

Game Breakdown

Mortal Shell 2

Why has it dropped Stamina?

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I have played both Mortal Shell games. The first one can be written off as a commendable first attempt to make a soulslike. Mortal Shell 2 improves to become a shining example of one. It's an enormous step forward from its prequel. But this thesis/essay isn't praising Mortal Shell 2.

When I played Mortal Shell 2, I realised the devs had dropped a system that has become the cornerstone of defining soulsborne and soulslike games: stamina. Yet playing through Mortal Shell 2, all the way to New Game Plus, the game vividly felt soulslike.

I understand what makes a game feel like a soulslike differs from player to player, so I'll say what it means to me: **a soulslike is gameplay that compels the player to make deliberate decisions against a challenging action economy**. Stamina is just the most common expression of that action economy and not the economy itself.

This isn't a commentary on what characterises a game as a soulslike. This is a deep study and commentary on why Cold Symmetry dropped the stamina system from their second game, and why Mortal Shell 2 is better for it.

What Do I mean by Action Economy?

To keep it brief, an economy is a system for trading resources. By extension, **an action economy is the trade of resources from the player to perform actions in a game**.

How Stamina expresses Action economies

In Elden Ring, the most popular soulsborne, the player takes actions to progress combat at the cost of stamina. Actions that progress combat refers to actions that significantly contribute towards overcoming threats. This includes light and heavy attacks, dodge rolls, spell casting, jumping, etc. Performing all such actions costs stamina in Elden Ring.

The player must trade stamina to perform these actions. Whenever the player takes an action such as attacking, for instance, they are compelled to make deliberate a decision, to spend stamina, to achieve an outcome they anticipate at that moment: reducing the enemy's health bar. At the same time, the player must decide how much stamina to spend while attacking, because the opportunity cost of attacking is dodging to improve the survivability of the situation, since **both actions draw from the same resource pool**.

Mortal Shell 2 is a Soulslike

First, I'll define what a soulslike game is to me.

A soulslike is an action game with real-time combat in which the player is compelled to make deliberate decisions against a challenging action economy; failure to engage with this economy effectively leads to a materially expensive fail state; that is not cushioned by permanent meta-progression.

This definition is not perfect. There are debatable edge cases such as Returnal. But dwelling on edge cases is not the point of this essay.

Mortal Shell and Mortal Shell 2 easily fall within this definition. But if Mortal Shell 2 drops stamina as an expression of action economy, how does it express it?

Mortal Shell 2 Reallocates Action Costs

Mortal Shell II reallocates the cost of aggression: the punishment for a bad decision arrives immediately, tied to the read itself, rather than being deferred to a later moment. In Elden Ring, spending stamina on an attack and then being unable to dodge the counter is a delayed consequence. The decision and the punishment are separated in time, with the player caught exposed only after the fact.

In Mortal Shell II, a reckless attack or a failure to anticipate an opponent's move is punished in the same instant it happens: direct health loss from an unread attack, immediate posture build-up (while using the untarnished seal for example) from absorbing hits instead of avoiding them, or getting caught mid-swing while Resolve is committed to a special action.

Break, Stagger, Resolve

Mortal Shell 2 reallocates its action economy from stamina into separate, independent systems running simultaneously through a combat encounter. These systems are: Break, Stagger, Resolve, cooldown and recovery. From the five, stagger is responsible for maintaining the feel stamina creates in other souls/like games.

A stamina system's primary purpose, concerning gameplay feel, is to restrain player aggression from mindless attacking to deliberate attacking. The stamina cost for performing actions, in Elden Ring for example, restricts players from mindlessly attacking until the enemies die. Although enemies do have an invisible stagger/posture bar, that's more akin to Mortal Shell 2's break meter since opens enemies up to ripostes.

In Mortal Shell 2 the stagger bar is invisible to the player and accumulates when enemies take hits. When stagger damage reaches a threshold (unique to for each enemy), the enemy goes into hit-stun interrupting any action the enemy was performing. The variance between enemies' stagger thresholds is arguably the sole factor in deciding whether the player hacks away until the enemy dies or patiently anticipates enemy actions. For instance, it takes only one light attack to put small-sized enemies into hit-stun in the early game but multiple standard strikes or certain special actions to stagger medium to large sized enemies.

No Mindless Attacking despite Stagger Rules

Despite the fact that certain enemies stagger with one hit, Mortal Shell 2 compels the player into deliberate actions through two other restraints that have nothing to do with the resource economy at all.

