

# THEY'VE GOT SOULS

THE TREACHEROUS ROAD FROM DEMON'S SOULS TO DARK SOULS II  
MICHAEL ROUGEAU

*In a world of games devoid of challenge, Demon's Souls stood alone.*

It was an anomaly, or so it seemed at the time. Where other games offered tutorials, explanations, sidekicks, and do-overs, *Demon's Souls* offered only death.

It was the antithesis of what every video game studio knew about game development in a post-*Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* world: players don't like to be challenged, they don't like to be tested, they don't like to have their progress reset, they don't like not knowing exactly where to go next.

And they especially don't like dying.

*On paper, Demon's Souls should have been a failure; it was anything but.*

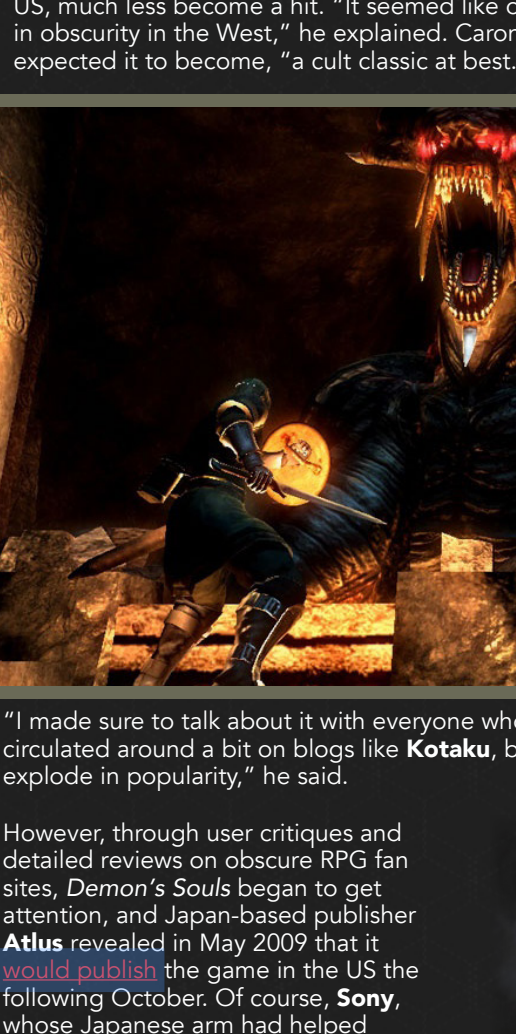
From Software's influential action role-playing game was released in Asia in February 2009. Its reception from *Famitsu*, Japan's premier gaming magazine, was tepid: the publication's four reviewers scored it collectively at **29 of 40 points**, or less than a 75 in *Metacritic* terms.

Yet Western players, eager for a fresh RPG experience, got their hands on it almost immediately, importing the Asian version (with its English dialogue and text) to play through it months before the official U.S. release. Most of them sensed immediately that they were experiencing something special, even if they knew its punishing difficulty and dense, dark fantasy world wouldn't jive with everyone.

New Jersey resident Andrew Hall wrote in a review on *GameFAQs* that,

**"...death is a companion..."**

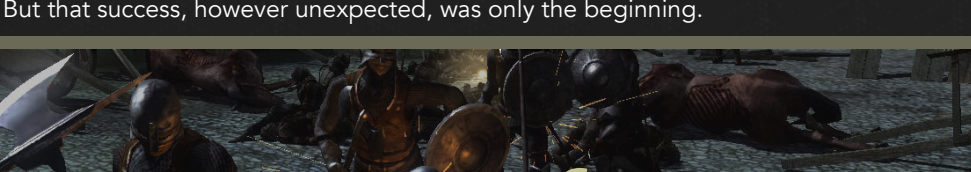
in *Demon's Souls*. "It's not for everyone, and it's not very forgiving," he wrote. Hall published his review, under the name zterrans, in April 2009, six months before the game's U.S. release. He gave *Demon's Souls* an eight out of ten.



