



THE VIDEO GAMES GENERATIONS NEWSLETTER

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Issue #35 – January 3, 2026

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Loading Screen

When I started this newsletter, it made sense to keep the name I came up with when my daughter and I started our podcast back in 2014, when she was just 8 years old (she'll be 21 this year). If I had it to do over again, I might call this OMWAVG instead of VGGN – Old Man Writes About Video Games.

Well, old in the sense that I'm starting to feel my age. I turned 54 in November. Already, my action game reflexes aren't what they used to be.

Still, I try not to go too long between action games, to make sure I don't get rusty. I like a good turn-based RPG, puzzle game, or point-and-click game, but those do nothing for maintaining those reflexes.

This week: *Dark Souls* and other *Souls*-like games.



Recent Events

There May Be Hope for Saros Yet

According to an article at VGC (incidentally, perhaps the best place I've found for getting video game news), *Saros* from Housemarque may not be the brutally punishing experience that *Returnal* was. At the risk of saying again something I've made no secret of in the past, I put around 20 hours into *Returnal*, making it as far as the boss fight in the third stage, but ultimately gave up. Almost no progression to keep between runs (a couple important items and persistent unlockables) is exactly why I don't enjoy (most) roguelike games.

It's hard to know if the changes they're making to that formula for *Saros* will be enough to redeem the complete waste of time that their *Returnal* was, and I'm still on the "no" side of pre-ordering it, but at least I'm interested now.



Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/features/2026-saros/>

Will the PS5 Generation Last Longer?

Among the many things generative AI has disrupted (mostly in negative ways, arguably), computer hardware itself is getting more expensive (it doesn't help that we now have to also contend with the idiotic tariff situation in the United States). According to a report at Insider Gaming, console makers aren't in a hurry now to bring about the next generation.

Source:

<https://insider-gaming.com/ram-prices-next-gen/>

CD Projekt Sells Good Old Games (GOG)

I have a modest GOG library, although I've rarely played any of the games I bought there. For that matter, I don't even play my much larger Steam library because I don't have a gaming PC set up. Maybe I'll (eventually) get one of those upcoming Steam Machines and that will change, but I digress.

The story here is just that CD Projekt has sold their PC gaming store to one of its co-founders, Michał Kiciński. It doesn't sound like anything else will change.

Source:

<https://www.videogameschronicle.com/news/its-going-into-very-good-hands-cd-projekt-is-selling-gog/>

Game Informer Issue #373

Yes, it's a slow news week when I'm making up something just to fill a bit more space.

I just got my fifth new issue of Game Informer after the staff banded together to resurrect their magazine from the GameStop doom last year. My current subscription is for ten issues, so it's already half-way over.



I should probably read it, rather than just skimming through it. They gave *Hotel Barcelona* (from Swery65 and Suda51) a 5 out of 10 in a one-sentence review, but I still want to play it – even if it's supposedly a roguelike.

Bright Souls

Like many, I stayed far away from *Dark Souls* and *Demon's Souls* and the wider *Souls*-like genre at first, because they had a reputation for being too tough, possibly unfair at times, with a high chance that you'd invest hours into playing only to lose everything on bad luck.

There's a smidgen of truth in all of that, but as with most things, the perception isn't always reality. I probably envisioned these types of games as being more *rouge*-like – a genre of games I tend *not* to enjoy. One of my biggest gaming peeves is to lose progress in a game.

The Souls-Like Journey Begins

Somehow, in April 2015, I started playing *Bloodborne*. I would have sworn the original *Lords of the Fallen* (not a FromSoft game) was my first *Souls*-like, but I fact-checked it on my game play log, and no, it was *Bloodborne*.

That's probably all it took to hook me. I must have spent 10 hours in the starting area, being cautious, constantly making my way back to save and level up. If I did die, it was always tense making my "corpse run" back to pick up my blood echoes (the equivalent of "souls" or currency you use to level up your character).



According to my notes, I got all three endings around ten days later, and went on to get the platinum trophy. I remember having to work my way through chalice dungeons, I think they were called, in order to do that.

I remember getting really good at the combat, or at least the style I sent for, which was fast and fluid attacks using quick weapons, with lots of dodging. I also remember spending hours on certain bosses, but not getting too frustrated as I slowly improved my strategy.

Discovering a Whole New Genre

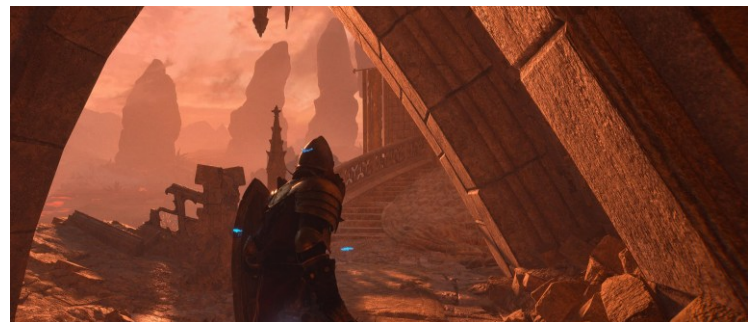
The next game in the genre I played was the original *Lords of the Fallen*. I had a three-day weekend, and I used every waking minute of it to make my way through the entire game.

After that, I played the 2D side-scrolling *Salt & Sanctuary* from Ska Studios. It's a great game, and I think I even prefer it to the sequel, *Salt & Sacrifice*, although that's also really good.

A couple months later, I finally played my first true and proper *Souls* game, *Dark Souls III*. That's not to diminish the fun I had previously; just, this was probably when I realized *Souls*-like games were for me, after all. Well, maybe I had already realized that with *Bloodborne*.

I suppose *Souls*-likes aren't a whole new genre, but there are certain aspects about them that make it seem that way. At their core, they tend to be action RPGs with a focus on melee combat, but there are aspects to them that set them apart.

It becomes hard to classify some games as *Souls*-like, though, because *Souls*-inspired games often have some – but not all – of the things we associate with the genre. It's not unusual for a game to put its own spin on things, borrowing just a couple elements without cloning the entire formula.



What Makes a Souls-Like

Most Souls-likes take liberties with the formula and put their own twist on it. For instance, *Remnant: From the Ashes* and *Immortal Unchained* have more of a focus on ranged combat. *Remnant* also doesn't drop your unspent "experience points" when you die, meaning there's no corpse run to get it back. It's similar in *Morbid: The Lords of Ire*, where you just lose your experience multiplier but not any actual experience.

Some games trim it down to just the bare essentials, like respawning enemies when you rest at a bonfire (or equivalent), or with their methodical combat systems, or in a world design that loops back on itself with shortcuts to open and secret areas to find.

These are the elements I most associate with Souls-like games, in no particular order.

1. **Enemies respawn when you rest.** This is probably the number one core feature of a Souls-like. Most can get away with changing or eliminating everything else, but I can't think of a single Souls-like I've played where all the enemies you defeated (aside from bosses) don't come back to life when you rest at a designated spot (to heal, level up, and usually auto-save your game). Often, this by itself isn't enough to be a Souls-like, but when paired with a couple of other staples of the genre, it fits.
2. **Accumulating unspent experience or currency.** In *Dark Souls*, it's quite simply called "souls". It varies in other games – blood, salt, amrita, tar, ergo – but it's essentially your reward for defeating enemies. It accumulates until you spend it, which also means it's possible to lose it (or drop it) at the spot you die.

3. **Leveling up at the bonfire.** It's not always called a bonfire (that's a *Dark Souls* thing). It might be a shrine or a camp or something else, but this tends to be your nearest safe space. After you accumulate souls (or whatever), you may need to return here (avoiding death as you do) in order to spend it and level up (increase your stats, improve weapons, and so forth). The clever thing about *Dark Souls* in particular, and games which borrow this mechanic directly, is that it's just like experience points. You need more and more of it as your level increases, so you might just be stuck with it until you accumulate enough to actually spend. Once you rest, though, enemies respawn (see #1) meaning the path you cleared earlier is no longer clear of enemies.
4. **The corpse run.** If you die before spending your souls (or whatever), they drop on the spot (or sometimes get picked up by an enemy), meaning you have to go back and retrieve it (or defeat the corresponding enemy) else you lose them entirely (if you die again first). While this would seem to be a core tenant of the genre, I've played games that *feel* Souls-like but you don't drop anything when you die. I tend to consider games like those Souls-lite.
5. **Danger around every corner.** Whether it's in service of creating corpse runs or just the inconvenience of making your way back to where you were after you respawn at camp, these games tend to make even the general enemies a pain if you get surrounded or surprise-attacked by one. This encourages cautious play, learning the area, and developing good strategies to deal with each enemy type.

6. **An interconnected world.** These games typically aren't open world (*Elden Ring* notwithstanding), and some of them play out as distinct levels entirely (the *Nioh* series, for instance), but usually you're set loose in a world of branching paths and locked gates that reward careful exploration. You might make your way through a swamp, far from your nearest bonfire, only to realize you've made a loop back to the other side of a gate you can now open and return to that same bonfire.
7. **The dark fantasy setting**, characters that talk in slow riddles, and a story that can only be deciphered by the most dedicated players (not me, apparently) who read every piece of lore attached to the items you pick up. Granted, this is mostly a FromSoft thing, with others in the genre often not adhering to fantasy or the same unknowable world mystery gimmick.
8. **Stamina plays into combat.** This applies particularly to games with melee combat (which are most of them). Attacking, blocking, dodging, and other actions use stamina, and if you're not careful, you may find your character out of breath and overwhelmed.
9. **Bosses.** I can't think of any *Souls*-like or even *Souls-lite* where there aren't bosses. In general, nobody does it like FromSoft, and some even miss the mark entirely when it comes to making fun bosses with moves and patterns you have to learn to overcome.
10. **Death is to be expected.** These games generally expect players to die, die, die again, both in service of other elements (like the corpse run) and as part of the general experience of learning to play.
11. **Fog doors.** Although this is typically a FromSoft thing, fog doors require you to intentionally enter a new area or return to a boss after it defeats you the first time.

My Top 12 Souls-Likes

Without further preamble, here are my top 12 favorite *Souls*-like games. I almost cheated and grouped games by series, but usually there's a specific game in the series I would put above the others, so I forced myself to pick my favorite game from each series. I did cheat by including 12 instead of the typical 10, because I had a tough time ranking some of them and didn't want to leave out any of my favorites. I guess that was further preamble.

#12: Mortal Shell

Looks and feels a lot like *Dark Souls*, but with skill and weapon enhancements, not character progression.

#11: The Last Oricru

A melding of *Souls*-like features and more traditional action-RPG sensibilities (*GreedFall*, *Elex*, and so on).

#10: Salt & Sanctuary

An excellent 2D *Souls*-like; perhaps the best, if not counting *Hollow Knight* (which is more *Metroidvania*).

#9: SteelRising

A bit easier than the typical *Souls*-like, from Spiders.

#8: Lords of the Fallen (2023)

One of the most unabashedly *Souls*-inspired games.

#7: Immortal Unchained

You've probably never heard of this game, but I loved it when I played it in 2018. Guns, though, not melee.

#6: The Surge 2

A sci-fi *souls*-like with tech and machinery. It's great.

#5: Nioh 2

Loved the house-like Lady Osakabe fight. Great game.

#4: Lies of P

This is about as good as it gets for a game not actually made by FromSoft. It's regarded as one of the best.

