In Defense of Video Game Music Arrangements

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Dr. Kris Rucinski

- Piano Professor
- Private Teacher
- Certified Gamer

Arcade Games, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), SNES, Nintendo 64, Nintendo Switch, Sega Genesis, Playstation, PS4, PS5, PC, Emulation

Gamer Cred

1. Beat hard games

2. Abdicate real world responsibilities to game

Subject: Silksong

YOUTUBE

BobtheGuy

Silksong's Difficulty is... Complicated

https://youtu.be/eOCAu8QSBY0?si=1q18VhvaGjE1F9jG

- "Before Silksong came out, we played Hollow Knight for 8 years, and this whole time, we've been talking about how hard it is... In a way, this experience is integral to what Hollow Knight is. (Many) had to quit... coming back weeks, months, maybe even years later to... fall in love with the game."

Subject: Silksong

Sister Splinter is just invincible minion spam?

Act 2 is way too easy, ever...

r/Silksong · 10 days ago
therealdanhill

SPOILER

Sister Splinter is way too hard, come on now. And a Bloodborne comparison.

...ht · 7 days ago

...harder than Hollow ...hat Team ...rminds

SILKSONG
FOURTH CHO...
EASY BOSS GUIDE
3:14 AS
CHEESE NEW...

How to (Ve...

ParakeetRiot · Sep 9 @ 12:47pm

Why is Sister Splinter Being Nerfed?

Soulslikes, and I t...
Knight Silksong
Ring – but what

capitan_conch · Sep 12 @ 3:10am

Why does anyone find Sister Splinter difficult?

...Knight Silksong TOO hard?

X · mjrosewood
7 likes · 6 days ago

"why is sister splinter so hard oh my god. the amount of ...

why is sister splinter so hard oh my god. the amount of tries its taking me to defeat her is more than the amount of tries that all the ...

SPOILER

Splinter Sister is not consistent? What am I missing?

Estus Flask

Was it just me or was the final boss too easy? (Yes I know it technically isn't the final final)

Credit: BobtheGuy - Silksong's Difficulty is… Complicated (2025)

Silk Souls?

- "...(content hidden) behind cryptic clues...

- Why lock so much material... behind these obtuse barriers...?

- (the developers' purpose) is to bring the community together... no one in their right mind would be able to figure out on their own... part of the beauty is that it takes committed fans working together to unlock all of the mysteries."

Credit: Team Cherry – Silksong (2025)

Silky Tones

SUBSTACK

Rhys Elliot

[The Alinea Insight Newsletter](#)

Silksong passed 5m players in three days

https://alineaanalytics.substack.com/p/silksong-passed-5m-players-in-three

GOOGLE SEARCH

AI summary

"At launch, the game and the soundtrack bundle were listed as the number one and two top sellers on Steam, respectively."

Credit: Rhys Elliot - The Alinea Insight Newsletter
Silksong passed 5M players in three days (2025)

Silky Tones

Buy Hollow Knight: Silksong & Soundtrack

BUNDLE (?)

Buy this bundle to save 20% off all 2 items!

Bundle info | -20% | Your Price: $25.58 | Add to Cart

Worlds Together

- **London Philharmonic**
  - **Greatest Video Game Music (2011)**
    - Highest debut of orchestra release since Star Wars III (2005)

- **Sean Chen**
  - **Cliburn Bronze (2013)**
    - Videogame-Inspired Works (2003-2011)

- **London Symphony Orch**
  - **Final Symphony (2013)**
  - **Music from Nobuo Uematsu**
    - Final Fantasy VI
    - Final Fantasy VII
    - Final Fantasy X

Those Who Know

Super Scriabin
Concert II Poster
(2024)

• Still getting comments
at time of writing
(2025)

Credit: Kris Rucinski (2024)

Common Scenario

Student:
There's a song I want to play!

Teacher:
OK, what is it?

Student:
I found the score online...

Teacher:
OK, let me see...

...But Why?