In Chicago, Phil Caron was piqued by the game's combination of RPG and survival horror elements, which he first noticed in an early trailer. He reviewed it for *One Last Continuum*, a now-defunct niche gaming site, writing, "Let me begin by saying this; *Demon's Souls* is not a game for everyone."

**"Once I started discovering the nuances in the combat system and finding weapons that made combat less instantly fatal for me, I started loving the game,"** Caron said. "And once I managed to somehow defeat the 'twin Maneaters—a difficult two-pronged boss fight—without taking a hit or exploiting any glitches, there was no going back."

Hall told me that at the time, he never expected the game to even be released in the US, much less become a hit. "It seemed like one of those that was just going to linger in obscurity in the West," he explained. Caron echoed that sentiment, telling me he expected it to become, "a cult classic at best."



"I made sure to talk about it with everyone who would listen, and my review of the game circulated around a bit on blogs like *Kotaku*, but I don't think I ever expected the game to explode in popularity," he said.

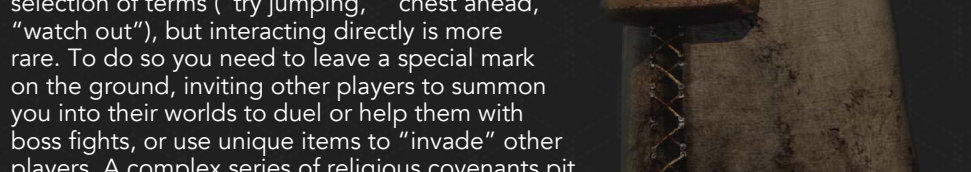
However, through user critiques and detailed reviews on obscure RPG fan sites, *Demon's Souls* began to get attention, and Japan-based publisher **Atlus** revealed in May 2009 that it would publish the game in the US the following October. Of course, **Sony**, whose Japanese arm had helped develop the game alongside From Software and published it in Asia, had the chance to do so themselves. But **Sony America's** development chief, **Shuhei Yoshida**, thought *Demon's Souls* was "crap,"

a sentiment that eventually became highly publicized when **Sony expressed regret** at missing the chance. Go easy on Yoshida, though; *Souls* games are not easy to get into.

"I wasn't surprised that Atlus picked the game up for North America after Sony passed," Josh Tolentino, who imported *Demon's Souls* and reviewed it for the website *Gamer Limit*, told me. "They were exactly the types of folks to pick up these niche titles, the kind that accumulate considerable goodwill simply by existing."

Sure enough, *Demon's Souls* became something of a sleeper hit that fall, earning numerous accolades and experiencing "very strong sales," according to Atlus's senior project manager, **Sammy Matsushima**. The hype had begun to build by the time **Namco Bandai** jumped on board to publish the game's "Black Phantom" edition in the U.K. and Europe in June 2010, and that initial run **sold out** within five weeks.

But that success, however unexpected, was only the beginning.



## From Software To Players

*Demon's Souls* is a game about evil power. In the land of Boletaria, an aging king driven by greed awakens an ancient, evil power. A sorcerer fog covers the kingdom, and with it comes demons. The bravest warriors travel far and wide to penetrate the mist and to save or plunder the Souls of those within. Players take control of one such adventurer, killed almost as soon as they arrive and cursed to continue questing in ethereal "soul form."

**Consequences. Every action you take, every choice you make, every time your character dies, there are consequences.**

You lose your Souls, used for currency and leveling up. Your weapon breaks. You miss an opportunity. The world of Boletaria, and its paltry few remaining inhabitants, becomes a little darker, and even less forgiving. In a game with no do-overs—it saves automatically every few seconds and there's no pause button—these things matter.

From the outset you're given freedom to visit any of its five areas, but that freedom is an illusion; setting foot in any of them means instant death for inexperienced players. The game's enemies, whether typical sword-wielding skeletons or homogenous phosphorescent slugs, decimate careless players in seconds. And those are just your A.I. opponents; there's ample opportunity for real, online players to invade your world and attack or aid your quest as well.

