

Chapter 8 + Coda Reading Response

Reading this chapter drastically changed my idea for my final project (thanks, Ge) in the same way that taking this course drastically changed the way I play games. I've always been a fan of tight reaction-time based games, like *Katana Zero*, *Smash*, *Guitar Hero*, and the like. However, Kunwoo's game design lecture and this section of *Artful Design* made me realize that many of my most memorable gaming experiences haven't been when mashing buttons, but instead when exploring a world that, as stated on page 449, made me still. While the adrenaline injection of a flashy edgeguard in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* makes me feel something, it certainly doesn't help me to "recognize something eternal and authentic amid life's uncertainty, transience, horrors, and utter imperfection." This is not to say that reaction-time based games can't invoke the sublime; indeed (no spoilers), the dystopian world of *Katana Zero* is heart-wrenching yet hopeful, and the lightning-fast gameplay is interspersed between heavy cutscenes and thought-provoking walking simulator sections. Up to this point, though, I thought I just preferred games with tight controls, but in reality every one of my favorite games also has an incredible intrinsic mental realm, one that, upon exploration, yields "a subtle but authentic reward, to know what it means to be human."

For the first bit of quarantine, I would stay up until 6 in the morning every night playing games with a couple of my closest friends. We don't play games together in the usual sense; for many years, we have been playing single-player games as 2-person co-op games by splitting the controls in some ludicrous fashion (while the other person watches). Most often, one of us will suggest a game that meant a lot to us (I brought in *Cave Story*), and with the help of TeamViewer, two of us will hivemind into a single player. *Hollow Knight* (I will try to avoid

spoilers) was the perfect game for this setting. Your character is a tiny bug equipped with a small sword (“nail”), and it seems that your only objective is to explore the beautiful depths



of the realm. Over time, you meet characters and fight bosses, but the most striking moments of the game are the discovery and exploration of new, gorgeous areas (like Greenpath pictured above). Even though every character in this game is an eccentric-looking bug, I find that the game holds a mirror to human life and transcends its medium (in a way endorsed by Principle 8.25). Every bit of exploration rewards you (with money, health, or resources), but though these are technically means-to-ends, the beauty of the world makes the exploration an end-in-itself. Every new area feels delightfully fresh. Every new character has something interesting to say. There is no time pressure or linearity to the game; your bug self is free to wander and discover freely. Somehow, the anthropomorphic bugs become familiar and humanistic; they have issues,

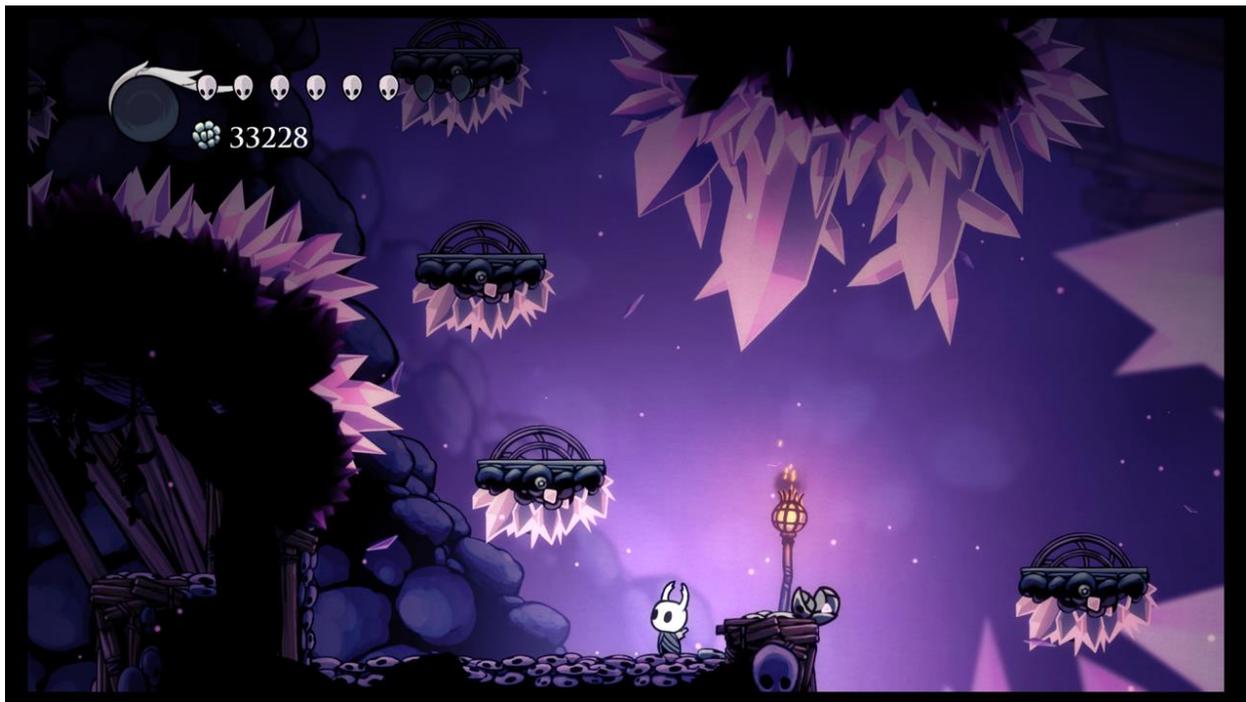
thoughts, and perceptions that cause one to pause and think about their own humanness.



For example, the Elderbug, pictured above, is one of the first to greet you upon reaching the main city of Dirtmouth. As the game's events progress, the Elderbug, when asked, passes judgment on the world, lamenting and praising its twists and turns. The Elderbug does not tell you what to feel; rather, the Elderbug's perspective both acknowledges the player's distance from the world and draws the player in. These interactions with an omniscient being cause the player to pause and reflect upon the world and your character's place in it. The Elderbug, as described on page 457, invokes characteristics of the sublime, causing the player to marvel at their place in the bug world and the beauty of each moment spent therein. (This also makes the player question the hierarchy of the world: why are some bugs to be talked to and some bugs to be destroyed for money? How is this distinction drawn?)

You can imagine, then, the emotions I felt while playing this game and remotely controlling only the movement in an attempt to meld minds with my friend (who was in control

of attacking and spells). Every journey and boss fight was made that much more meaningful by the added difficulty and cooperation required. Every moment where we were made still was even more powerful in the mutual agreement to just exist in the realm (we did, often, pause for the small good things, as mentioned in Principle 8.23). When the designers created this game, they imbued it with conscience, personality, and love, and because this came through when we were playing, it made us want to explore every nook and cranny of the world. We have almost 100%ed it (turns out split controls is very difficult), but all 100 hours of that game have felt meaningful and memorable.



Hollow Knight, then, is a shining example of a game with tight controls but a thought-provoking world. However, upon reflection, it is hard to reach the sublime without both of these things. Indeed, embodiment of the human requires an intuitive and responsive interface; the designers of *Hollow Knight* picked the interactions that your bug self could undertake and

optimized them to feel natural. They then made a realm that merited lots of interaction, and the design loop was complete.