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## Dialectics in Black

A dark soul… what is that? The expression conjures a plethora of associations that circulate around eerie places and their inhabitants: decayed graveyards and tombs, the ruins of manor houses and castles, cursed forests, overgrown gardens, and the sparse expanse of infernal wastelands—all of them traversed by the damned and lost; evil spirits and demons; restless creatures that, being neither dead nor alive, find themselves caught between the here and now and the hereafter. In fact, the associations outlined here are well suited to draw up a sort of catalogue, although incomplete, of the topography and cast of Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Dark Souls* trilogy. After all, the games are obsessed with the topic of death, and they create an ever-dying world out of this preoccupation (Martin 2017). However, the image of the dark soul also opens up other spaces of reflection that exist outside of the all too fitting, all too likely associations.

If we are to follow Alain Badiou and his "dialectics in black", then it is the inherent characteristic of this non-color to symbolize a lack and an excess simultaneously (Badiou 2017, p. 77). The radical dark is typified by the meeting of a too-much and a too-little, which condition each other, one becoming impossible to be conceived of without the other.

I would like to use this relationship as the basis of my following considerations. In this sense, my thesis is that the *Dark Souls* games make possible an aesthetic experience, which is marked on all levels and in regard to its paratexts by Badiou's dialectics in black. This is especially pertinent to the temporalities which these games configure: from the tedious inching forward through confusing and dangerous spaces to the self-assured run-throughs of the very same spaces now familiar to the last detail; from the stasis of aimless wandering to the sudden breaking open of a (seemingly) limitless spatiotemporal escape, when a locked gateway grinds open; from the repetitive cycle of failure in the face of overwhelmingly powerful enemies to the triumphantly flashing "Now!" of victory.

These different temporalities, assembled from conflicting ideas of time, shall be grasped more precisely using readings of Deleuze's concept of assemblage, which originate in the context of so-called posthuman feminism. From this perspective, we can see that the fascination of the *Dark Souls* trilogy stems from the striking fact that these games primarily generate one thing: aesthetic liveliness in the experience of presentness.

For Badiou, black enters a tension-filled, as well as indissoluble, in short dialectical, relationship with its counterpart, white. Heaven and hell, life and death, completion and failure, fulfillment and disallowance cannot be separated from one another, when we are considering the secret of black. Although, black and white cannot be neatly subsumed under specific valences; thus, the white page manifests as a symbol of the childhood fear of unmanaged and menacing (school) knowledge (2017, p. 17). It should also be noted that the seemingly opposing polarities, like life and death, align in the realm of black, by pointing toward their respective rival in their own lack or excess.

It must be emphasized that the paradoxical dialectics in black described above also pertain to the human soul.[1] For Badiou, the darkness of the soul is something that always reveals itself in the event, when it suddenly becomes obvious what the species one belongs to is generally and specifically capable of doing and to what extent the gruesomeness that is revealed there could also impact one's own life and being. Black, then, functions as the (non-)color "of treacherous, murderous, incestuous souls"; beyond that it is "the color, or the sinister absence of color, of groundless accusations, of rampant slander" (2017, p. 37). The black soul, then, connects with imaginations of impurity, of depravity, in its blackness whereas its opposite, the white soul, is associated with purity. However, the dialectics in black ensure that these seemingly clear delineations become quickly muddied: for it is revealed, claims Badiou, that the white soul ultimately owes its purity to its inexperience and ignorance (2017, p. 38).

What interests me especially about the *Dark Souls* trilogy is the linking of the black soul to a system of knowledge. Badiou puts it as follows: "All knowledge is knowledge of black, which happens by surprise" (2017, p. 39). In this perspective, knowledge is always bound up with the "treacherous, murderous, incestuous" (2017, p. 39). This means that at the bottom of truth is a black bottomless pit—there is nothing else. When we connect this core idea of the "dialectics in black" with a second one, which always sees both a lack and an excess in black, then we are able to gain an initial insight into the puzzling object of fascination that is *Dark Souls*.[2]