In fact, *Demon's Souls* and its successor, *Dark Souls*, have one of the most unique online components ever seen. Players can leave one another messages composed from a preset selection of terms ("try jumping," "chest ahead," "watch out!"), but interacting directly is more rare. To do so you need to leave a special mark on the ground, inviting other players to summon you into their worlds to duel or help them with boss fights, or use unique items to "invade" other players. A complex series of religious covenants pit different players against one another in a number of unpredictable ways, and no two encounters are alike. This bred strange loyalties among players, Tolentino described the online community as "unusually intimate."

For Alex Lucard, who reviewed *Demon's Souls* for the site *DieHard Gamefan* in April 2009, the game's unconventional multiplayer was "the kiss of death for the game."

"Here was a game that actively rewarded you for being as big an asshole as possible to your fellow gamer. That part alone had me convinced people would hate the thing," he said. "I just envisioned teens or casual gamers picking this up and being reduced to tears." He gave the game a five out of ten, though he explained to me that many of the bugs he encountered in the import version had been fixed by the time it hit the States.

Yet somehow the game caught on. "My personal theory is that *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* scratched just the right itch among gamers both new and old," Tolentino explained.

**"For players who grew up in the last ten years or so... *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* were basically entirely new experiences. For older gamers, they are blasts from the past, with 'old school' sensibilities and conception of challenge."**

In the face of all that old school challenge, skilled players have a formidable arsenal of weapons, spells and skills at their disposal. It's just a matter of understanding how to use them. It takes perseverance and a careful attention to detail to gain the skills necessary to truly enjoy *Demon's Souls*, like building up a muscle you'd forgotten you had. In that regard, it's like playing the original *Legend of Zelda* or *Metroid*.

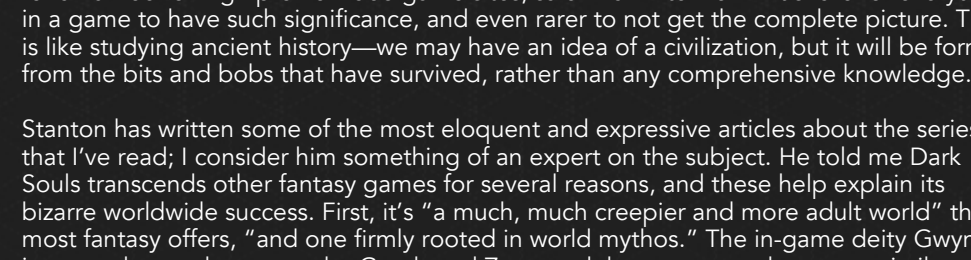
The designers at From Software revealed in players' suffering, knowing they would ultimately be better for it. No pain, no gain, no Souls. In a post on Europe's **Official PlayStation Blog** celebrating the game's digital PlayStation Network release in January 2013, the game's director, **Hidetaka Miyazaki**, said,

**"The process of overcoming the challenge and the feeling of accomplishment brought by breaking through each difficulty is the value we would like to offer to players."**

The studio's previous works included the equally convoluted *Armored Core* games, a forgettable 2006 RPG called *Enchanted Arms*, and another series—this one's important—called *King's Field*. Playing one of the numerous *King's Field* games on the PlayStation or PS2, it's easy to see where *Demon's Souls* came from. The older series operated under a similar assumption: that challenge equals fun, and that players should get exactly what they put into a game.

But the *King's Field* games lacked the polish and flair that would ultimately attract players to *Demon's Souls*. And besides, back then, challenging games were a dime a dozen. Nowadays RPG fans are lucky if there's not a massive checkmark on a map somewhere pointing out the exact location of their next objective, or making those seek like *Demon's Souls* all the more enticing for the old school and hardcore, or just those seeking a challenge, among us.

Despite Sony's skepticism that *Demon's Souls* would do well in America, Atlus's Matsushima told me that the publisher was never worried. It was "a bit of a departure" from their usual fare, but its gloomy aesthetic and weighty gameplay caught their attention almost immediately.



