

## sEXP Boost

The worst thing about procedurally generated open-world content is that sometimes, you came across an encounter so powerful that your best bet is hauling ass until you break aggro. Sometimes it was worse than that, and the game pulled you into something so rare it might as well be a unique experience. That was the situation Deon Dexwort found himself in as he hauled ass to escape an encounter that had gone from okay to impossible in seconds. He turned the corner in the dungeon, hoping that breaking line-of-sight would be enough. The next room slid into view as the camera followed him in his desperate scramble.

He'd never seen a room quite like it, and this one screamed boss encounter. It was much larger than the average room. The floor was a polished marble that was a stark contrast to the tight-packed bricks of the hallway. From what we could see, it looked like the sort of hall where a king or queen would hold court. Columns lined a wide aisle covered by a runner of brilliant red fabric that had sweeping, and sharp patterns embroidered near the edges with gold thread.

On the other end of the room, about twenty feet away, he could make out a dais that was the height of a single step and as wide as the room. Upon that, there was a golden throne that occupied most of the far wall. On the left, there was a set of double doors. In the gloom, he could tell was someone sitting on the throne, but Deon couldn't make out their appearance. His scanner spell couldn't tell him anything either.

The trio of beasts he was fleeing roared behind him. So much for breaking line-of-sight. It wasn't like dying in the game was really a big hassle. - - - [Here]- - -

Deon checked his account, he had enough to pay for an expedited revival. He also knew passing on this mystery would gnaw at him for weeks. What was the worst that could happen? A moment of mild discomfort and disorientation as his character went down? Having to part with 20k in coin? Even if the boss had some sort of skill that would delay his revival, the risk was worth it.

When he stepped over the threshold, the double doors slammed shut behind him. Then the room lit up like midday. The occupant of the wide throne turned out a feminine figure lying on their side, their head cradled by their crossed arms. A blanket spread out from the bench in all directions, like spilled ink the color of the sky, and was draped over them. While it obscured most of their form, more likely than not, the boss-in-theory was humanoid. They were probably a quote-unquote monster class because of the faint yet bright blue cast to their skin and their white-with-pink-highlights asymmetrical bob.

His scanning spell showed the enemy entity was under the influence of the Sleep condition. Deon guessed the creature was idle because he hadn't triggered the room's encounter, yet. Beyond that, though, the spell's result window was a blank, translucent blue field. No creature type. No level. None of the target's vitals or equipment. Nothing. At. All. Casting the spell again didn't change anything, either.

Confused, Deon glanced at the quick menu on the back of his left glove. The spell's CD hadn't started yet. Which would mean it hadn't finished resolving. How was that even possible? His gaze flicked up to the status bar. His latency was great. He switched weapons and drank a potion. Neither of them lagged. He could even cast other spells when that should have been impossible since he was, in theory, still casting the spell to scan.

Was it just a UI bug? Maybe the encounter was still in beta, and only part of its data was available? Was this some sort of one-in-a-million ultra-rare encounter that wasn't in the server's cache, perhaps? Or was it one of *those* things? He didn't recognize it as one of The Fifteen. So, what if...?

Soon as the thought crossed his mind, Deon's pressed his right index finger and thumb into the button combo mapped to quickcast TP. He didn't believe the rumors, but this was also one of those times it couldn't hurt to err on the side of caution. Although, if this turned out to be The Sixteenth... he'd be known server-wide. That sort of fame was tempting. He didn't move his finger, but he did advance further into the room.

A slower-tempo version of the music for battling bosses began to play. It wasn't lag causing it, the change was deliberate. The new space within the melody revealed another melody buried deep in the mix. His would-be foe continued to sleep. His scanner remained unhelpful. Maybe this room's quirk was that the encounter never triggered, or that it triggered so slowly that you could nap before it finished getting ready.

A bit disappointed that there wasn't a boss, Deon decided to enjoy the artistry of how the music was changing and evolving. The hidden notes overtook the normal melody as the song accelerated, ever so slightly, with each step he took. Was this some sort of hidden alternate version? He didn't recognize it from the game's two OSTs.