The enjoyment which *Dark Souls* provides is paradoxical insofar as it seems inseparably connected with the "agony" that Tom van Nuenen describes as the defining play experience (van Nuenen 2016, pp. 510-511). This is by no means self-evident, since the mercilessness of the game could also simply cause disappointment and frustration—as is occasionally the case with survival horror games like *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013) or *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014). By contrast, *Dark Souls* seems to be geared towards creating a correlation between the intensities of suffering and pleasure (Petralito, Brühlmann, Iten, Mekler, and Opwis 2017). The game's punishing level of difficulty consequently serves to facilitate an exhilarating play experience. Hereby it makes possible the experience of a variety of temporal qualities in each instance of a commanding "Now!" (Grimm 2016). The interrelation of suffering and pleasure conditioning the play experience, stems from the intensity of the self-awareness gained in the series of dynamic temporalities, which are all ultimately compressed to a persistent experience of being present, pulling the player in with body and soul so to speak; this is only ever possible, because each wrong choice, be it ever so small, can lead to the immediate demise of the avatar: be it one strike too many or at the wrong moment, which depletes the

stamina bar, so that the videogame character is left defenseless and at the mercy of their opponent. What is needed to succeed in *Dark Souls* is indeed the run-through of innumerable cycles, always alike, always varying, in which progress taking the paths of "effort, frustration, reward and release" and "observe, learn, adjust" (ibid.) is bought with the avatar's dozens, even hundreds of deaths. At some point, one comes to know how the skeleton warrior, the gargantuan Firesage Demon, the pop-eyed basilisks spewing cursed fog behave—one knows what they will do, *even before they do it.* Then, there are no more surprises, no more sudden fright; instead, only the question remains, whether the player is able to behave according to their own knowledge.

## Always Already Dead, and yet Undying

Death in *Dark Souls* is simultaneously a tyrannical and timid ruler: it has touched everything, nothing, however, has been ground to dust under the boot of impermanence. 'Dead', 'undead', 'undying'—in Hidetaka Miyazaki's world design, these ideas and concepts are related radically to the idea of a temporality in conflict, which puts to work an exceedingly paradoxical construct, after all, we are met here, as Gareth Damian Martin says, with an ever-dying life, which was never truly alive, and which will never meet its end (Martin 2017). This temporality prompts associations to nightmares in which one is pursued by something gruesome, desperately running for one's life, without ever even making one step forward. These comparisons and images are not meant to suggest a poeticized interpretation nor an evocation of a gothic sensibility; it is simply a matter of attempting to grasp descriptively the nature of the temporal sequences which each player of *Dark Souls* is subject to.

What this means can be best described using one specific mechanic: should the avatar die, all of the souls collected up to this point—especially through the killing of opponents—are lost. Since souls are the universal currency of the game, needed to, for instance, improve the stats and armor of a player character, most players will be anxious to reclaim the lost souls; except, perhaps, if they already control a highly upgraded character or are trying for a 'Soul Level 1' run-through. One has exactly one chance to reach the place where the player character has met their demise, to recover the previously acquired souls now hovering over the ground in the shape of greenish, shimmering, and flamelike swirls. The fact that something of the sort is possible suggests that the death of the avatar in *Dark Souls* indeed constitutes an interruption of the temporal continuum, which began with the start of the game, though, it does not imply a temporal reset, in the sense that something that has already transpired could be undone, as if it had never happened. The fact that one also retains the objects gathered before the death of the avatar (like weapons or armor) and that gates, doors, and fences that one had opened do not become once again impassable (so long as a shortcut had been unlocked as a result) reinforces this.

On one hand, we are then confronted with a timeline that only ever points forward. On the other, all opponents that one had defeated in the previous run-through before the avatar itself perished, except for bosses and a few specific types of enemies, are

reanimated. After the demise of the player character, one is additionally transported back to the bonfire one had last rested at.