#3: Dark Souls Remastered

I finally played this years later on Switch, and loved it.

#2: Bloodborne

My first *Souls*-like was arguably one of the greatest.

#1: Elden Ring

This was easily my Game of the Year in 2022. It's a masterpiece, appealing even to non-*Souls* gamers.

Honorable Mentions

It turns out, I've played a lot more *Souls*-like games than I realized. I'm not going to write about each one individually – look them up if you're unfamiliar – but I (mostly) enjoyed every game listed here and would (again, mostly) recommend them.

This list doesn't include a few games that stray further from the formula but might be considered *Souls*-like to an extent; games like *Asterigos: Curse of the Stars*, *Scars Above*, *Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn*, *Clash: Artifacts of Chaos*, *Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin*, and *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*.

These are in no particular order:

Black Myth: Wukong
Morbid: The Lords of Ire
Lords of the Fallen (2014)
Wo-Long: Fallen Dynasty
Nioh 1
Dolmen
The Surge 1
Salt & Sacrifice
Remnant: From the Ashes
Chronos: Before the Ashes
Remnant II
Ashen
ThymeSia
Dark Souls III
Hellpoint
Blasphemous
Let It Die
Code Vein
Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice
Demon's Souls

Future Souls

A few months ago, during a month when I redeemed one of my last remaining Xbox GamePass codes to play *South of Midnight*, I played the first few minutes of an interesting *Souls*-like called *Another Crab's Treasure*. I opted to wait on the PS5 physical edition (which I have now). I had a blast with what little of it I played, though, and it's high on my backlog for a playthrough (finally) in 2026.



Last year (yes, 2025 is now last year), I didn't get around to *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers* (which I bought) and *The First Berserker: Khazan* (which I haven't bought yet). Both are said to be really hard, possibly even for the *Souls*-like genre, which is worrying. *Black Myth: Wukong* and *Sekiro* both nearly broke me, and I've been less drawn to *Souls*-likes that are *that* hard lately.

There's also *Enotria: The Last Song*, which looks cool, but again, I just haven't gotten around to it yet. I waited on the physical release for it as well, which I now have.

Despite some questionable and disappointing statements from the developer of *Lords of the Fallen*, the sequel to the reboot is due out this year and might be one I (eventually) pick up.

Lastly, I never played *Dark Souls II*. Well, I played a few minutes but didn't stick with it. I always heard it was too different and a bit of a black sheep, but I shouldn't let that stop me.

Collection Inspection – From Software

This, of course, isn't every From Software game. This issue is all about *Souls*-likes, so these are just the *Dark Souls* and related games by FromSoft in my physical collection. Unless I missed any, I *think* this is all of them; at least, all the ones I have.

Dark Souls II – Collector's Edition

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Collector's Edition

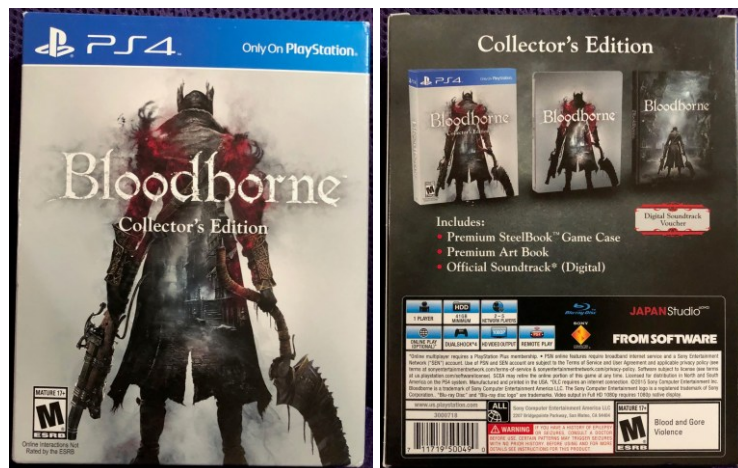
Comments: What's this? An actual collector's edition for *Collection Inspection*? I usually don't include them because I rarely open them, but this one seems to have been an exception. I never played it (and I have other copies as well) and I never opened the actual steelbook-cased game, but it comes with a cool statue. The box explains how to actually get the little guy to hold his dual swords, but I opted not to. There's a hardbound art booklet and a cloth map too, which have also never been opened. The game inside proclaims it as the *Black Armor Edition*, but I guess it's all the same thing.



Bloodborne – Collector's Edition

Platform: PS4 / **Edition:** Collector's Edition

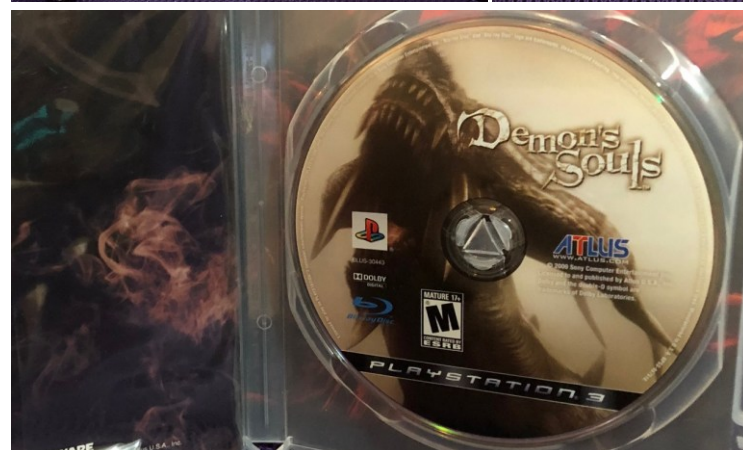
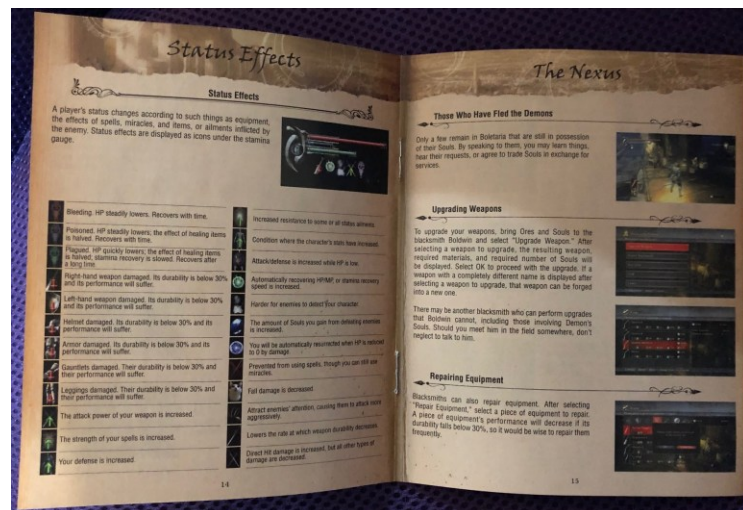
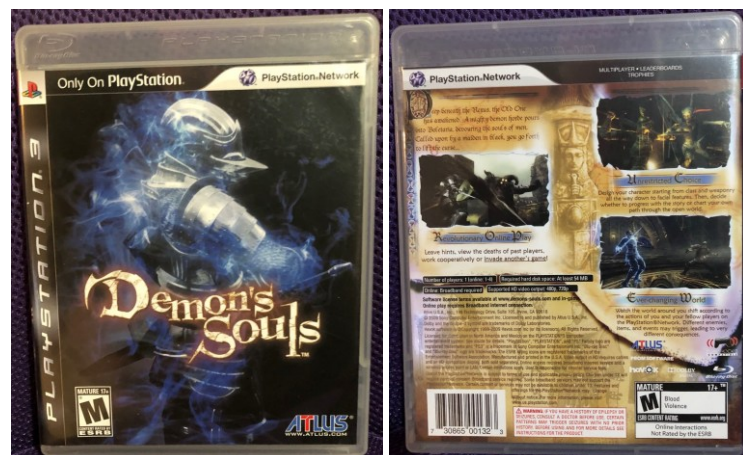
Comments: I'm surprised by how much some sellers on eBay are asking for this version of *Bloodborne*. I wouldn't have guessed it being rare or in high demand, but what do I know? It's not as cool as the *Dark Souls II* Collector's Edition with that statue, but it does come with a steelbook case and art book.



Demon's Souls

Platform: PS3 / **Edition:** Standard

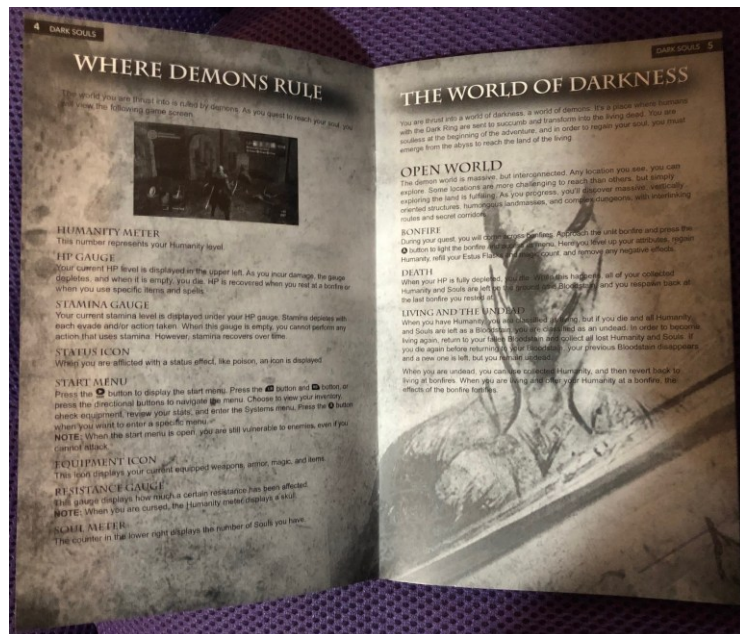
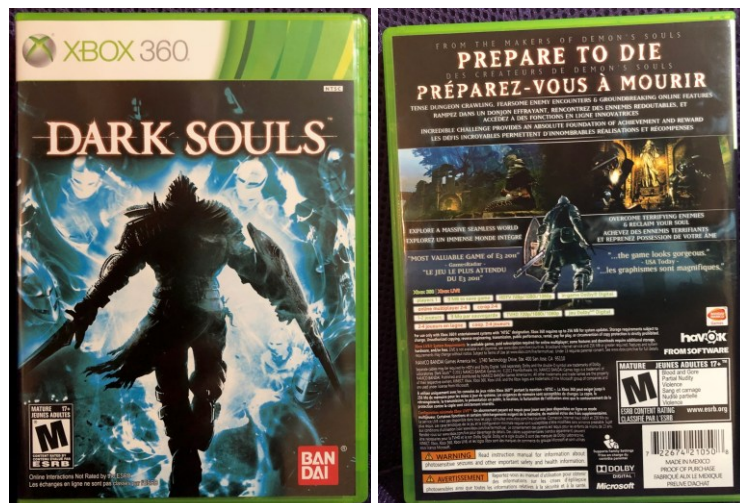
Comments: It's the game that started it all. I never played the original, because that was at a time when I still thought it would be way too hard and punishing for me. I did end up playing the PS5 remake, though.



Dark Souls

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: Depending on how you look at it, *this* is instead the game that started it all, and again, it's from a time before I realized I liked this kind of game. I ended up playing it for the first time when the remastered version came out. I played the Switch version. I have no complaints. It ran perfectly fine.



