is rarely discounted as a souls-like is Salt and Sanctuary. Salt and Sanctuary takes the core concepts of Dark Souls such as exploring character builds, dodge and poke combat tactics, and the ability to mess up poorly yet also succeed triumphantly and puts them into a 2D platformer with all the same hopeless aesthetics and unique game mechanics put forth in Demon's Souls.³ This revelation means that many games outside of the 3D space may be contenders for the descriptor of "souls-like." However, not just any game that wishes to be a souls-like platformer can do so without controversy. Hollow Knight is one such game where fans

³ Wood, "What the Hell Is a Souls-like? Game Devs Break down FromSoftware's Accidental Genre" and Allen, "Soulmates - How the Souls-like Genre Has Changed Combat in Gaming"

of the genre speculate over and argue online whether it deserves to be called a “souls-like.” Hollow Knight takes some aspects of Dark Souls such as the way NPCs interact with the player, rest points, similar boss mechanics, and unrelenting damage from even the most basic of enemies, yet the game leaves out crucial details like combat that punishes you for attacking at the wrong time, the leveling system, and a comparable dodging system. Hollow Knight could be an example of what a “souls-lite” game could be, however it is not squarely in the souls-like category. Many 2D souls-likes could also just as easily be considered metroidvania titles. It isn’t hard to conceive when you consider that the souls games themselves took heavy inspiration from the metroidvania genre in their development.⁴ What ends up separating most 2D souls-likes from metroidvanias is the distinctive combat system.

It is crucial to understand the combat of Dark Souls and similar From Software games to understand what makes these games stand out in this fashion. Dark Souls operates on a input queue system for the player, meaning that when the player presses the attack button multiple times, their character will attack multiple times. There is a delay on this so that the animation must be able to occur within a certain time frame, but it allows you to commit to an attack immediately after executing your previous one. Committing to attacks is a big decision as well, as once you begin your attack animation, you cannot stop unless you are damaged by an enemy. Most attacks allow you to change direction until the midpoint of the animation, but you are still forced to swing your sword or cast your spell. This commitment contributes heavily to how the combat feels throughout each fight. So, too, does the way the enemies fight you. Souls games show you *where* to dodge, whereas many other action-adventure games show you *when* to

⁴ 1. Michael Rougeau, “What Is a ‘Soulslike’? How Zelda and Nioh Cemented a Game Genre,” Digital Trends, March 7, 2017, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/what-makes-a-soulslike-a-look-at-nioh-and-the-legend-of-zelda-breath-of-the-wild/>.

dodge. This means that you may not know when an attack will occur, but a boss in any souls game will choreograph for a moment long enough to act upon, “Hey! I’m going to attack in *this* direction!” This choreographing goes as low as to the most common enemies in the first area of each of the souls games. Those weak enemies still punish you severely if you do not read their move properly, however, as most of them may do upwards of half to two thirds of your health in one flurry of attacks, sometimes enough to kill you entirely.

Dark Souls is a game that is often characterized as being very difficult and punishing, which creates an expectation among other souls-likes for this to continue to be the case. While the souls-like genre is often described as being very punishing, this is a label that is often misleading. Developers and players can be divided on the issue of difficulty, with some believing crushing difficulty to be a defining trait,⁵ while others think differently.

Kubodera and Canellas are of a similar mind, and don't feel that Souls-likes necessarily have to be super challenging. "The difficulty has to be deliberate in a way that leverages risk and reward," Kubodera says. "Part of what makes a Souls game so rewarding is overcoming mechanical difficulty by learning patterns and systems. If you can still create that euphoria without challenge, then you've probably created a new sub-genre of Souls-likes."⁶

Challenge, although common and expected in this genre, is not a necessary component, but it is encouraged. Challenge must, however, result from the game’s design, not numbers. One idea that floats around forums for souls-like games is that of “inflated difficulty” or difficulty which is only achieved through inflating or deflating the values involved in combat, such as health and damage. The belief is that most difficulty in other types of games is achieved through this method, and difficulty options merely adjust these values. For a souls-like, however, it is

⁵ 1. Trent Cannon, “What Are Soulslike Games? The History and Appeal, Explained,” whatNerd, October 11, 2022, <https://whatnerd.com/what-are-soulslike-games-history-appeal-explained/>.