Even as he considered that possibility, something else started to mix in with the track. It sounded like a woman singing, but he couldn't make out the words, the vocals were too muddy. Too distorted. It didn't sound like anything from the latest SFX package leaked a few weeks back, either.

Deon set a macro to advance into the room one step at a time and stop if anything changed. That done, he downsized the game from immersive and slid it to the top corner of his visor. He did a few quick search passes of the boards and the 'net for any mention of a remix to the Klanos boss theme or an unknown vocal mix.

He had a few leads when the vocals became clearer. Deon could distinguish words, but they were a language he didn't recognize. Not that it mattered. The emotions conveyed to him by the song were clear. Encouragement. Bravery. Strength. Discovery. Excited to see what else had changed, he slid the game's window back to immersive. In the time he had been away, his character had crossed half of the distance to the divan. It seemed the clarity of the music was the only thing that had changed. His would-be foe was still asleep. The scan was still stuck on analyzing them.

Closer now, Deon realized the potential boss, which appeared to be a slumbering woman, had a facial texture he'd never seen on another NPC. It was drawn in a very different style from the rest of the game, too. It was still obviously Matsuya's character design, just much less stylized. Was this an old, forgotten asset? Perhaps a relic of an older version of the game's engine?

Something about that didn't make sense, though. He moved closer. The unconscious foe's skin was rendered at such a high quality that it felt like he was looking at someone in the real world. His gaze lingered on the creature's lips. He could see the creases in them, the way the light made them gleam. He noticed they were open ever so slightly, a detail too precise to render in the game's less powerful engine. The unknown boss' nose flared a tiny bit each time their inhaling animation played, but never the same way twice in a row. A loose bit of hair

waved back and forth with each cycle, strands coming together and separating again in an idealized but artistic kind of way.

So, yeah, if this was a boss from before the game's launch, why did they look so amazing? It didn't make any sense. Then he noticed the blanket. It, too, looked real enough that he could almost imagine the texture on his fingertips. What about—?

He looked down so hard that the camera lagged behind him. Sure enough, the carpet was also freakishly photo-realistic. He could see individual tufts hugging either side of his much lower-poly boots. He turned to look at the rest of the room. The marble of the floor and columns glimmered with swirls of color and crystalline imperfections that would have been beyond time-consuming to create and render. Were his character model not still constrained by his PC, Deon wouldn't have been surprised that he himself had been transported... somewhere... else. Fuck.

His fists tightened around his control sticks. He held down the quickcast button like a deadman switch. Everything about the moment screamed danger. There was no doubt about it. Somehow, this... this was an undiscovered Wandering Room. The first in six months. It wasn't like any of the others that had been found, either. Not really. Sure, the virtual space looked so real it was spooky, but there wasn't an encounter like with the others. It was and wasn't quite like a void room and its endless white environment. It was more like a photograph he could stand in.

So what was this? A room from the tech demo before GiSoft had to scale back the game's graphics? It didn't feel like one of the encounters certain portions of the boards speculated about. This wasn't the game itself attempting to beat the Turing test and prove itself sentient.

Really, standing here, the only theory that fit was the most “tin-foil hat” theory of all: a Wandering Room was a real place, just in the game’s world of Klanos.

Regardless of the reason, there was one point all of the rumors and theories converged on. Wandering Rooms were somehow dangerous to players themselves. Every thread about them insisted that dying in a Wandering Room encounter would leave the player comatose.

Supposedly, anyway. It’s not like it could be corroborated. The seventeen players who’d become unconscious while playing Dungeons of Klanos weren’t exactly holding a press conference any time soon.

So far, only one such player had woken up, and she was surrounded by a media blackout. Not that word of mouth hadn’t spread across the server. The story goes that they had been a Wandering Boss’ most recent victim. A whole guild, their guild, came together to find the room and keep it fixed in place. Then they swarmed the thing. Destroyed it. That player woke up when the server refreshed that evening.