Dark Souls Remastered

Platform: Nintendo Switch / **Edition:** Remastered

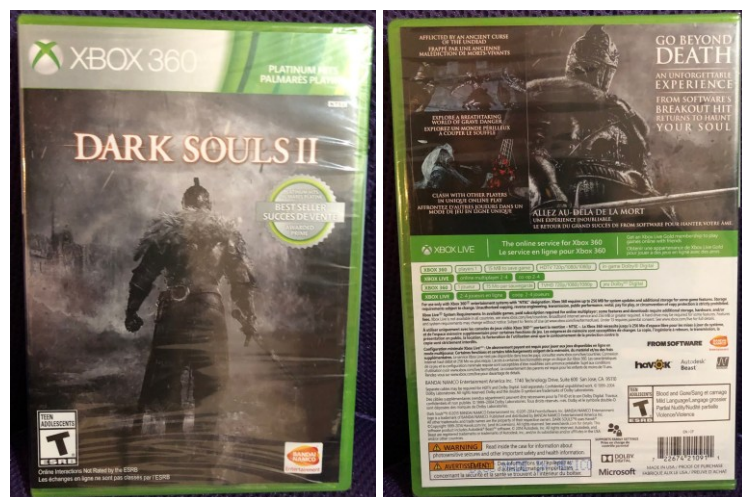
Comments: Like I said, I had no problem playing the Switch version. I really enjoyed this game.



Dark Souls II

Platform: Xbox 360 / **Edition:** Platinum Hits

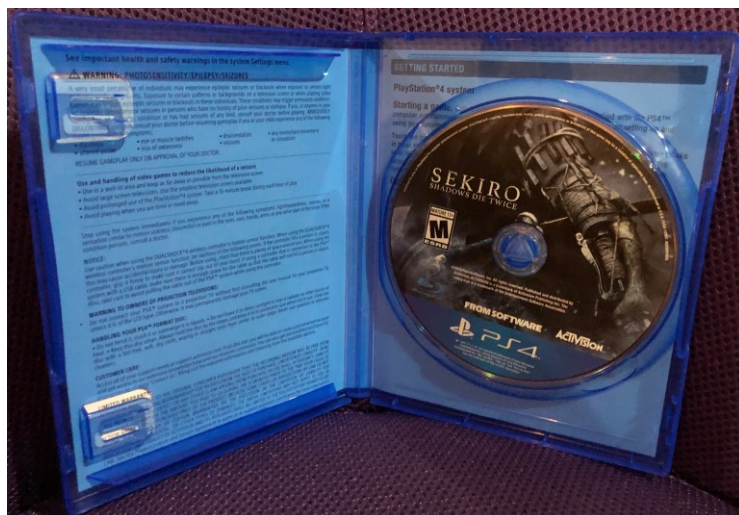
Comments: The second of my four (yes four) copies of *Dark Souls II* is a factory sealed Xbox 360 edition. It seems like a lot of copies to own for a game I never actually played (yet). When I finally do, I have the PS4 version digitally, so there won't be a need to pop in any of these discs or open the factory sealed ones.



Sekiro – Shadows Die Twice

Platform: PlayStation 4 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: Let's switch things up, much the way From Software did when they released this tough-as-nails Souls-like that ditched traditional RPG leveling in favor of an action game with less opportunities to over-level and outpace the world's challenges.



Dark Souls II – Scholar of the First Sin

Platform: PlayStation 4 / **Edition:** Standard

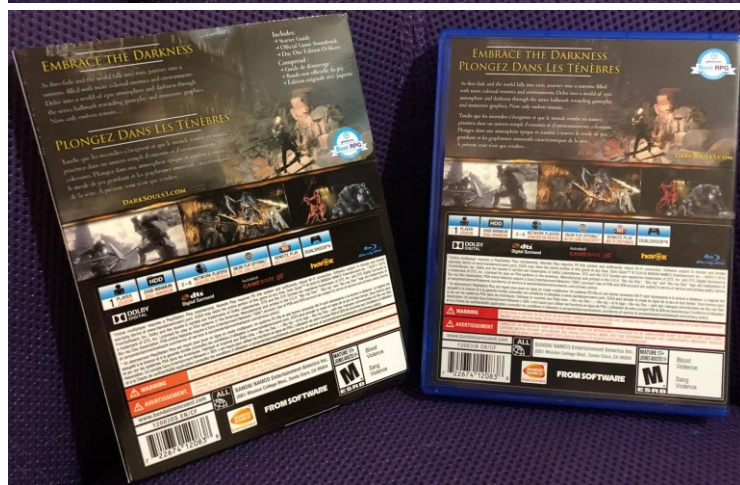
Comments: My third copy of Dark Souls II is also an unopened, factory-sealed one. I actually *have* played a little of the beginning section of this game. I just wasn't in the mood at the time. I do need to play it.



Dark Souls III

Platform: PlayStation 4 / **Edition:** Day One Edition

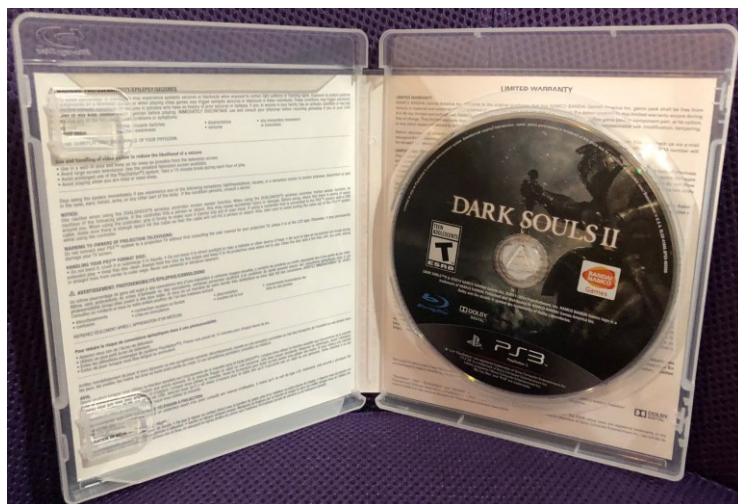
Comments: In lieu of an instruction booklet, *Dark Souls III* for PS4 came with a cool little miniature Prima strategy guide. This was already at a time when publishers stopped including any booklet at all. It also came with an official soundtrack CD and a slipcover.



Dark Souls II

Platform: PlayStation 3 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: My final copy of *Dark Souls II* is for the PlayStation 3. I probably bought this one pre-owned.



Demon's Souls (Remake)

Platform: PlayStation 5 / **Edition:** Standard

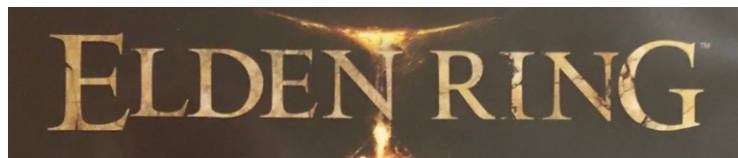
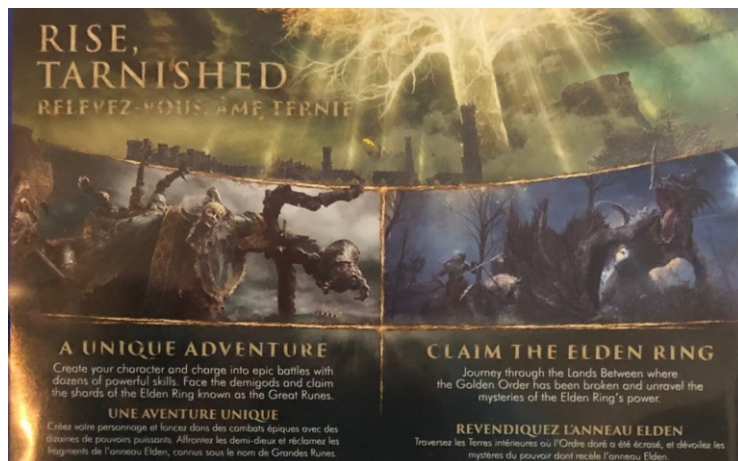
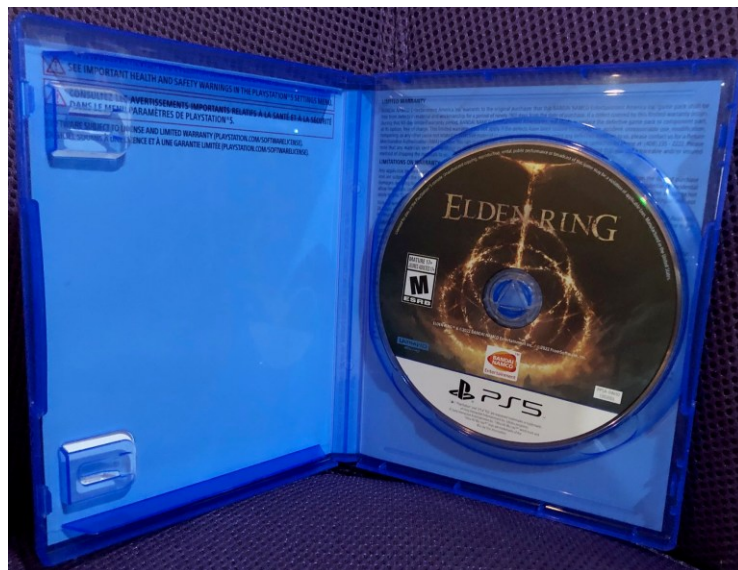
Comments: Sure, *technically* this isn't a game made by From Software, but it's the *remake* of one.



Elden Ring

Platform: PlayStation 5 / **Edition:** Standard

Comments: I made a decision a few years ago to stop buying those big-box collector's editions of games. If ever I was going to do it anyway, this would probably have been a good game for it. This was far and away my favorite game of 2022, and probably the pinnacle (so far) of what a *Souls*-like game can be.



Capsule Reviews

The first of these was originally comprised of a full three “tweets” (the format I landed on eventually when posting these), but I only included a badly-framed photo of the title screen (no screenshots), so I’ve grouped it in with my capsule reviews this week.

Immortal Unchained

A sci-fi *Souls*-like, but mostly guns. Minor tech issues, but it’s pretty solid after a patch. Some reviewers decry its gameplay, but I enjoyed it.

It gets better after a bland intro level. The story is hard to follow, but that’s also *Souls*. I found a lot to like.

It’s also a game nobody talked about and I hadn’t even heard of, yet it came out in the fall this year. It’s an impressive effort by a small team, and worth a look if you enjoy the *Souls*-like formula.

Tip: turn on lock-on aiming (L2 trigger) rather than R3 manual lock. Works wonders.

I love hidden gems like this. These ambitious and mostly successful games in the AA space. It doesn’t seem indie at all, but not quite AAA.

The name may have hurt it, though. *Immortal Unchained* sounds like a vampire romance novel; Twilight fan fiction or something.



Played on console: PS4.

Originally posted to social media: 12/27/2018.

Dark Souls Remastered

I found it harder than *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls 3*, and nearly gave up after a few hours.

It gets a bit easier at higher levels, and is definitely a memorable action RPG experience.

I’m glad I stuck it out.

It’s a classic for a reason.



Played on console: Nintendo Switch.