This has two consequences for the player's experience of temporality: for one thing, the linear time urging ever forward is challenged by a different kind of temporality that insists on cyclical processes and repetitions; for another, *Dark Souls* opposes any attempt to synchronize anew both of these dimensions of temporal experience after the death of the avatar with all the throngs of enemies it is able to raise. The tension accompanying the pursuit of this point of synchronization is generally all the more heightened the more valuable and difficult to reach the lost soul goods are. In any case, necessity requires exposing oneself to the same cyclical sequences—and indeed it seems to be the exact same, not just similar, opponents that one has to defeat over and over again while the paths that are to be traversed also remain the same—demanding considerable willpower and endurance from the players. Although, adjusting to this can indeed shift into a meditative state: a letting go, a passive and peaceful and at some point almost relaxed submission to the inevitability of a tenth, twentieth, even fiftieth cyclical repetition.[3]

It is by no means unimportant that this collision of conflicting temporalities does not take place solely on the micro-level of the individual cycle of death and rebirth of the avatar, but that it also comes into its own on the macro-level, meaning a complete playthrough in this context. As, after the last opponent falls, an end (whichever it ends up being) is reached and after the credits have rolled, *Dark Souls* begins anew. Although, it does not, strictly speaking, restart "at the beginning", instead continuing, bafflingly and in diegetically inexplicable ways, the journey of the avatar by returning it to its point of origin: they keep their stats, their souls, the majority of their acquired and collected armor, and their knowledge of what is to come—carved into the memory of the players over many hours—and of course any and all opponents, including bosses, have returned. At least in part one of the trilogy nothing about either the places, where they are waiting to ambush the player, or their number, or their attack and defense patterns changes; they have only become considerably stronger and more dangerous, since one has strayed into their realm for the first time.

This 'game' of incessant repetition and similarly incessant progression, this entanglement of ever-new and ever-the-same, can in principle be continued into infinity (although the difficulty level does not increase anymore after the seventh run-through) and may be regarded as an equivalence to that other entanglement of suffering and pleasure; with the caveat that it cannot be clearly determined to which temporality to attach which feeling. That it is impossible to put a natural end, if we are to call it that, to the cycle described here, develops consequently from the fact that the undead of *Dark Souls* are, as it is stated in the prologue of part one, awaiting "the end of the world"; that other end, then, which dismisses nature, time, and life in all their humanly thinkable forms likewise, and which is to be situated far beyond the (from a subjective point of view admittedly final enough) death of the individual.

## Aesthetic Liveliness

During my explorations, I saw myself confronted with the notion that the diverse mechanics along with the architecture and the atmospheric character of the game world as well as the interaction with non-player characters work together with surprising precision to shape a dynamic entanglement of tension-filled temporalities. In general, we can say that *Dark Souls* positions a *cyclical time* and a *vectorial time* against each other, while also interlocking them.

Certainly, both thusly identified, fundamental temporalities can be captured more precisely in various ways. The time characterized by repetitions (as it were, the efforts of exploring a new area or mastering a particularly difficult section structured to the rhythm of repeated dying) is of a cyclical quality that can be heightened to a time of stagnation (when, for example, the boss seems to prove impossible to defeat; even the period of time taken up by the run from the bonfire to the site of the fight is then part of this time, dominated by the questions: *What have I done wrong?* and *What can I do better?*) culminating in a time of stasis (when even the twentieth attempt to defeat the boss is of no avail; or when being hopelessly lost in a labyrinthine area unable to find the sole passable route). Likewise, one can subdivide vectorial time into many distinct variants of differing intensity. Their collective commonality is that they push toward the composition of a being-in-the-present. There is the tension-filled "Now!" when crossing over into an unknown territory, in order to then explore it with the utmost vigilance; the elated and joyous "Now!" when one finds a shortcut that leads back to a bonfire; the triumphant "Now!" when snuffing out a boss after an arduous battle; the simultaneously fearful and stirring "Now!" upon finding out with a muffled sound and white text on a black background that other players with nefarious intentions have infiltrated one's own world; and the epiphanic "Now!" when under the impression of having solved one of the many secrets of *Dark Souls*, like when reading an item description or finding a specific corpse in a specific place.