⁶ Wood, “What the Hell Is a Souls-like? Game Devs Break down FromSoftware’s Accidental Genre”

important that the difficulty must come from the gameplay mechanics itself such as character movement, dodge mechanics, and stamina, while not being inflated in any way. When considering what makes a souls-like a souls-like, this is one of its core tenets.

Souls-likes often have a variety of different weapons or magical abilities which may be used to different effects, yet often one cannot use many different types of weapons as effectively as each other at the same time. For Dark Souls, this was facilitated by having three types of magic and many move sets and thus stat requirements for weapons, although most weapons fall into either “dexterity” or “strength” categories. Dexterity and strength are two of the many different stats in the game, with those two, intelligence, and faith being the main offensively relevant ones. In Salt and Sanctuary, this tradition is continued with their “tree of skills” that serves to allot levels into specific skill points. This is all to facilitate the use of a specific type of weapon throughout the game unless your skill points are shuffled around. It’s a self-regulated system as the only real restriction is how effective you will be at using different weapons based on the skills you’ve decided on throughout the game. There will, however, be plenty of types of weapons throughout most faithful souls-like games. You as the player are given free choice to determine which style of fighting you prefer, attribute your stats accordingly, and play with the different weapon types. This facilitates replayability since players may wish to experience the game with a different fighting style. Many games that are called souls-likes, however, do not have this distinct feature, and instead opt to have merely one fighting style. One of Hollow Knight’s differences from the norm is this same lack of variety for how one may choose to fight. Although there are better weapons after the initial ‘nail’ you use, the others are just more powerful ‘nails’ and thus are better compared to equipment upgrades. Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, another From Software title, also features this lack of variety, where the gameplay of

Sekiro is wrapped around the main character's katana, which cannot be exchanged for any other weapon. Both Hollow Knight and Sekiro are often called souls-likes, yet they miss the mark in this very crucial manner, which warrants them both being considered souls-lites, due to the different feel this then provides for the player.

Both Sekiro and Hollow Knight use melee weapons exclusively, which differs from the genre as well, since ranged weapons are typically included. When thinking about souls-likes, it's easy to fall into the trap of always picturing someone wielding a sword, since that is typically the core weapon used in every game in the genre. Even if one acknowledges weapons outside of swords, it still becomes a challenge for some to recognize the addition of non-melee fighting within the souls-like genre. While bows and crossbows weren't well utilized in the original souls games, we see a great use of another ranged weapon type in another of From Software's games, Bloodborne. Bloodborne includes the use of firearms as a quick short ranged weapon, in line with the gameplay that the game facilitates, that also double as the parry function, a critical component of souls-like games. This inclusion proves the genre's ability to continue to use ranged weaponry, yet most developers neglect this aspect, instead opting to cut out ranged damage unless it's with a throwable item. Jedi: Fallen Order opts to avoid ranged weapons for the player entirely, yet still manages to feel like a souls-like, and serves as an example of the lack of need for those weapons. Although bows and crossbows, and even ranged spells, are commonplace in the original Dark Souls series, they are not the kind of weapons one would expect to see in a souls-like. Melee weapons are almost critical for facilitating the genre's distinct feel, but melee weapons on their own don't mean it's a souls-like.

One of the most distinctive features within souls-likes is the inclusion of the dodge roll. Jedi: Fallen Order, Dark Souls, and many other games have a dodge function which operates like

the original from Demon's Souls. Having a dodge roll or another motion which moves the player to a new location while providing temporary invulnerability is not unique to this genre. Games have been using various dodge functions as far back as 1988 with the arcade game Cabal, yet there is something that separates the souls-like dodge from that of other action games. Notably, souls-like dodges have a period of time after the invulnerability has worn off where you are still unable to control your character. This point in the animation where the character must stand up after their roll is an opportunity for your opponent to hit you, punishing wrongful dodging. Additionally, in every souls-like, the dodge costs some stamina. Jedi: Fallen Order and Dark Souls have a slow roll that is characterized this way perfectly. Other games in the genre such as Sekiro and Bloodborne differ in that instead of a slow and heavy dodge roll which may punish you on the get-up, these games offer a much faster "step" which will see the character step in a direction, being invincible for a moment, and then they are ready to fight again without the hassle of falling to the ground and coming back up again. This alternate method of dodging is better suited to and is used more in titles with faster gameplay. Despite the distinct lack of the punishing period for their animations, they still feel faithful to the souls-like genre due to their application in those speedier games and that they do not otherwise alter the formula for the dodge. One game which features both methods of dodging is Lords of the Fallen, one of the first true souls-like games.⁷ In Lords of the Fallen, you primarily dodge roll, but when locked onto an enemy, you may tap the dodge button once to perform a quick step or twice to perform a dodge roll. Due to how each of these dodges operate in different environments, it is acceptable to apply the faster "step" in faster games and the slower, more punishing roll to slower souls-like games. Another feature which seems to be mostly situational is the inclusion of multiplayer.