## THE PATH TO DARK SOULS

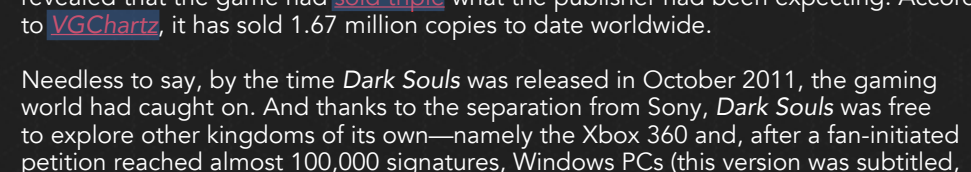
"Of course the more the team got to play it, the more they recognized how challenging and robust the game really was," he explained. "The overwhelming consensus from our early preview and hands-on efforts with media was very positive, and it confirmed the thoughts everyone had about the game."

Unfortunately, when it came sequel time—as it must eventually with almost any successful game—Atlus decided up, "despite our best efforts," Matsushima said. For reasons that remain unclear, From Software teamed up with Namco Bandai to publish the successor to *Demon's Souls*. Atlus was apparently in the race, but Matsushima admitted,

**"...there are limitations we encounter as a smaller publisher. While it allows us to do many great things, it also at times works against us."**

Sony, on the other hand, seems never to have been a contender at all, again for unknown reasons. That meant From would need to choose a new name, among other things, for the next game, making it less a sequel and more a spiritual successor.

Thus *Dark Souls* was born.



You might not know all that from looking at *Dark Souls*, or even from playing it. The game shared plenty with its predecessor; combat, weapons systems and even visual styles remained largely unchanged. Online multiplayer was still perfectly intertwined with the core single-player experience. One character—the murderous trickster Patches—even made it over to the new game, somehow making it out of accursed Boletaria alive.

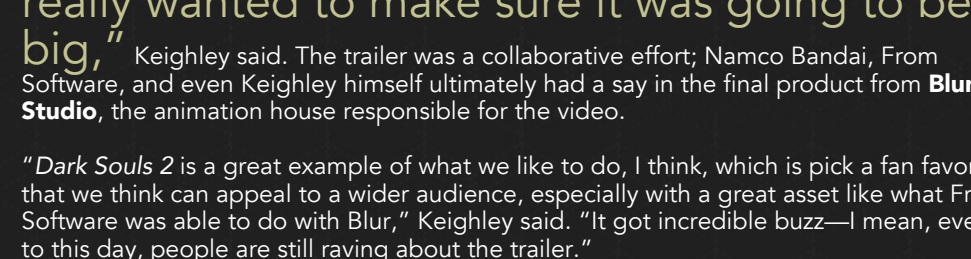
That's not to say there were no improvements, though. Unlike Boletaria, which was comprised of several separate, closed-off levels, *Dark Souls*' kingdom of Lordran was one expansive, interconnected sandbox, like a 3-dimensional ant farm full of shortcuts and mysteries.

The story concerned an undead descendant of the first human, the Furtive Pygmy, and his (or her) quest to either relight the mystic bonfires and perpetuate the reign of an incestuous court of giant-gods, or allow them to be snuffed out and let darkness consume the doomed kingdom.

As in *Demon's Souls*, narrative and lore seemed sparse to the unobservant, while those who bothered to look discovered that every minute and seemingly trivial detail added another thread to the tapestry. It made the whole thing feel believable, and even grounded, in spite of all the dragons and time travel.

**"It took a lot of play to understand just how magnificent *Dark Souls* is,"** **Rich Stanton**, a writer who freelances for a number of high profile video game sites, said in an interview. "It's rare for everything in a game to have such significance, and even rarer to not get the complete picture. This is like studying ancient history—we may have an idea of a civilization, but it will be formed from the bits and bobs that have survived, rather than any comprehensive knowledge."