I have described the temporalities enumerated here from the perspective of the player's experience and with regard to an individual's possibilities of action. However, the tension of the conflicting temporalities can, to a degree, also be discussed independently of the players as a—if we are to call it that—objective component of the games' world. In *Dark Souls,* this is expressed, for example, in the nature of things being both alive and dead without ever truly belonging to either one: The inescapable, cyclical existence of the undead and an eruptive, undefeatable liveliness are linked together.

The enjoyment of *Dark Souls* comes into effect mainly due to the intensity of this experience of temporality. Here, we can also duly address Alain Badiou's concept of a "dialectics in black". It seems obvious that the specific black shaped into an aesthetic experience in *Dark Souls* ought to be grasped through the dialectics of a too-much and too-little, lack and excess, which are caught in a mutual interdependence, without melding into each other completely. We find the shift from lack to excess (and back) everywhere, although both qualities keep striving towards their respective opposite.

What precisely this means can be demonstrated using the difficulty level of *Dark Souls*. "From bloodbath to bubble bath"—the somewhat flippant but nonetheless

quite fitting formula, coined by Jason Killingsworth, contours the movement which the players execute in the course of many hours (MacDonald and Killingsworth 2016, p. 10). What seemed unbearably difficult becomes quite easy, all too easy, so that many an aficionado is willing to do anything to reinstate the toil of the beginning, and with it the intensity of the triumph, for example by pointedly renouncing certain resources or by working their way up to NG+3 or NG+4, where the familiar becomes once again foreign and dangerous. Of course, the game world, its mechanics, the attack and defense patterns of the opponents do not truly become unfamiliar. But it comes down to this: If the most convoluted pathways had not long since become home, had the alien and dangerous opponents not already become old acquaintances, no player would have a chance to succeed considering the difficulty raised anew.

However, Badiou also claims that the dialectics in black are expressed in a specific system of knowledge. Maybe one could say that, in this perspective, knowledge always threatens to dissolve itself, to erode its own foundations by only ever producing more black, so that that which ought to enable seeing shows solely the blindness of the abyss, where the whole bottom of the truth is to be searched for. I do not want to view these considerations as life lessons but to relate them to an aesthetic configuration. Then, we can see that *Dark Souls* is imbued wholly with the dialectics in black even in this respect.

Franziska Ascher puts it aptly:

> If the sequencing of the game world is indeed vertical, as it is postulated in the beginning, the main directionality of the game is downwards and the deeper the player sinks into the game world, the deeper they dive into its secrets—and the more burdensome becomes the guilt resting on the avatar's shoulders. Knowledge is only gained by paying the price of guilt, even though the player rarely has the choice not to fight a boss-opponent (2014, p. 12).

Initially, the world of *Dark Souls* seems to refuse any attempt targeted toward an exploration of its inner coherence—it is hermetical and mysterious to such an extent. Nevertheless, inklings and certainties, or, after all, only would-be certainties, supplant the lack of comprehension bit by bit. Everything that the players come to know, however, ultimately only increases an ignorance of the second degree: How is it possible that the avatar, the NPCs, the opponents, and bosses, indeed the whole game world are so hopelessly entangled with a cursed entropy that seems only to lead to darkness and death? The game's ending then gives no answer but leads the excess of knowledge about this cursedness, which is always mainly an experience and a feeling, back to the point of origin of ignorance. Meanwhile, this process also takes place, as bleak as the narration may seem, in the aesthetic pleasure of those dynamic and conflicting temporalities which I have tried to break down here: For it does not transpire as a decoding of information but is enabled in the game mechanics and play activities.

In this sense, I would claim that the dialectics in black posit a law of motion, which encompasses all game mechanics; it structures the acquisition of the world of *Dark Souls* in its affective directedness, where the entanglement of excess and lack as a series of dynamically conflicting temporalities generates a feeling of aesthetic liveliness, which pulls into itself, transforms, and finally overcomes within the

experience of playing, all toils of combat and exploration, all the darkness of the narrative, all the hopelessness of the entrapment of the avatar. Because of the multiplicity of temporalities that it is able to configure, *Dark Souls* is curiously one of the most vivid and, speaking in terms of an aesthetics of experience, vibrant games out there. It sets the darkness ablaze and brings blackness to light.