⁷ Allen, "Soulmates - How the Souls-like Genre Has Changed Combat in Gaming"

Multiplayer in the souls games themselves is a limited endeavor which involves allowing others to enter your game world with the express purpose of helping with the game. This is done by placing an in-game sign which is then sent to other players in their worlds, where they may choose to interact with the sign and then “summon” the player through it. The player who is summoned may be able to help clear the area, and defeat the boss, but once the boss has been defeated, you are no longer able to summon within the area. Additionally, players are able to place messages that also appear in other players’ worlds, providing helpful advice without needing to directly help the other player. This style of online multiplayer is very distinct to the Dark Souls franchise and facilitates helpful, but optional behavior between complete strangers. While this type of connection is largely unseen outside the souls-like genre, it is surprisingly unused within as well. Lords of the Fallen swaps the in-game items with a simple multiplayer menu at it’s rest points, but otherwise functions almost identically to the Dark Souls games, save for the ability to directly invite friends. Salt and Sanctuary opts for a simple two-person, local multiplayer, drop-in type of system. But many souls-likes will take the approach of Jedi: Fallen Order, which is to say they simply will not facilitate multiplayer in any of it’s forms. Despite the uniqueness of the multiplayer in Dark Souls, this is one aspect of the game which does not define its genre.

One aspect that some consider to be the key to a souls-like’s success is their environment.⁸ Specifically, souls-likes tend to have a strong emphasis on environmental storytelling, showing lore through item descriptions and optional exposition. Although it may be clear what your character’s goals are if you listen to NPC dialogue and cutscenes, Dark Souls relegates almost all of it’s worldbuilding to more obscure sources within the game. This

⁸ Cannon, “What Are Soulslike Games? The History and Appeal, Explained”

encourages curious players to hunt down rare artifacts to piece together the puzzle that makes up the hidden story within the games. For games looking to follow the From Software formula, figuring out this ingredient helps each one feel fascinating. Jedi: Fallen Order and Lords of the Fallen both showcase this tradition well, even if there's a little more spoken exposition throughout Fallen Order than there would be in Dark Souls. Both Fallen Order and Lords of the Fallen showcase the environment-first orientation to storytelling and include item descriptions as a prominent method for learning more about their worlds. It can be difficult to find examples where souls-like games differ from this path, yet it is clear from Fallen Order, at least, that a game does not need to relegate all of its storytelling to obscure methods to be considered souls-like in nature. Yet the relative lack of games built without that aspect which still bear the moniker points to a general expectation among players that the environment and in-game descriptions will teach them more about the world than they could gather through other methods while playing a souls-like.

Demon's Souls, and its successor, Dark Souls, began a trend in gaming that turned into its own genre, yet "souls-like" still means different things to different people. For an attempt to find a coherent understanding of this term, one has to take a look at its various parts and discover which aspects are more or less needed to consider a game part of the genre. In order of importance for this genre, the most important factors are overall combat mechanics, melee-centricity, environmental storytelling, and the inclusion of a dodge mechanic. This isn't even to mention the prominence of in-game bosses, the stamina system, or the inclusion of magic. Each of these three other factors, although important to the souls-like genre, are not unique to it, nor are they ever left out, with the minor exception of magic in rare circumstances. If one were to look at what makes a souls-like *feel* like a souls-like outside of these main features, it becomes

clear that dark themes, a focus on challenging but fair experiences, and weapon customizability help one experience a connection to the original games. Not all souls-likes are the same, yet neither are two platformers or two fighters. Still, the souls-like genre is plagued by its novelty and must attempt to grapple with what is and isn't its most crucial pieces from the games that started it. Souls-likes will continue to be enjoyed by gamers throughout the following years, and as the genre develops one must watch to learn where the line gets drawn.

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