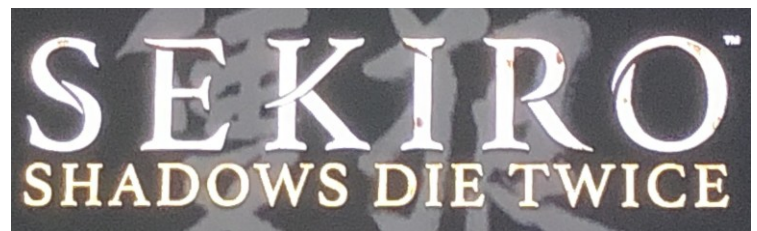
Originally posted to social media: 11/23/2018.

Sekiro – Shadows Die Twice

Extremely difficult action/adventure fantasy Shinobi game. It drops most RPG elements of prior FromSoft games, demanding fast reflexes rather than grinding.

I nearly gave up and quit many times. The last boss in particular took me four days to beat.

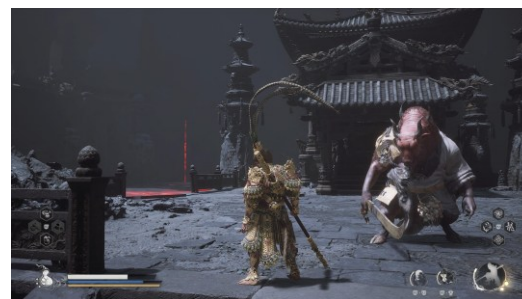
Maybe not worth it.



Played on console: PS4.

Originally posted to social media: 04/25/2019.

Mini-Review: Black Myth - Wukong



There were times in this difficult *Souls*-lite (sorry, yes I said it) when I didn't think I could finish it.

There were times, after getting whooped by certain too-tough bosses over and over that I didn't even *want* to.

But there were other times when I marveled at what an experience it was; the beautiful lands, the mythical bosses, enemies, and characters brought to life, and the wild and memorable cut scenes (including between-chapter animated shorts).

The *Souls*-like influence mostly ends with the game's vibe, difficulty, and general design. Progression is more about skills, gear, and specific stat boosts.

You lose nothing when The Destined One dies; real-life sanity, maybe.

By the end, I did most side stuff, skipped two optional bosses, and beat the final boss on my second try.

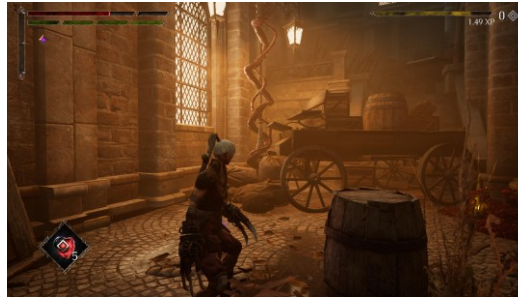
Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 12/21/2024.

Mini-Review: Morbid – The Lords of Ire



The first *Morbid*, subtitled *The Seven Acolytes*, was an isometric *Souls*-like with pixel art. I never got around to playing it, but this follow-up seemed like my kind of thing; and it is!



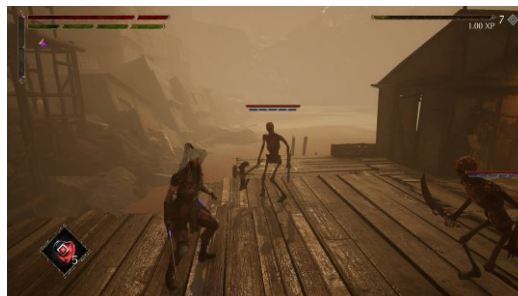
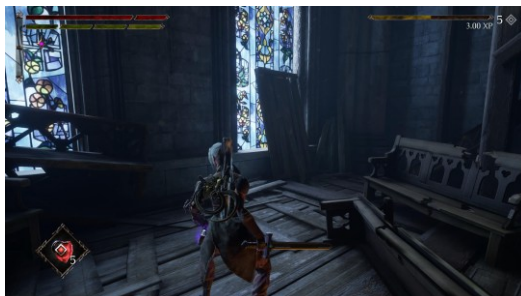
It's a third-person action game with *Souls*-like elements, and just the kind of visual and world design I like in games of this type.



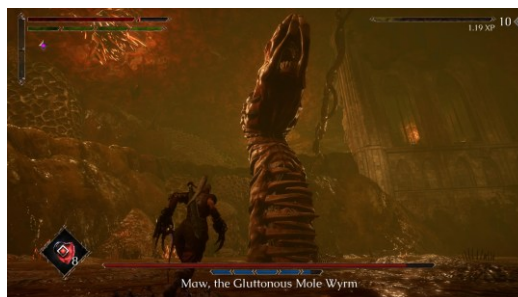
A lot about is on-the-nose when it comes to aping its inspirations (ex: areas called Dunghaven and the Rejectorium).



It strays from the formula in other ways. It lacks a corpse run (you don't lose "experience" upon death, just your multiplier).



It has interesting weapon and perk upgrade systems rather than traditional stats (it's not really an RPG).

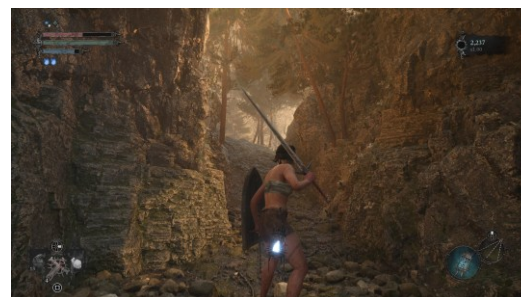
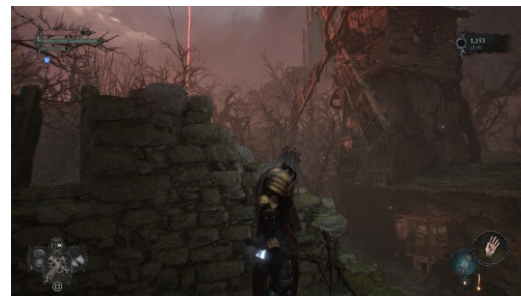
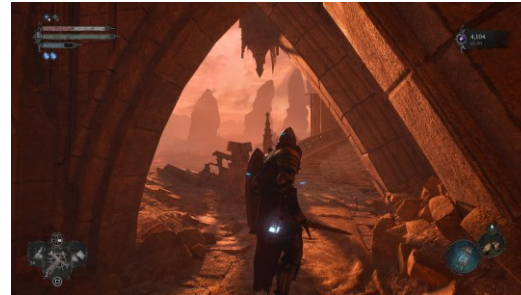
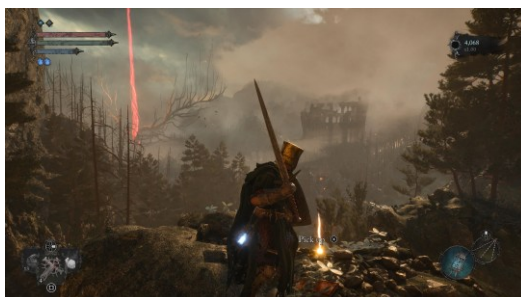
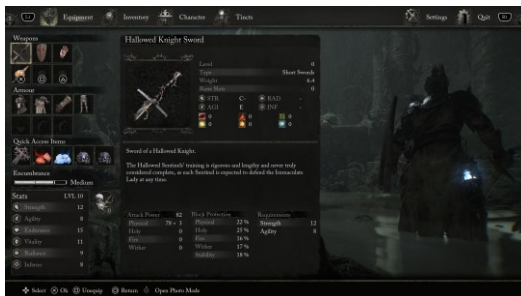


There are different weapon types, plenty of bosses, and multiple big areas to explore and fight your way through. Fun!

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 06/02/2024.

Mini-Review: Lords of the Fallen (2023)



One of my first *Souls*-likes was the original *Lords of the Fallen*, and I played through it over a three-day weekend. This reboot or sequel is considerably larger, and as *Souls*-likes go, I'd say it's on the tougher side, whether it comes to the combat or the sometimes head-scratching confusion of where to go and what to do next.

Those able to follow the story in the *Dark Souls* trilogy would likely disagree, but if somebody told me this was *Dark Souls 4*, I wouldn't question it. It might be the most *DS*-like of the *Souls*-likes I've played, and I've played a lot.

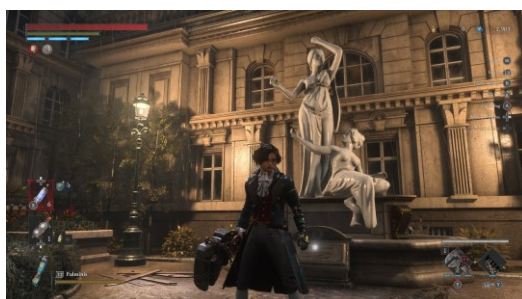
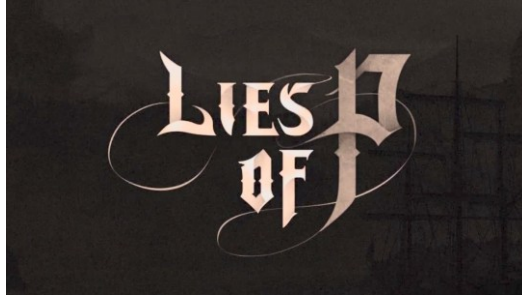
I didn't like the dual world-switching mechanic at first, but it grew on me.

As is usually the case, it's hardest in the first few hours, until you level up, get acclimated to the systems, and learn the language of its gameplay.

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 10/22/2023.

Mini-Review: Lies of P



Souls-likes seem to be a dime a dozen these days, but it's such a fun formula I tend to enjoy most of them. Most put their own take on it but never feel like something FromSoft might have made themselves.

Lies of P feels like something FromSoft made, mostly from the disconcerting pseudo-gothic style and methodical melee combat of *Bloodborne*, with some *Sekiro* parrying and *Dark Souls* vibes. It's easily one of my favorites in the genre now.