## The Temporality of Assemblage

With respect to Hidetaka Miyazaki's trilogy, it strikes me as appropriate to consider one more aspect. In my previous explorations, I have illustrated that *Dark Souls* brings the aesthetic mode of Tolkienian fantasy to a paradoxical completion. This goes for the tendency of the mythopoetic epic to construct its worlds from stories that, if one is to get to the bottom of them, betray the hint of new stories, so that the allure of enjoying a potentially endless adventure-space is elicited (Shippey 2002, p. 60; Illger 2020, pp. 33-48). *Dark Souls* frustrates this principle and fulfills it all the same (or the other way around). The game world is marked by cryptic mysteriousness, pointing to a multitude of entangled fates and histories without ever revealing what has *really* happened, easily imparting the feeling that it would be impossible to fathom the spatiotemporal depths of Lordran (or Drangleic or Lothric); no matter how many times one completes the game. This also pertains to the fact that the worlds of fantasy—at least if they call back to the Tolkienian tradition— operate under a metaphysical law of good and evil (Flieger 1983; Illger 2020, pp. 57-65). Here, *Dark Souls* allows itself a particularly bold interpretation: because, albeit that the valences of light and dark are twisted, confused, and permuted to the extreme here, the game always allows us to surmise that good and evil do exist, somewhere, outside the reach and capacity for understanding of all the wretched creatures that traverse the cursed kingdom. This concerns especially the aesthetic experience of *the small things*: Which player would contest that a bonfire is, indeed in the transcendental sense, *good*? After all, this also goes for the affect-poetic principle of the sudden and unexpected turn for the better that could be labeled, with regard to Tolkien, as a eucatastrophe (Tolkien 1983, pp. 125-127; Illger 2020, pp. 48-56). How often does a boss seem invincible upon first encountering them? However, hope always flares up anew that it could also be different. At some point, the opponent finally falls, albeit that the victory may have happened against all odds. Strangely, this principle is even fulfilled in a cyclical temporality, which keeps the world of *Dark Souls* prisoner: for even though the ending of the game as such does not give much occasion to hope, the eucatastrophe, after all, entails that the avatar keeps going perpetually, never surrendering—perhaps not a happy but certainly persistent Sisyphus.

If all this is true, then it must, however, also apply that *Dark Souls* knows longing. For this feeling lives, indeed more than any other, at the heart of Tolkienian fantasy—for we are dealing with a genre that will not have its dream of a better world exorcised, be it ever so naïve, tacky, and unpolitical. Although, it should be said that the fact of this adherence to such a longing is in itself already political, when it transpires in a time that is as bereaved of utopias and as positivistic as ours.

There is, however, a figuration molded into the game that allows us to correlate the historicity of our present to *Dark Souls* in an additional way. I am speaking of

assemblage. In so-called posthuman feminism, the concept of the assemblage denotes a collection of heterogenous entities and materialities. According to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, humans, animals, plants, machines, and objects are connected within it, although it is crucial that an assemblage does not follow a hierarchical organizing principle; it does not strive to pacify all the heterogeneity that meets within it through the enforcement of a logic established in advance (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015, p. 23). On the contrary—according to Lowenhaupt Tsing, assemblages are always productive and committed to constant transformation in their productivity: "assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them" (2015, p. 23). The author develops what precisely this means with the example of the exceedingly valuable Matsutake mushroom that grows in forests polluted by humans and around which develop dynamic biospheres, wherein every single element influences all others creating unforeseen potential for growth following polyphonic, undirected rhythms: "a gathering that's greater than the sum of its parts" (2015, p. 23). Here, nature and culture collide, and new developments can grow from the rubble of capitalism on the winding paths of contamination and collaboration.