- Many scores made for MIDI playback

- Original not meant to be played in first place
  - Piano music might not be playable with 2 hands
  - Arranger desire to capture all layers and aspects

- Lack of professional composition study

- Appropriate leveled arrangements paywalled or unavailable for particular game or track

The Ask

- Assess student interest
  - 1-6: probably not worth it
  - 7-8: might be worth it
  - 9: worth it
  - 10: definitely worth it!

- Treat as challenge piece

- Tailor arrangement

Familiar Music Benefits

- Student motivated to learn

- Musicianship skills
  - Ear training
    - Repeated hearings
  - Memory

- Emotional connection
  - Ultimate 'why' in music

Dark Souls Detour

DARK SOULS™

FromSoftware / Bandai Namco Entertainment

2011

37 million + copies (outside of Japan)

Dark Souls Detour

- Academic Journal Articles
  - No mastery without mystery: Dark Souls and the ludic sublime (2015)
  - Playing the panopticon: Procedural surveillance in Dark Souls (2016)
  - Enjoying death among gamers, viewers, and users: A network visualization of Dark Souls 3's trends on Twitch.tv and Steam platforms (2018)
  - How we deal with dark souls: The aesthetic category as a method (2020)
  - 'This must be the place': Understanding video game placeness through atmosphere and the refrain in Dark Souls (2022)
  - Fantasies of Adequacy: Mythologies of Capital in Dark Souls (2025)

Dark Souls Detour

- Academic Journal Articles
    - + about 1,300 others
        - –SINCE 1/01/2025

- Google Scholar returns 'About 545,000'

- UPDATE 10/08/2025
    - 10,100 Articles

Dark Souls Sentiment

- Dark Souls difficulty
    - Is Dark Souls too hard? (CNET; 2011)
    - Too difficult. (my story) – Dark Souls (Giant Bomb; 2011)
    - Dark Souls – review (The Guardian; 2011)
    - Dark Souls director pondering easier difficulty mode (GamesIndustry.biz; 2012)
    - The Glorious and Necessary Torture of Dark Souls (BuzzFeed News; 2014)
    - Yes, 'Dark Souls 3' Badly Needs An Easy Mode (Forbes; 2016)
    - We need to stop talking about how hard Dark Souls is (PC Gamer; 2016)

Dark Souls Sentiment

'It's not a matter of delighting in their pain or agony; no, what's so great about these videos is watching new people go through the same journey that many of us have. At first, it's unlike any game you've played before. **There's unusual opacity as the game doesn't explain that much about the mechanics or the story or anything.** The combat is extremely difficult, and you get absolutely brutalized. But slowly, things start to click. You learn patterns, you learn strategies, and you become addicted to the struggle for, and ultimate acquisition of **mastery.**'

(regarding videos of players' first times playing Dark Souls)
The Most Important Rule of Soulsborne Gaming; Jermergerg, 2025

Dark Souls Sentiment

- Dark Souls effects

Dark Souls Saved Me
1.9M views · 7 years ago

NakeyJakey

Credit: NakeyJakey – Dark Souls Saved Me (2018)

Dark Souls Sentiment

- Dark Souls effects
  - Dark Souls Helped Me Cope With Suicidal Depression (Writing on Games; 2016)
  - Dark Souls Saved Me (NakeyJakey; 2018)
  - Can Dark Souls Help You Mental Health? | MindGames (GameSpot; 2021)
  - Dark Souls 1 Changed My Life (Internet Pitstop; 2022)
  - Dark Souls Saved My Life. (Ember; 2022)
  - Finding Dark Souls At The Right Time (CasualGuy; 2024)
  - Dark Souls Saved Me (Govermannt; 2025)

Deepest Lore

- "A land of grey crags, archtrees, and everlasting dragons."

- "But then, there was Fire. And with Fire, came Disparity."

- "Then, from the Dark, They came, and found the Souls of Lords within the flame."

- Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight defeated the dragons

- "But soon, the flames will fade, and only Dark will remain."
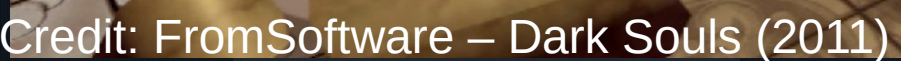
Dark Souls Challenges

Credit: FromSoftware – Dark Souls (2011)

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The Hero's Journey

Overcome:

- Hostile, decrepit world
- Imposing, overwhelming horrors to best
- Sprawling, interconnected map
- Treacherous terrain and obstacles
- Subtle story told through item descriptions and spare character interactions
- Growth in skill and knowledge
- Preparation for final encounter...