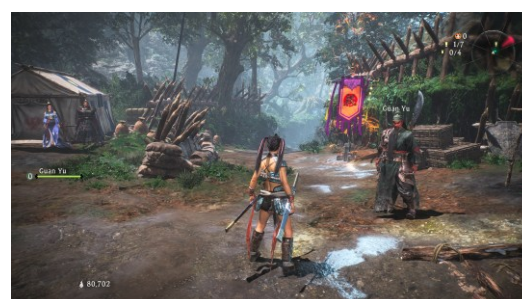
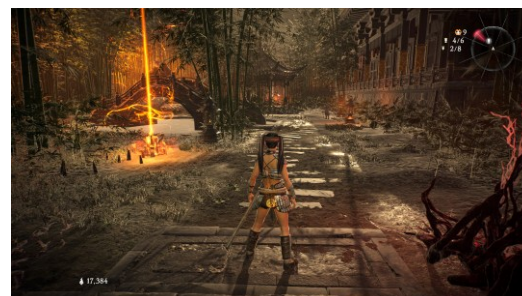
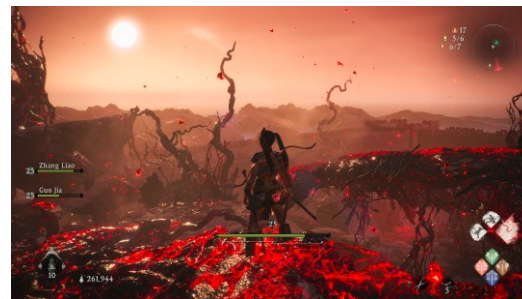
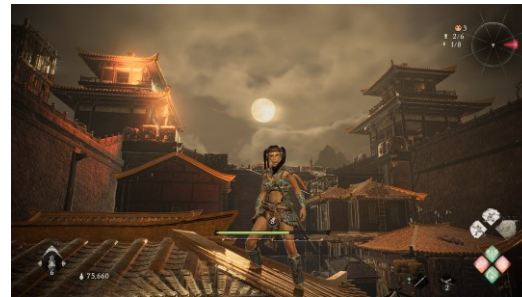
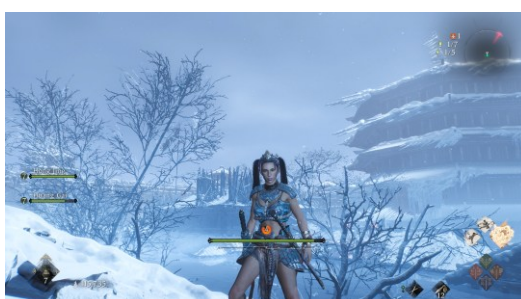
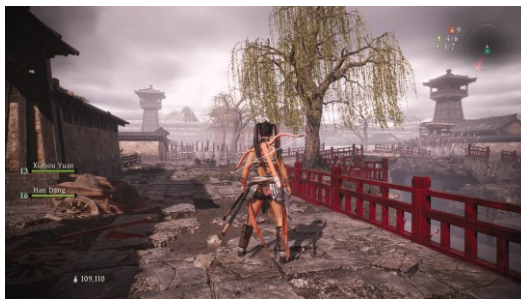
There's a challenge that never gets to the point of feeling too hard or too easy. With my build, I never beat a boss on the first try, but probably never needed more than 5, 10 attempts tops.

What *Lies of P* adds to weapon, character, and skill stats (and its story) keep it from feeling like a shallow copy. Loved it.

Kudos to Round8 Studio.

Played on Xbox Series X with GamePass. Posted: 09/30/2023.

Mini-Review: Wo Long - Fallen Dynasty



As a big fan of *Nioh* and *Nioh 2*, I couldn't help but enjoy *Wo Long*.

Team Ninja has taken their familiar *Souls*-like formula played across a series of self-contained levels, removed the Japanese setting and yokai and placed it in China just prior to the Three Kingdoms era.

I'd probably have gotten more out of it if I had any familiarity with it (the characters, the history) or had played (for instance) any *Dynasty Warriors* games, but I still enjoyed it; more than *Nioh*, but not quite as much as *Nioh 2*.

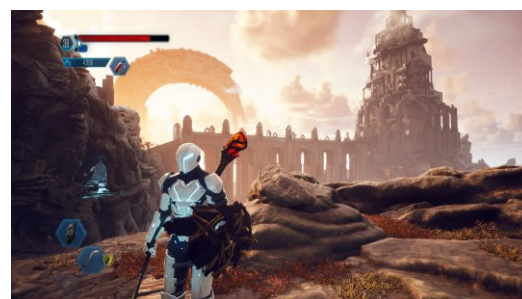
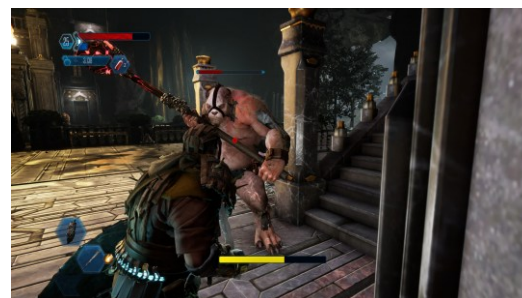
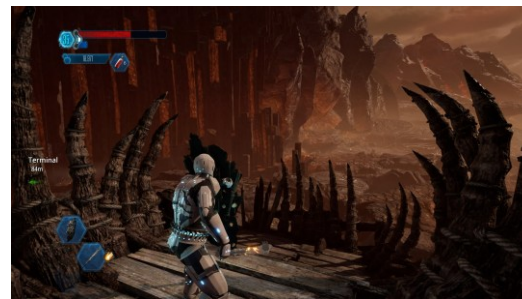
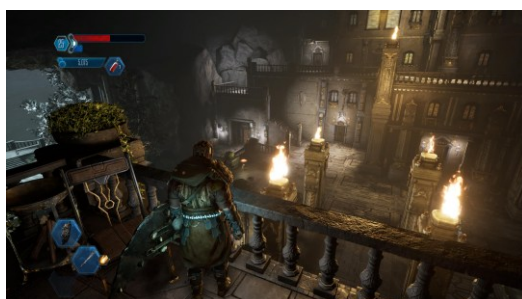
Combat has some variety but isn't overwhelming. In melee-focused action games, I'm great at dodging but bad at blocking, so having the parry system tied to dodging felt great.

A couple tough bosses, but nothing a bit of easy grinding didn't solve.

Great game!

Played on Xbox Series X with GamePass. Posted: 03/18/2023.

Mini-Review: The Last Oricru



A story-heavy action-RPG like *GreedFall* or *Elex*, but with *Souls*-like systems, combat, and world design.

I don't know if I was over-leveled or had great gear, but this might be the easiest *Souls*-like ever.

I really enjoyed it, but the writing, especially the dialogue, comes close to undermining the entire experience. It's often silly, awkward, and comes across like what a middle-schooler would think is cool and witty for adults to say. It's in sharp contrast to a mature story, awesome world-building, and a mostly solid package on a technical and artistic level.

Decision points apparently branch the story in big ways, although I saw just my own play-through.

This all adds up to a really good, memorable game; but wow, that dialogue. It does everything else about the game a big disservice.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 12/31/2022.

Mini-Review: Salt and Sacrifice



It's the follow-up to *Salt and Sanctuary*; part platformer, part Metroidvania, but mostly a side-scrolling *Souls*-like with a unique art style that looks hand-drawn.



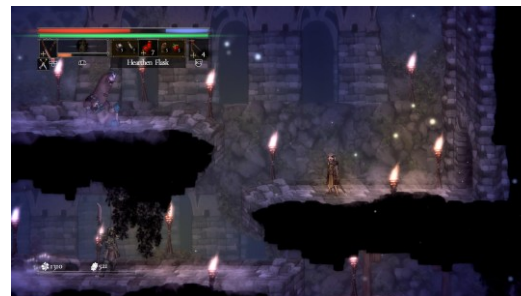
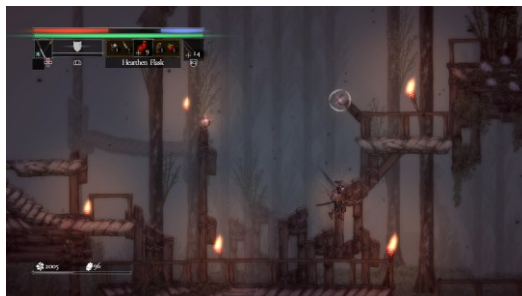
I think I liked *Salt and Sanctuary* a bit more than this, but this new game does seem improved in some ways, and more focused.



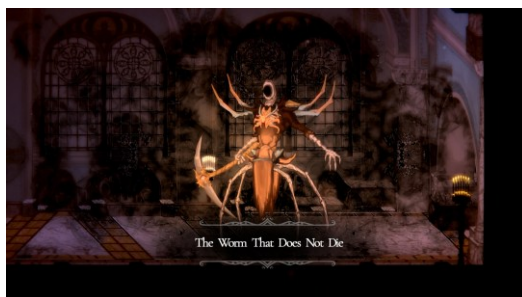
The hooks you'd expect of a *Souls*-like are all present here. Gain "salt" from enemies to level up. Go back and grab your salt pile if you die, to avoid losing it before you spend it.



The story is dark and mostly inscrutable, although I'm getting to a point where I wish that wasn't a core tenet of *Souls*-inspired games like this.



Invest in stats that suit your playstyle, with weapons that scale to specific stats.

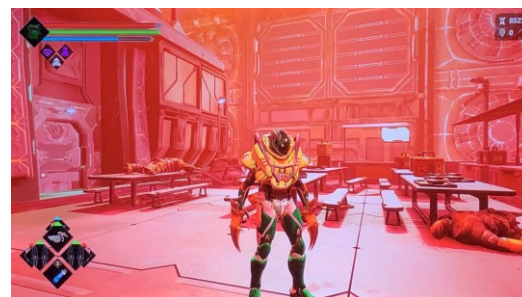
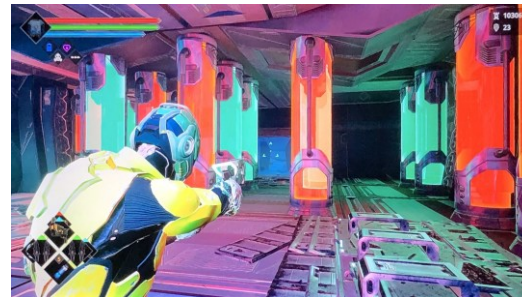
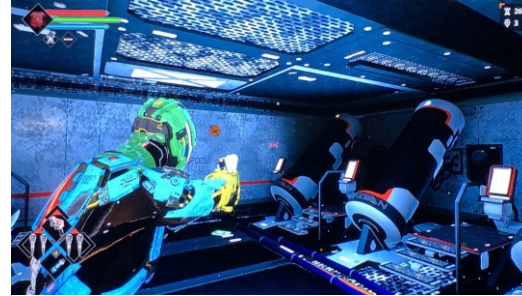


If you enjoyed the prior game, you'll probably like this too. Lots of bosses. Good game.

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 12/17/2022.

Mini-Review: Dolmen



When I picked up this recent release, I had no idea it was a *Souls*-like. We're at a time now, where there have been so many takes on the core formula, that these games can take inspiration from other *Souls*-likes, not just FromSoft games.

This one reminds me a bit of *Immortal Unchained* and *The Surge*, with its sci-fi setting and hybrid melee/ranged combat. It's in stark contrast to *Elden Ring* with an almost throwback feel that sticks to those earlier iterations on the formula. As such, it's still really in my wheelhouse.

You collect items and enemy drops to craft new equipment. Armor has base stat requirements and weapons scale to your core stats. You invest nanites (souls) to level up. Enemies re-spawn when activating a save spot (bonfire).

Really fun, safe take on the genre. I liked it a lot.

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 05/26/2022.

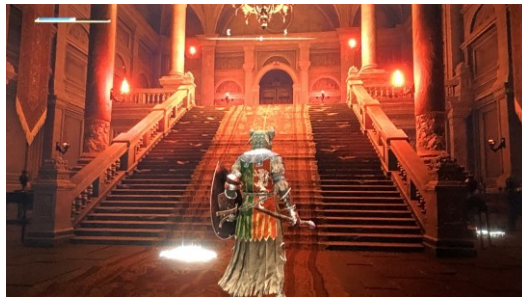
Mini-Review: Elden Ring



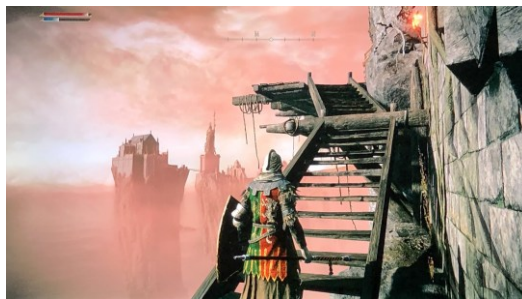
It's *Dark Souls* in all but name, yet it's even better and more open and something truly special in the action RPG genre.