Initiative

Attack startup frames make simply waiting to react risky. Eating an enemy's startup while you're holding back to punish is often worse than committing to your own attack first. This isn't about spending or building anything — it's a restraint built on information and timing, closer to what a game like Sekiro leans on than what Elden Ring does. A player who mindlessly waits for a "safe" moment to react is often worse positioned than one who commits early and controls the exchange.

Commitment

Weapon choice decides whether trading blows is even viable in the first place. I tested this directly: with the Obsidian Hammer, I can tank an enemy hit mid-swing and keep attacking. With the Axatana, getting hit mid-swing interrupts me outright. So the game asks a different question depending on what's equipped. A heavy weapon rewards committing to fewer, heavier reads, because its poise buys forgiveness. A fast weapon offers no such cushion, so discipline means genuinely respecting enemy timing rather than trading through it.

To add context on top of this, the majority of combat encounters involve multiple enemies grouped together, and more often than not, easily-staggered enemies are grouped with enemies that take multiple hits or special actions to stagger. Unlike games such as Ghost of Tsushima, which limit how many enemies engage at once in a group encounter, Mortal Shell 2 is not forgiving since many enemies can attack simultaneously. Between group density, startup-frame risk, and weapon-dependent commitment, the game restrains recklessness through several independent channels stacked on top of the resource economy, not through the economy alone.

Resolve brings Combat together

Resolve is the only true resource in the strict sense: something the player accumulates and then spends down. Break and Stagger aren't resources, they're **damage dealt to a target**, generated as a byproduct of action. But the relationship between these systems isn't cleanly separate, because Resolve is convertible into Break/Stagger output. Spending Resolve on an ability like Gragu's Staggering Blow buys a large, deliberate chunk of Stagger damage, on top of the smaller, "free" amount landed passively through standard hits. There's a low-cost tier (standard attacks, generating Resolve *and* some Break/Stagger passively) and a high-cost tier (spending accumulated Resolve to convert it into a concentrated burst of Break/Stagger). The output of actions performed by spending Resolve is evidence of a conversion channel.

This means I need to correct something I claimed earlier. I described Break, Stagger, and Resolve as "separate, independent systems running simultaneously." That's not quite right. They're separately *tracked*, but not separately *closed*. Resolve flows into Break/Stagger on demand, and Break/Stagger generation (via standard hits) partially refills Resolve in turn. **This is a closed loop:** standard action generates a low-cost byproduct across multiple currencies at once, and spending accumulated Resolve converts it into a concentrated, deliberate payoff in one of them, which then feeds the next cycle. That's a stronger discipline mechanism than three independent pools would be. A player who's careless anywhere in the loop stalls the whole engine.

Why Mortal Shell 2 dropped Stamina and is better for it

Stamina was one expression of a deeper principle: combat that compels deliberate decisions against a resource, with real cost for getting it wrong. Cold Symmetry rebuilt that principle across three independent channels. A closed economic loop runs through Break, Stagger, and Resolve. Startup frames create initiative pressure. Weapon-tied poise governs commitment. No single meter carries the weight of restraint anymore. That's why the game survives losing its most iconic resource without losing its identity. Discipline in Mortal Shell 2 emerges from several systems pointed the same direction at once.

"Still feels soulslike" answers half the thesis. The other half is "better," and that claim needs something stamina genuinely couldn't do.

Stamina's job was restrictive. Run out of it, and the only thing that came back was permission to act again. The closed loop replacing it still does that restrictive job. The three pillars prove recklessness is still punished. But it does a second job stamina structurally could not do: it converts discipline into identity. Landing hits deliberately builds toward something. Resolve becomes a Shoulder Bash, a Staggering Blow, a sidearm shot, a Shell ability, each one shaping what kind of fighter the player is becoming mid-encounter. Stagger-focused, Break-focused, Resolve-hungry hybrid. The same restraint stamina enforced through scarcity, Mortal Shell 2 enforces through specialization. Specialization is something a player can express. Scarcity only asks them to endure.

That's the sentence the whole essay has been building toward: deliberate aggression leads to expression. Stamina could restrain a player, but it could never make that restraint feel like progress toward something the player chose. Mortal Shell 2's systems can. For every unit of discipline the loop asks for, it hands something back that's the player's to shape. That's the improvement. Combat asks the same discipline of the player, and pays it back in identity, where stamina only ever paid it back in survival.