Lowenhaupt Tsing, however, does not only understand assemblage—or not just primarily—as a fascinating ecological phenomenon. Moreover, it is supposed to provide the principles of thought that allow for new ways of looking at political, economic, and historical processes. Before the backdrop of a capitalism that has developed elaborate techniques for transforming everything into resources, no matter whether dealing with a human, an animal, or a thing, approaches are established to escape this logic of competition and utilization and to gain a new perspective on the world. Lowenhaupt Tsing maps out how capitalism, in order to invest in machines, businesses, ideas, and people, must divide all from all, or put in Marxist terms: must alienate. Because when everything stands on its own—as Christine Lötscher notes—the entanglements of living matter disappear from the field of view, which is wholly fixated on naturalizing the artificial demarcations (Lötscher 2018, pp. 240-241).

The point is, then, to extricate oneself from the "artificial borders", meaning, to produce a style of thinking which is not aligned according to dichotomies or identarian attributions, which would indeed also affect the ontological divisions between human and animal, culture and nature. The implications of such a project are quite far reaching; profound changes would be necessary, to allow for even the smallest steps on this path.

It is certain, however, that the principles of thinking through assemblage can also be productive for the analysis of aesthetic compositions. This becomes very obvious with *Dark Souls*. With this, I do not strive towards a revision of my theses so far, though. Even the dialectics in black remain in place as a regularity of movement—regardless of the fact that Lowenhaupt Tsing would doubtlessly question the premises of Badiou's approach, since, according to her, categories like "lack" and "excess" have fallen into a dichotomizing stasis. Indeed, what changes most substantially, when Hidetaka Miyazaki's game is viewed through the prism of assemblage, is the point of view. The assemblage allows us to regard the world of *Dark Souls* with different eyes, so to speak. We then notice that there are innumerable rooms and creatures assembled here, which are characterized by multifarious and surprising combinations of the humanoid and the animalistic, the organic and the inorganic, the living and the dead, the natural and the mechanical.

Perhaps many players feel a longing to spend time in such a world, to be part of it. That this is not truly possible would be a consequence of the historical space that *Dark Souls* occupies: The game can fashion a world that dissolves artificial demarcations, but it cannot make it inhabitable. The avatar's—and thus the player's—relationship to it will always remain marked by battle, suffering, and death.

However, from the perspective of assemblage, we are able to interpret the cyclical time of a perpetual demise and emergence differently: less as a hellish inescapability and more as a longing to be born into a world, where not only the human and inhuman, not only the organic and inorganic meld, but also death and life flow into each other. Maybe in the sense of Rosi Braidotti's demands to end the overemphasis on death: "The ultimate subtraction is after all only a new phase in one generative process" (2018, p. 40). For the play experience that *Dark Souls* enables, this is most certainly applicable. After all, death itself obtains the mark of aesthetic liveliness.

Against this background, we can also see the predilection of this game for the insignias of the gothic—ruins, fog, darkness, and ever-present decay—in a different light. Not as a blissful reveling in overcome art forms, nor simply as a resorting to atmospheric stereotypes, but more so as an expression of the endeavor to shape a specific idea of time, in which the insoluble connectedness of becoming and decaying is inscribed. With John Ruskin, who defined the Gothic as an assemblage *avant la lettre*, one could say: "Nothing that lives is or can be rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part of it is nascent" (Ruskin 2010, p. 203). Or, to paraphrase a likewise enigmatic line from a Bob Dylan song: (S)he who plays *Dark Souls* is at once busy being born and dying.[4]

Perhaps this would also be a clue as to where that "incredible power to create communities out of shared hardship" (MacDonald and Killingsworth 2016, p. 6) stems from that is at the heart of the play experience of *Dark Souls* for Keza MacDonald. As she describes, in it the opposing emotions "of being simultaneously entirely alone and part of a brethren of lone adventurers" (2016, p. 6) are connected. Hidetaka Miyazaki's games generate these feelings—based on the inscrutable curiousness of their world building as well as their infamous difficulty—by stirring the potentially unending production of paratexts (manifesting as forums, wikis, and YouTube-videos) that arguably nearly all players consult sooner or later, to whichever extent, connecting their efforts and joys with the corresponding experiences of literally innumerable strangers.