The thing about these FromSoft games (aside from *Sekiro*) is that they're rarely ever harder than in the first few hours. You get plenty of opportunity to customize your character to a play style that fits you, and some great "farming" spots make over-leveling easy.

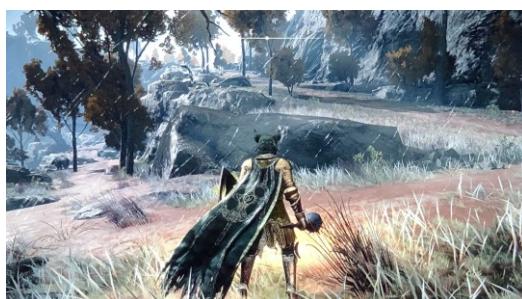
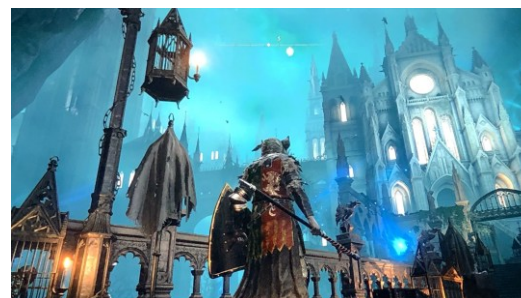
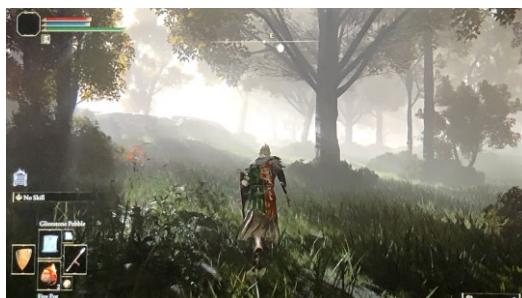


The secret sauce, so to speak, comes from incredibly bizarre and grotesque enemies and bosses, a huge world to explore with entire big hours-long optional areas that you might never even find, weird soft-spoken characters, and just a dark fantasy vibe that is unique to these games.



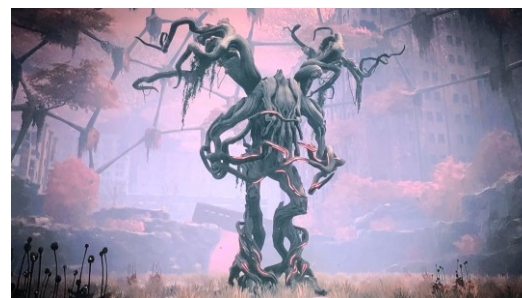
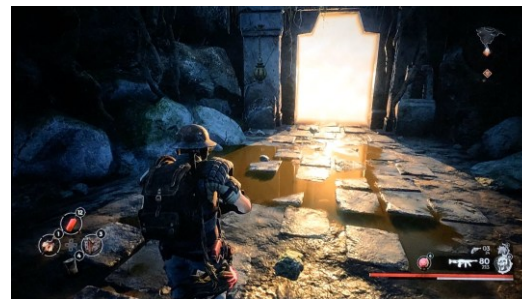
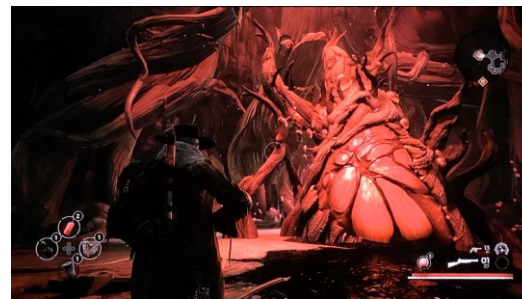
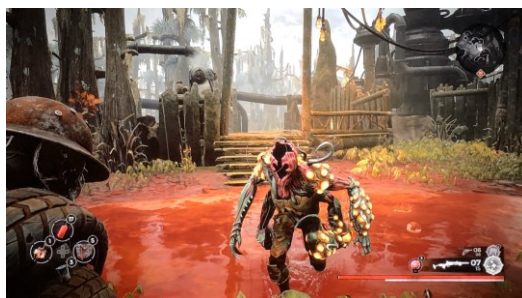
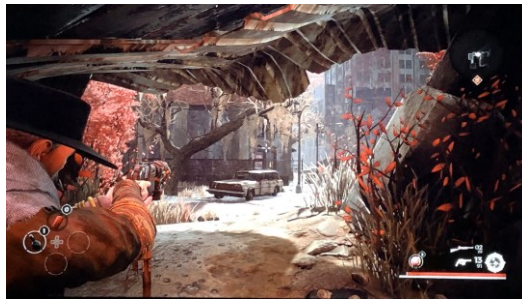
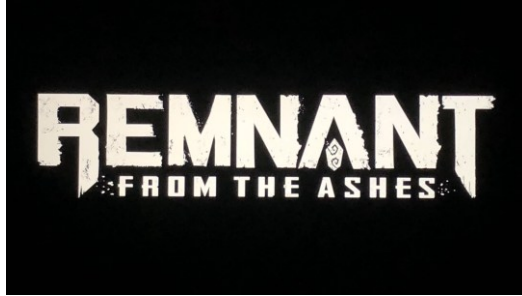
Despite its surprising success, I wonder how many newcomers will actually stick with it. It's absolutely worth it.

A masterpiece.



Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 03/23/2022.

Mini-Review: Remnant - From the Ashes



Souls-like games have become a favorite of mine. *Remnant: From the Ashes* has most elements (bonfire-like checkpoints that respawn enemies, challenging combat, boss fog doors) but without the corpse run (you lose no money or experience upon death). This may make it more appealing for gamers who want the challenge without the pain of losing progress (aside from returning to the last checkpoint and making your way ahead again).

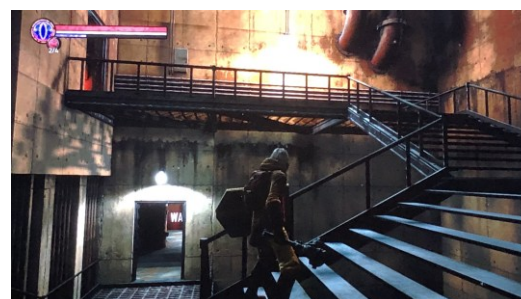
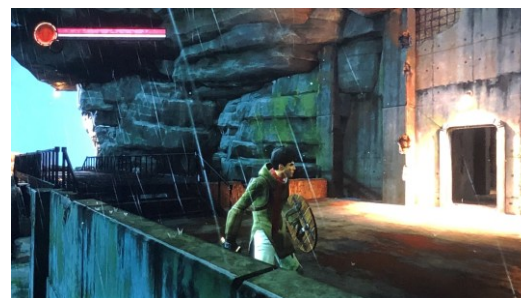
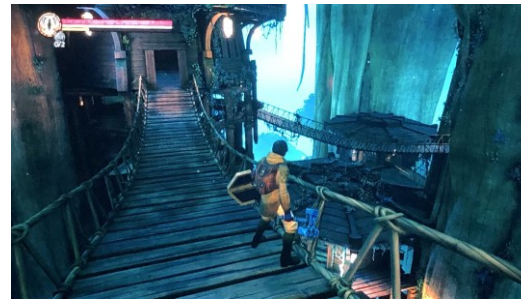
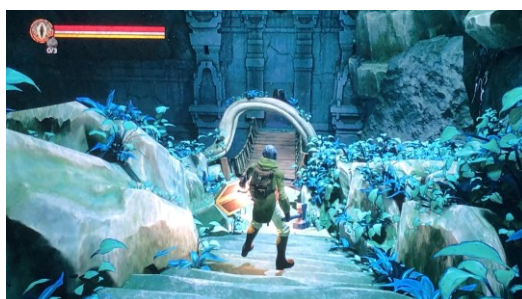
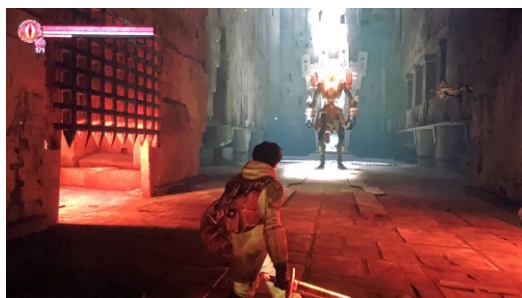
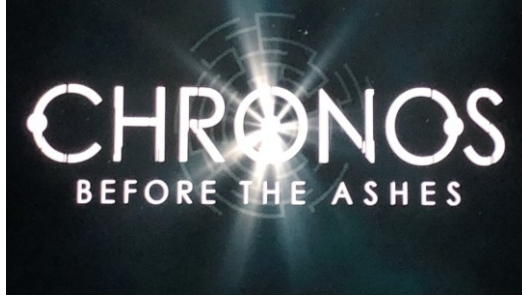
Which bosses, side quests, and even world layout you get are randomized, which encourages replays.

Upgrades are tied to weapons, armor and passive traits (think perks), not character attributes.

Despite several odd crashes (blue screen on PS4 Pro), I enjoyed the game. Interesting world and boss design, plus more emphasis on guns and less on melee, help set it apart. Good game!

*Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 01/18/2020.*

Mini-Review: Chronos – Before the Ashes



This prequel to *Remnant: From the Ashes* has *Souls*-inspired combat (methodical melee) and the same general “watch your step” vibe, but most other *Souls*-like ingredients are absent.

No corpse run, no losing experience, and enemies only respawn if you die.

The first game’s ranged combat is also gone. It can pose a challenge (ex: the last boss in particular was tough on Heroic (hard) mode), but normal and easy modes may make it more appealing to some than a real *Souls*-like.