Stanton has written some of the most eloquent and expressive articles about the series that I've read; I consider him something of an expert on the subject. He told me *Dark Souls* transcends other fantasy games for several reasons, and these help explain its bizarre worldwide success. First, it's "a much, much creepier and more adult world" than most fantasy offers, "and one firmly rooted in world myths." The in-game deity Gwyn is somewhat analogous to the Greek god Zeus, and there are countless more similar examples. This grants it the unique advantage of resonating with people across multiple cultures.



**"The main reason *Dark Souls* has such an impact, however, seems to me more about its faith in the player. This is a game built around the central idea of dying and then trying again,"**

Stanton said. "It depends on players to recognize that, in an era when most big-budget stuff is trying to make the play experience as blandly smooth as possible."

"It has faith in the ability of players to persevere, learn, observe, deduce, and interpret," he added.

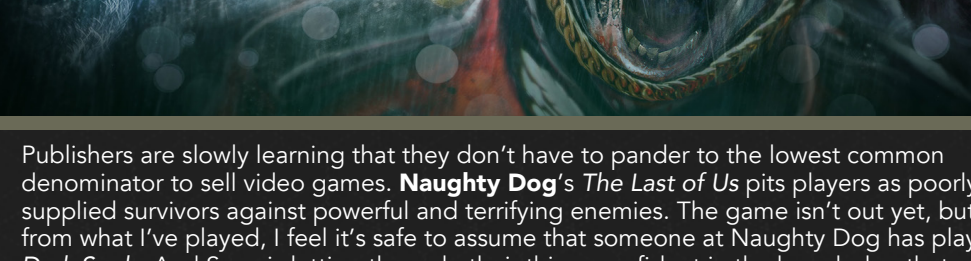
**"It's the best example of showing rather than telling that the medium has seen."**

At the end of February 2010, four months after the U.S. release of *Demon's Souls*, Atlus revealed that the game had "broken" what the publisher had been expecting. According to **IGN Charts**, it has sold 1.67 million copies to date worldwide.

Needless to say, by the time *Dark Souls* was released in October 2011, the gaming world had caught on. And thanks to the separation from Sony, *Dark Souls* was free to explore other kingdoms of its own—namely the Xbox 360 and, after a fan-initiated petition reached almost 100,000 signatures, Windows PCs (this version was subtitled, aptly, the "Prepare to Die" edition).

By May 2012, *Dark Souls* had sold 1.19 million copies, according to Namco Bandai's annual financial report, making it the best-selling game of the publisher's fiscal year. Granted, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* sold 7.5 million copies in its first two weeks on the market in November 2012. But still, the *Souls* series was a success as far as its fans and, more importantly, its publishers were concerned.

Is it any wonder a direct sequel is on its way?



## THE LEGACY

Gamers have spoken. Contrary to what the biggest video game publishers have been treating as gospel for the last decade, players do want to be challenged.

**We want to be tested. We want to master a game after 60 hours, not 60 minutes. We want to explore rich virtual worlds without being told exactly where to go. We want to learn from our mistakes. We want to die.**

Yes, a sequel was inevitable. What was really surprising, though, was just how it was announced.

The **Spike TV Video Game Awards** show is among the most highly publicized and widely televised video game industry events of the year. Game-makers often take advantage of this platform to debut world premiere trailers for their biggest upcoming titles. But this airtime is usually reserved for tentpole franchises like *Gears of War*, *Tomb Raider*, *BioShock*, and *Assassin's Creed*, not a place for an ultra-hardcore RPG that curtailed its life in the West as an obscure import hit on cult RPG sites.

Yet there it was, on-screen at the 2012 VGAs and on televisions around the world, with as much fanfare as the biggest-triple-A titles: *Dark Souls 2*. A new adventure, with new opportunities to die, die and die some more, and, hopefully, to learn something new in the process.

**Geoff Keighley**, executive producer of the *Video Game Awards* (and host and executive producer of the Spike TV show *GameTrailers TV*), told me that the *Dark Souls 2* trailer had been in the works for an entire year.