*Dark Souls* does, however, allow for such connection in the game itself, even outside the possibilities of player vs. player combat and the cooperation with (anonymous as well as personally known) players; this is done with the help of a few mechanics that (at least in online mode) keep reminding the players that there are others—who knows how many?—who are, at this very moment, also traversing the same dungeons as oneself, who are struggling with the same opponents, are dying the same deaths or have done the very same at a different point in an undefined past. For one thing, it is possible to leave messages for other players, to give them clues or warnings (or to attempt to lure others into a trap with a deceitful message). Furthermore, it can happen that one leaves a blood stain while dying, which players who visit this site of death later can use to request to see a ghostly replay of one's own failure—a seconds-long street ballad about the fate which befalls the

meddlesome and boorish. Finally, and most importantly *Dark Souls* ensures that one is continuously alerted to shadowy apparitions. In the beginning one might wonder what could be behind the strange figures that emerge seemingly without rhyme or reason only to disappear again. At some point, one has to realize, as Daniel Vella writes,

> that they are in fact other players, captured and re-presented in realtime as they engage in their own simultaneous playing of *Dark Souls* wherever (and whoever) they might be in the world. The ghostly figures travel paths different to the ones the player takes; they wear armour and wield weapons the player might not yet have discovered; they deploy techniques the player might not yet have learnt, or even known were possible. In short, they shadow the player's own playing of *Dark Souls* with an intimation of all the "paths not taken", revealing the vast space of possibility that is both hinted at and, simultaneously, closed off by the player's activation of a single playing-out of the game (2015, p. 14).

A sudden lighting up of the countless paths that could have been chosen and that might still—upon a future run-through of the game—be pursued also pushes something into perspective that Vella calls "ludic sublime". From his perspective, nearly all the aesthetic effects I have attempted to describe and to explain on the previous pages could be conceptualized as individual aspects of this "ludic sublime". Since it indeed aims

> to actively remind the player of the limits and the inadequacy of her perceptual opening onto the milieu of the gameworld, the computational systems underlying it, and the space of possibilities they structure (2015, p. 10).

Without a doubt, the impression may impose itself on somebody who is playing *Dark Souls* that Miyazaki and his coworkers had configured "an ineffable whole" that exceeds infinitely the "necessarily limited perception" of any player (2015). However, this impossible infinity at once folds back on the player, in the manifold as well as ghostly and likewise concrete presence of other "lonesome adventurers", from which the virtual brotherhood, of which Keza MacDonald speaks, is then generated (MacDonald and Killingsworth 2016, p. 10).

In this sense, it may be appropriate to add one more to the many temporalities of *Dark Souls*: the temporality of the assemblage. It does not dissolve into the, simultaneously dynamic as well as tension-filled, into and against each other of vectoral and cyclical time, which marks the play experience to the highest degree; certainly not, when the idea of the assemblage is to truly come into its own. From a perspective like the one Lowenhaupt Tsing and Lötscher are trying to develop, it would be much more plausible to claim that the many mechanics that serve to establish this at once ghostly and concrete contact between anonymous players in *Dark Souls*, for their part project a ghostly-concrete presence upon the horizon of thought. A touching without proximity to each other, a helping without knowing each other gives the sense of a kind of incidental commitment and imparts the experience of a community that is somehow both highly real and entirely fictional perpetually building itself anew and dissolving in an ephemeral fleetingness.

Perhaps, in this too, a longing, characteristic of our time, is fulfilled.

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## Notes

[1]    It should not go unmentioned, that Susan Spitzer, Badiou's translator, likewise thought it suitable and even necessary to translate the French *noir* into English as *dark.* I will therefore allow myself to extend the scope Badious considerations, that pertain mainly to the "black soul", to include the "dark soul" as well. (Spitzer 2017, p. vii)

[2]    When I speak of *Dark Souls* in the following text, then I generally mean all three parts of the trilogy, even though there are surely some aspects of my present explorations that are especially relevant to the first *Dark Souls* (From Software 2011).

[3]    I thank Raphael Schotten for pointing out this shifting from frustration to meditation to me.

4    In Dylan's song 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' from the album *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965) it is stated that: "Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn / Suicide remarks are torn / From the fool's gold mouthpiece / The hollow horn plays wasted words / Proves to warn that he not busy being born / Is busy dying."