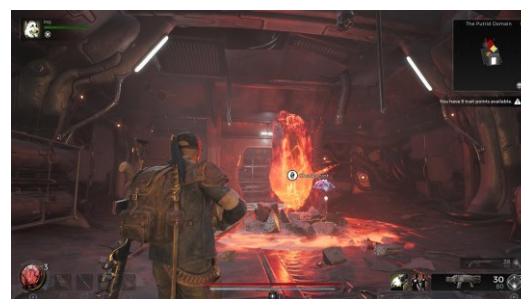
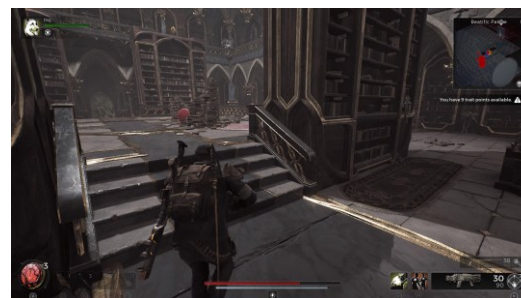
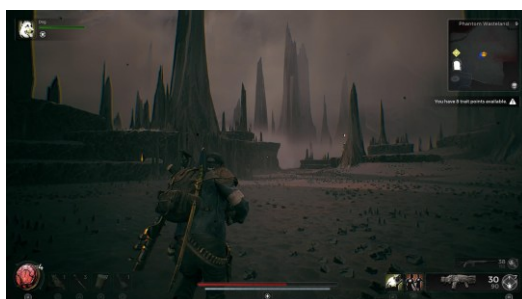
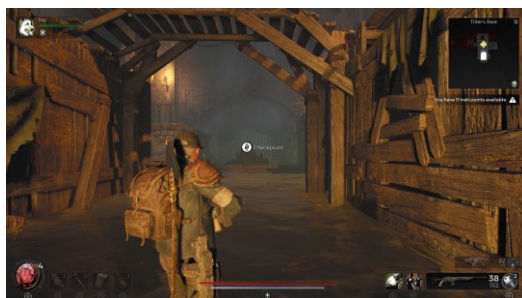
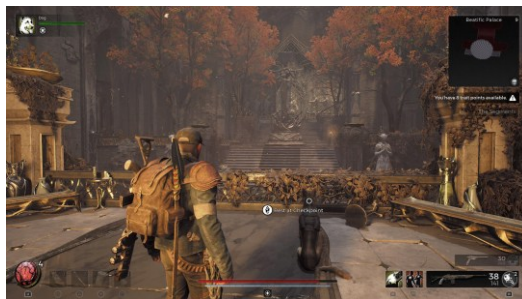
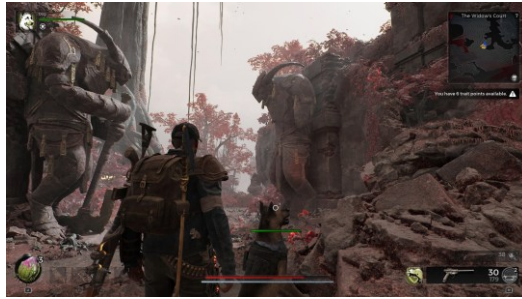
Its unique mechanic is that you age a year on death. Don’t worry; this won’t lead to a lost game or anything.

I marathoned my way through over the weekend and had a fun time. Now I’m trying a low-deaths run (on Easy) in an attempt to get the platinum trophy.

Cloud save backups are my friend. :)

*PS4 game played on PS5.
Originally posted: 04/26/2021.*

Mini-Review: Remnant II



The follow-up to *Remnant: From the Ashes* and *Chronos: Before the Ashes* is pretty great. It's a sequel to the former, with some *Souls*-like elements but gameplay focused on guns, not melee. There is melee, but I didn't use it much. In fact, it feels entirely optional and didn't seem effective with my character spec.

I said it has *Souls*-like elements, but not the ones that frustrate non-fans. There are difficulty options. The lowest makes for a pretty easy experience. Enemies respawn when you rest at crystals but you lose nothing when you die.

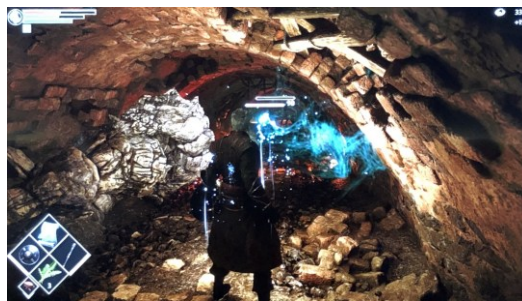
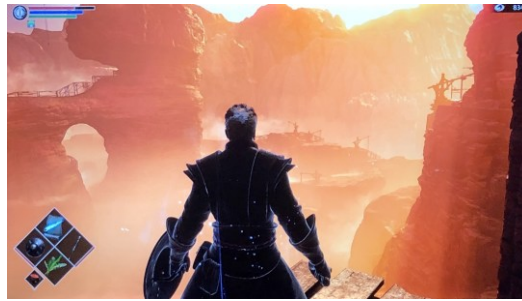
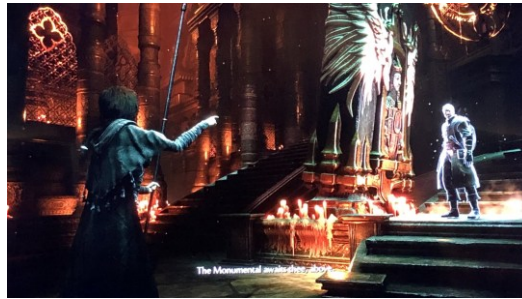
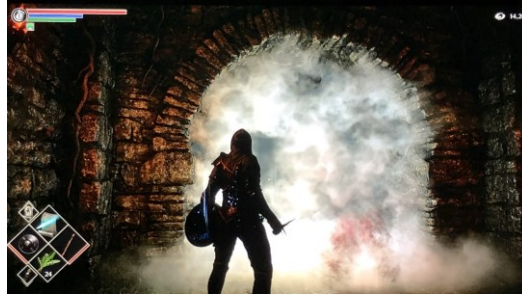
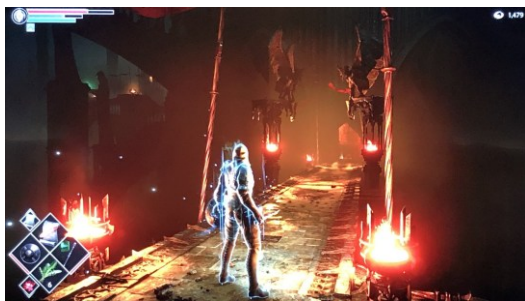
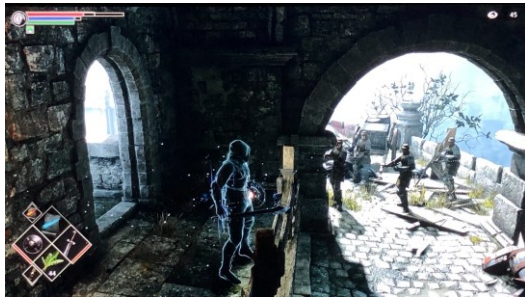
This is way more a traditional third person action/shooter than a *Souls*-like. There are also secret areas, procedural generation, multiple interesting worlds, enemies and lore.

Not game of the year, but more icing on the delicious cake that has been gaming in 2023.

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 08/03/2023.

Mini-Review: Demon's Souls (Remake)



The dark medieval horror fantasy RPG that spawned a genre looks great in 4K HDR, rebuilt as a PS5 launch game by Bluepoint. I enjoyed it, although I may be (finally) getting burnt out on *Souls* and *Souls*-likes at this point.

I opted to go for high magic and faith stats, with vitality and intelligence (aka “easy mode”) and found myself exiting often to make use of cloud save backups (aka save-scumming), especially before later bosses.

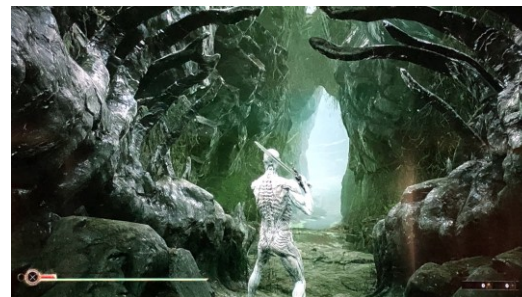
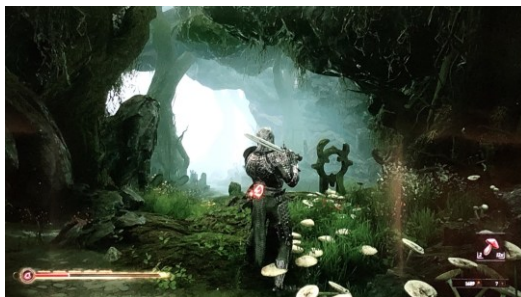
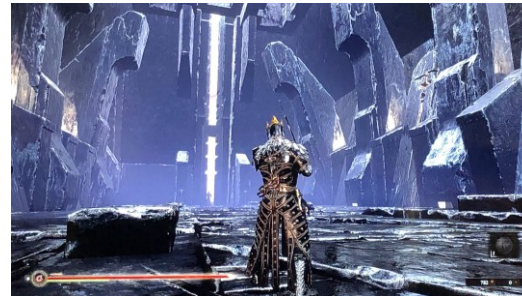
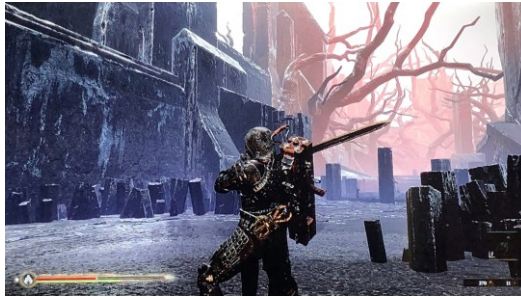
Much of the game was noticeably less difficult than others in the genre, but there seemed to be fewer shortcuts to make use of in some areas.

I wasn't a fan of the reduced-health spirit mode upon dying, but many other aspects (ex: multiple zones to visit in any order) were nice. Still not a game for everybody, but pretty familiar territory for genre fans.

Played on console: PS5.

Originally posted: 01/02/2021.

Mini-Review: Mortal Shell



Souls-like games typically use the mechanical elements of *Dark Souls* (corpse run to recover unspent experience (or “souls”) on death, enemies that respawn when resting at a bonfire, etc). It’s not often that the actual vibe and feel of the game world gets cloned as well, but it does in *Mortal Shell*.

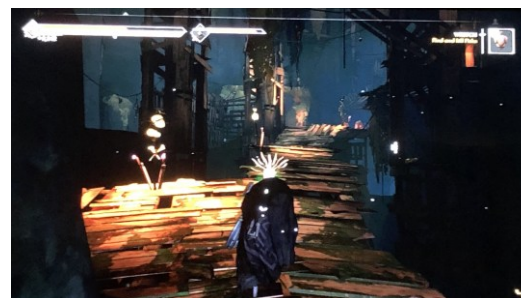
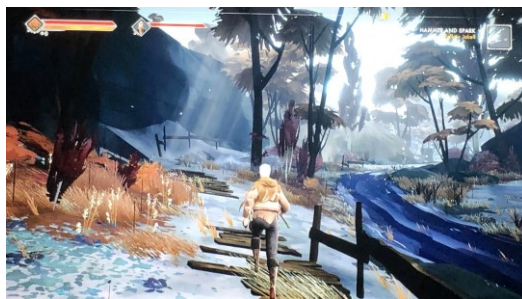
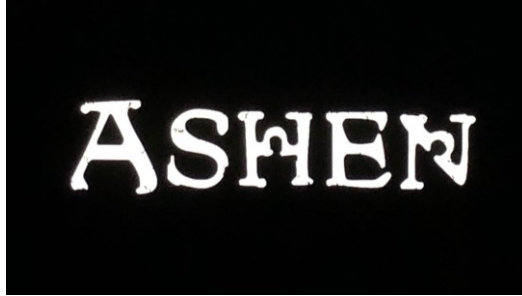
Slow-talking NPCs with cryptic dialogue, the dark medieval fantasy setting, a connected world of confusing paths, an inscrutable story; it’s all here.

The biggest changes come in the form of upgrade systems that involve weapons and skills (but no character progression per se), four different “bodies” with different preset stats to inhabit, and a shorter 12-18 hour campaign.

It can be hard at times (just like *Dark Souls*). A shame the RPG level-up progression is absent, but it’s still really good.

*Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 09/12/2020.*

Mini-Review: Ashen



A very *Souls*-like 3rd person action adventure with RPG elements. Low-texture art style gives the world and characters a painted look; interesting in concept, but it made the world seem a bit bland for me.