A Moment of Truth

You've made it to the final boss...

The ultimate challenge?

A Moment of Truth

- Epic orchestral/choral scoring replaced by sad piano minimalism

- Emotional expectations subverted

- Piquant philosophical realization reinforced by music

- Immense resonance with players

Comparing Engagement

- Dark Souls – Gwyn, Lord of Cinder – Ru's Piano Cover
- 3.2m views

- Lola Astanova – Moment Musicaux No. 4 (Rachmaninoff)
- 374K views

- Daniil Trifonov – Scriabin: Etude, Op. 42, No. 5 | Yellow Lounge
- 378K views

Listening Example

https://youtu.be/BHWof5Yh8Cc?si=88N4ghGdsZg4KfGr

How It Works

- Players share experience

- In-game connection and challenges

- Visceral and emotional to brain/perception

- Music instigates or enhances recall

- Video game music unite across musical preference

The Emotional Response

- DS3
  - Return of 'plin plin plon' theme

- Silksong
  - In a subjective ranking video?

- City of Tears
  - You be the judge

Into Action

- My course of action
  - Student high desire to learn video game music
  - Listen and anticipate
    - Student familiarity
  - Investigate resources
    - Musescore
      - Score writer
      - Musescore.com
        - Nominal yearly subscription
        - Import score file for editing
  - Tailored approach to level of student

Essential Preparations

- Presentation
  - Orientation
    - Format – Page Settings – PAGE SIZE – Portrait or Landscape
  - Note size
    - Format – Page Settings – Scaling – Staff space
  - Line breaks
    - Layout – System break / Page break
  - First measure indent
    - Format – Style – Score – Enable indentation on first system
      - Default is 'on'

Shaping Changes

- Editing
  - Transpose
    - Tools – Transpose
  - Cut
    - Select measures and Shift + Delete
  - Fingering
    - Palettes – Fingering
      - Starting positions
      - Hand position changes
      - Extended hand positions
      - Thumb crossings

Revise and Rewrite

- Determine style by student level
  - Melody only
    - Hands in 5-finger positions
      - Prime student in advance if any notes outside of range
    - Any determined student capable of learning
    - Consider duet with teacher's part accompaniment
  - Melody and bass
    - Students can do surprising things!
    - Circled fingerings for hand position changes
    - Keep accompaniment simple
      - Students more familiar with melody when listening

Revise and Rewrite

- Determine style by student level
  - Intermediate arrangements
    - More expansive ranges
    - Edit dense accompaniments
    - Eliminate double notes from melody
    - Presentation (noted earlier)
      - System breaks
      - Staff spacing
      - Page size and margins (if adapting from other arranger)
    - Fingerings if counterintuitive or problematic motion
    - Simplify – consistency and repetition where possible
    - 8va lines over ledger lines

Beyond the Scope

- Arranging tools useful in variety of situations
  - Reinforce lesson concepts
  - Technical details parents can use for reference
  - Tailored topic to student
  - Lead sheet introducing chord symbols
  - Arrangements for other purposes

Retro Spect

- Video game music arrangement connect students' emotional experience to performance repertoire
- Students with high desire and interest overcome challenges to achieve proficiency
- Huge audience/community of enthusiasts
- Investment in arranging practice provide oppotunity at all student levels
  - Plentiful resources and support
  - Simple changes to existing score promote accessibility
  - Advanced students learn arranging themselves
- Music good

CONGRATURATION
THIS STORY IS HAPPY END.
THANK YOU.

Credits Music

Hollow Knight (Team Cherry – 2017)
Christopher Larkin, composer
City of Tears
Arranged by Kris Rucinski

Thank you for listening

https://youtu.be/374TrnfDssU?si=NwaSujmNEsQU29DN

Questions?

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