

# Soulslike Posthumanism: Open Subjectivity and East Asian Philosophy

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Modeled after the *Souls* series developed by Japanese studio FromSoftware (2009-2017), Soulslike games have become increasingly popular over the last decades. Scholarship on *Souls* games includes a seminal article by Daniel Vella (2015) and more recent work by Andriano (2024) and Caracciolo (2024).

In this paper I will focus on the philosophy that underlies Soulslike games, arguing that the genre stages themes and concepts typical of East Asian thinking to pursue a distinctly posthumanist imagination of human-nonhuman relations. As formulated by theorists such as Donna Haraway (1991), Cary Wolfe (2010), and Rosi Braidotti (2013), posthumanism aims to question the notions of human centrality and exceptionalism that have historically played a key role in the ideology of Western modernity. This challenge to humanism involves foregrounding the fundamental continuity between human subjectivity and a wide range of biological, environmental, and technological realities. The goal of this posthumanist approach is to unsettle the autonomy of the human, an ideology that has led to the privileging of white, male, and able-bodied subjectivity.

In game studies, posthumanism has often been invoked in the context of discussions on “ecogaming” (Chang 2019; Op de Beke et al. 2024), and it is undeniable that posthumanist philosophy speaks to present-day environmental anxieties. However, the environmental framing is also in some ways reductive: just as it inspires new understandings of the nonhuman world, posthumanism calls for a profound reconceptualization of the human subject. Researchers including Rob Gallagher (2020), Laurent Milesi (2022), and Poppy Wilde (2024) have examined various aspects of games’ engagement with posthumanist ideas. This paper builds on these arguments but also seeks to extricate posthumanism from the (somewhat conventional) link with science fiction and transhumanist ideas of transcending bodily limitations: instead, it shows that the Soulslike genre has methodically and productively queried established notions of the human.

To do so, I discuss the way in which the *Souls* series draws on concepts of East Asian philosophy—such as Shinto animism or Buddhist rebirth—to depart from Western assumptions of mind-world bifurcation. I start from the observation that the concepts of “souls” and “humanity” are central to the genre on the level of both game

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mechanics (Sicart 2008) and narrative. Already in *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware 2009), the player-character could choose between “soul” and “human” forms, with the latter offering a number of advantages but also potentially increasing the difficulty of gameplay (for instance, by enabling hostile PvP “invasions”). With *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011), humanity becomes an in-game item that can be collected and consumed; puzzlingly, it can be obtained from nonhuman creatures such as sewer rats or some of the game’s most grotesque monsters. In *Pinocchio*-inspired Soulslike *Lies of P* (NEOWIZ 2023), humanity is a secret mechanic that determines the game’s ending by reflecting whether the player-character has been able to rise above their puppet nature.

By assigning a central role to the Western concept of soul, Soulslike games may appear to embrace the separability of matter and the individual self. However, the games undermine that idea by imagining a circulation of souls that consistently blurs the boundary separating collectivity and individuality. Ambiguously singular and plural, souls are a life force that cycles through various entities in the game world, including the player-character. The questions that surround humanity are another way in which Soulslike games capture the posthumanist emphasis on the fluidity and openness of (human) subjectivity. By arguing that the Soulslike genre opens up the human subject through a cross-fertilization of Western and East Asian philosophies, the paper contributes to a growing body of research on video games as a tool of philosophical exploration (see Gualeni 2022).

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