It also took me a while to get used to the gameplay.

It's open-ish world (wide linear?) with a small number of dungeons and bosses.

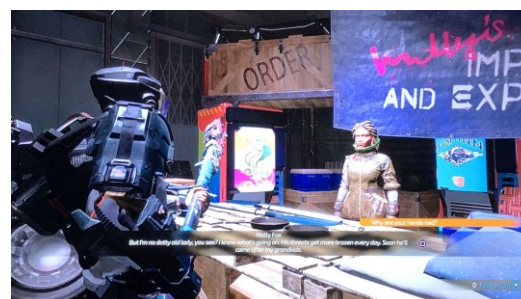
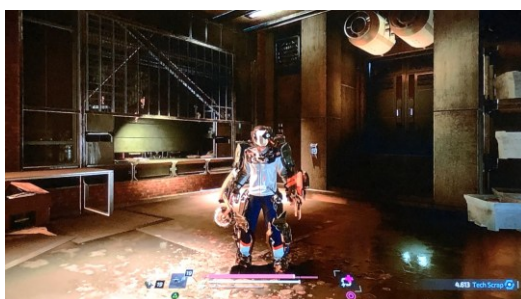
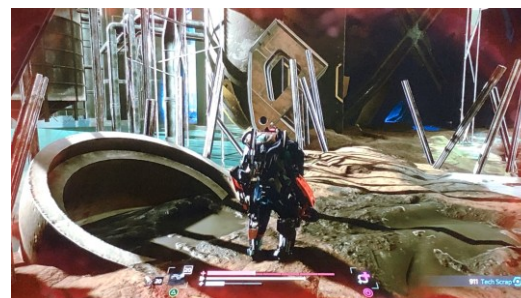
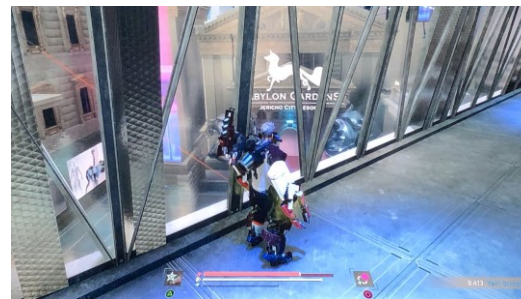
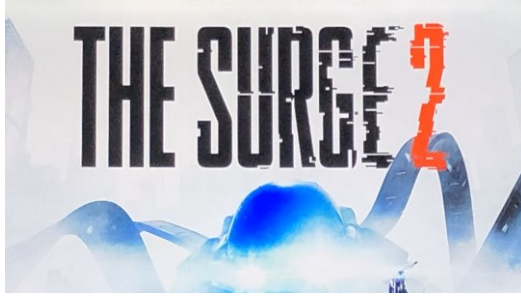
The dungeons are dark, creepy, atmospheric, and difficult. I failed the corpse run and lost more "souls" in *Ashen* than maybe any other I've played of this style. You can bank it later, though, which helps.

I enjoyed it, but I found certain parts frustrating. The last boss was particularly tough. It only strays a little from the *Souls* formula (ex: just health and stamina - "souls" are for currency and upgrades, not leveling up).

I didn't try co-op, but the AI partner helps. It's pretty good.

Played on console: Switch.
Originally posted: 05/25/2020.

Mini-Review: The Surge 2



A *Souls*-like 3rd-person action game that's very light on RPG elements, but does offer weapon and armor upgrades, familiar difficulty, and a few twists to the *Souls* formula (ex: your corpse run has a time limit before "scrap" currency is lost).

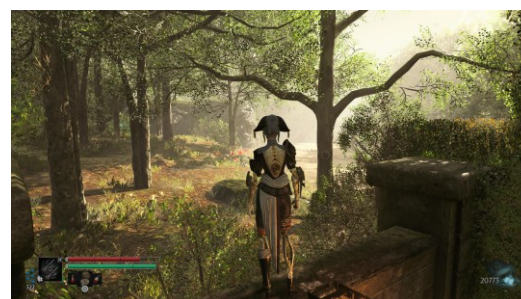
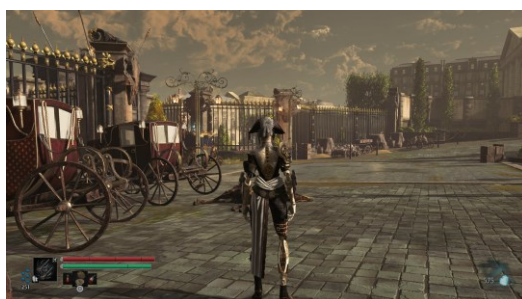
Maybe a step down from some others in the genre (particularly actual FromSoft *Souls* games and *Bloodborne*), but Deck13's latest still provides a great sci-fi hack-n-slash time.

Jericho City is a complex weave of shortcuts and routes that's fun to explore over the game's 40+ hours. A bit of save-file backup, a bit of NG+ play and help from a guide, and the platinum trophy is fairly obtainable.

If you're in the mood for a recent *Souls*-like and you already played *Code Vein* (which I liked a bit more), *The Surge 2* is a good option even if you didn't play *The Surge 1*.

Played on console: PS4 Pro.
Originally posted: 12/15/2019.

Mini-Review: SteelRising



Developer Spiders' business model seems to be taking a popular game, cloning the core mechanics/concept, and putting their own story, setting, or twist to it.

Earlier efforts took inspiration from Bioware and CD Projekt Red. *SteelRising* is *BloodBorne*, more or less. The twist is that you play as a clockwork robot during the French Revolution. Enemies are all mechanical. Otherwise, it's the *Souls* formula through and through; a bit less nightmarish than *BloodBorne* though.

While their earlier games had a sort of endearing jankiness to them, *GreedFall* before it and now *SteelRising* really showcase their talent. (To be fair, I loved the earlier ones too.)

This was quite a bit easier than the typical *Souls*-like; more story, too, and several tracked side quests. A departure from their open world RPGs, but fun!

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 09/11/2022.

Mini-Review: ThymeSia



It takes a lot to disappoint me. I'm the guy who loved *Cyberpunk 2077* at launch. *Bi mutant* was great, and I had a blast with the new *Saints Row*.



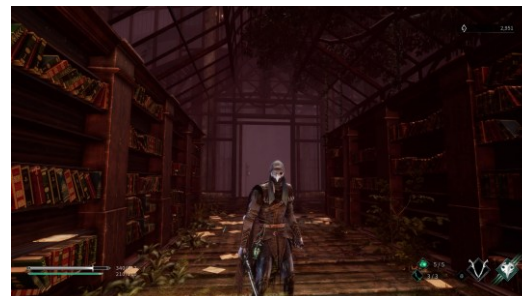
Every once in a while, though, I finish a game I'm just not too hot about, where ordinarily I'd just bounce off and you'd never hear about it.



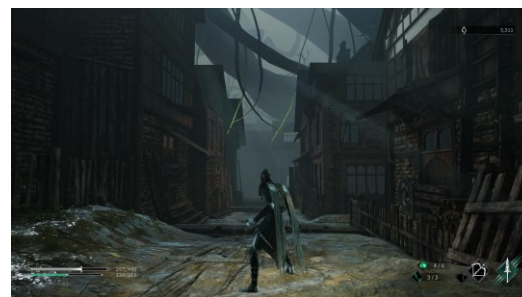
ThymeSia has a lot going for it, but I found it somehow boring and generic. It's a lot like *Bloodborne* (yep, another one) with its *Souls*-inspired design, and a lot like *Sekiro* with its often-brutal fast-paced combat.



It's on the short side, with 12 smallish levels split across just three areas.



There's only so much leveling you can do, then it comes down to skill; or persistence.



It somehow lacks the special sauce that makes others in the genre so great (*The Surge*, *Nioh*, *Steel Rising*, etc).

Not bad. Just meh.

Played on console: PS5.
Originally posted: 09/20/2022.

The Final Stage

I don't know what happened on December 28th, but the VGGN gained 8 new subscribers in the span of a few minutes. After feeling a bit disheartened over the past couple of weeks, I couldn't skip an issue or shut it down just yet.

One of these days when I do, maybe I'll do an issue where I include every mini-review I didn't already use, just to complete the set.

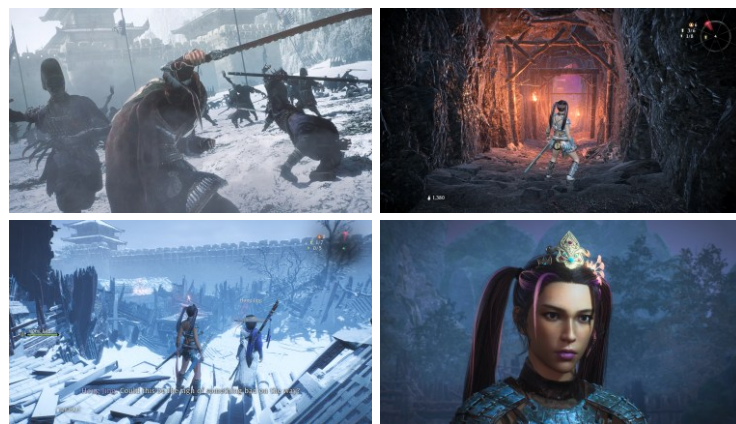
My two weeks off work is coming to an end. I spent much of the time dipping into older games I've been wanting to play for years, rather than whittling away at all the newer games on my backlog. I finally played *Conker's Bad Fur Day* (the *Live & Reloaded* version, which IMO was the right decision) and *Mega Man 64* (rather than *Mega Man Legends* for PS1, which apparently doesn't support the analogue stick).

I also finished *Metroid Prime 4* (see last week's issue for my mini-review), then played *Tunic* at my son's insistence (it was great). I discovered the N64 classic *Hybrid Heaven* and played through that, which was fun. My son likes co-op escape room games, so we played *How 2 Escape* and we're currently playing *Escape Academy* (which we'll try to finish this weekend).

I started *The Misadventures of Tron Bonne* as the follow-up to *Mega Man 64* (I have it in my collection, but it's also cheap as a PS1 classic digitally on PS3, so that's how I'm playing it), but I haven't gotten far yet. I had hoped to finish it and *Mega Man Legends 2* before I go back to work, but that seems unlikely with my son anxious for us to do *Escape Academy*.

All in all, I feel accomplished over this break. I even managed a half-hearted issue of VGGN last week, and a bit more thoughtful one this week. Argh. Work. I wish I could retire early.

For no particular reason, here are four more screenshots from *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*.



For more Souls-like mini-reviews, see my reviews of *Hellpoint* ([issue #20](#)), *Code Vein* ([issue #6](#)), *Clash: Artifacts of Chaos* ([issue #14](#)) and *Nioh 2* ([issue #6](#)).

Next Week

Will I finally write about every game I played in 2025 next week, including the older stuff I finally got off my backlog? The plan has been to recap my entire year of gaming (but briefly, in most cases) with mini-reviews for some of my favorites (at least for the ones I haven't already included in a prior issue).

I'd like to do my 2025 top 10 also, but there are so many games I still didn't get around to.

If not that, then maybe another genre-themed issue. I've wanted to write about first person adventure games (*Myst* and others), but I had planned to do that only after playing a few more from my backlog; so we'll see.

End Credits

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