**"What's great is that with *Dark Souls 2*, they really—from an early, early position—they really wanted to make sure it was going to be big,"** Keighley said. The trailer was a collaborative effort; Namco Bandai, From Software, and even Keighley himself ultimately had a say in the final product from **Blur Studio**, the animation house responsible for the video.

"*Dark Souls 2* is a great example of what we like to do, I think, which is pick a fan favorite that we think can appeal to a wider audience, especially with a great asset like what From Software was able to do with *Blur*," Keighley said. "It got incredible buzz—I mean, even to this day, people are still raving about the trailer."

The trailer features familiar-looking imagery for *Dark Souls* players: an ominous castle at the peak of a mountain above the clouds; a lone warrior drawing his sword in dense woods, turning to a deep unseen foe; stalactites and stalagmites brush his sword in shadows as he piers into a cave pit filled with the bones of dragons. "You are of the undead, forever without hope," croons an unnaturally deep voice. A robed woman hands our hero a token. He kneels in the forest, crosses an impossibly unsteady rope bridge. Masked figures strike him down with swords and arrows; a dragon spews fire toward the camera.

Keighley had worried about doing a purely cinematic trailer instead of one that showed actual gameplay, but with a game like *Dark Souls 2*, "...it's not a question of if the game is going to be high quality or not, because people know that From Software does a great game," he explained.

"We've had great support from Japanese companies, and I think to see Namco Bandai and From competing with the big boys, working on a big blockbuster trailer all year long, it shows that there's a will and an interest on their part to really help *Dark Souls* reach that *Skyrim*-like audience," he said.

That's actually been a point of contention for fans, who've expressed consternation over the sequel's early comparisons with *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, an open-ended but comparatively shallow game that saw massive success in 2011. **Tomohiro Shibuya** has now directed, after all, and it's unclear how different **Tomohiro Shibuya** and **Yui Tanimura**'s game will ultimately be from Miyazaki's originals.

It's been made clear that despite the former director remaining on board in a supervisory role, the freshies want to make the series **more accessible**. And, to be fair, that could be a reason to worry. *Souls* fans love punishment; accessibility is a dirty word. Given the pandering that goes on elsewhere in the industry, perhaps fans' concern is justified.

But Namco Bandai is hardly blind to the impact the series has had. Games like **Capcom's** *Dragon's Dogma* and **CD Projekt Red's** *The Witcher 2*, both of which riffed from the *Souls* games, are proof enough of the influence that From Software's brazenly hardcore games are having.

In particular, **Ubisoft's** *ZombiU*, the standout launch title for Nintendo's Wii U, was heavily influenced by the *Souls* games. It cribbed from their online components, allowing players to leave graffiti messages for one another and sending the zombieified corpses of deceased players into their friends' games. "Many of us on the team have played and loved *Dark Souls*," **Ubisoft's** **Gillaume Brunier**, producer of *ZombiU*, told me. He confirmed it was absolutely an influence for them, and that's most evident in *ZombiU*'s sometimes crushing difficulty.



Publishers are slowly learning that they don't have to pander to the lowest common denominator to sell video games. **Naughty Dog's** *The Last of Us* pits players as poorly-supplied survivors against powerful and terrifying enemies. The game isn't out yet, but from what I've played, I feel it's safe to assume that someone at Naughty Dog has played *Dark Souls*. And Sony is letting them do their thing, confident in the knowledge that hardcore games will attract hardcore gamers.

As far as *Dark Souls 2* goes, I believe fans need not worry. Keighley backed me up, too, saying, "It's still a From Software game, and those guys are focused on making a great game."

"I think Namco's going to amplify that and hopefully help that game reach a wider audience," he continued. "They really are embracing it in a big way." He added that there are plenty of surprises left for them to unveil—some that are "really big," in fact.

Here's my two cents: as long as the developers at From Software continue to make the games that they want to make, I'm certain that all will be well with the series. After all, if there's one thing that they've got in spades, it's *Souls*.



Mike Rougeau is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. So far he only has one *Dark Souls* tattoo.