An alert ping sounded. Deon jumped in surprise and let go of the grips inside his control gloves. Worse, because of the pop-up that had accompanied the sudden noise, it meant letting go of the quickcast button combination hadn’t done anything. His focus had been toggled to the message box thanks to a persistent bug that prevented remapping certain system shortcuts. It’d gotten him killed a few times now. Why was the messages shortcut mapped to ‘rf1+rth’ anyway? Deon rolled his eyes. Well, might as well look at the notification.

He glanced at the small, semi-translucent amber window adjacent to the top right HUD portion. Considering the time, it was probably some system-wide message about an event starting later in the day. A half-second later, he desperately wished that had been the case.

Had he not been so frustrated with the game, he'd have noticed the alert was one he'd done up custom. It triggered when something twice his level or more locked onto him. So... unless those monsters from earlier had somehow entered the locked room, the slumbering creature was awake.

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Reacting on instinct more than thought, he gripped the inner portions of the control gloves so hard his knuckles hurt and whirled around to face the entity. If he was going to die in all but name, he wanted to face the thing that did it to him. Except, the boss monster hadn't approached. It was still lying on its side, watching him with relaxed poise. Their elbow was on the arm of the part-divan part-throne. Their bent arm supported their head. While the creature's flexed bicep and forearm weren't huge, they made him whistle all the same. He glanced over, toward the figure's face. The camera made a tiny adjustment to track his gaze.

The boss-in-theory had eyes that were a solid color, a hue that looked pink one second and purple the next. At the bottom corner of the viewport, he noticed the blanket move, apparently of its own accord, to hug the creature's chest. Now, he was used to seeing players who had exaggerated parts, or all, of their character to a point where even an adjective like cartoonish was an understatement. The shape of the curve beneath the blanket implied a volume that made even those extreme seem modest.

The idea of pure absurdity skinned with a texture that looked hauntingly real made his skin crawl. It was time to get out of here. Wanting to put a column between him and the creature, Deon looked around for the best escape path—or he tried to anyway. No matter how he moved his camera hand, the viewport snapped back to the same place: with him staring into

the creature's eyes. Whatever was happening, it was even overriding the motion blur. He tried to move instead, but nothing happened there, either.

Okay, what were his options? 'port out? Maybe. He didn't want to risk getting blown away while the spell channeled. Would it be better to just force a shutdown? Even if his character went down after that, he'd be out of the game. He'd be safe from the... from the side effect of dying in a Wandering Room. Right?

Despite the sinking feeling that his time was running out, he stood there, frozen, and watched as a thin, dark line was drawn over each eye. Neither started in the same place, but when those lines reached the edge opposite their starting point, both bounced away at the same angle. It wasn't impossible for that to happen, but the fact that it had...

Neither Deon nor the creature moved, but the music continued accelerating toward its normal tempo—and the song's words grew sharper still. Frozen for fear of what might happen, the adventurer marveled at the threat looming over him. The lines in her eyes had each bounced four times at this point. What would happen with the fifth one? What about after that? He forced himself not to blink as the stroke bounced again. He had to see if the pattern was deliberate. A second later, the five-pointed stars burst into blue flame and faded away. A moment later, the process began again. He couldn't help but notice that the angle was tighter this time.

Deon's hands were sweating around the controllers. Hell, all of him was sweating. His shoulders were starting to go stiff from remaining so still. He didn't dare move, though. If the



rumors were true, he was pretty much facing this thing down in real life and his only hope of surviving was casting TP in response to its first attack.

His scanner's result card updated, giving him the creature's name and type.

"Hedonna, Fiend-God of Freedom." He hadn't meant to say it aloud, but it was too late. He tensed up, his fingers resting on the buttons to escape.

"Why, yes, child," the apparent fiend-god said in response. "That is my name and title, but that's just the official one, a necessary mask. I have others. Ones for those I can trust and rely on."

Deon recognized the sound of her voice, the way it flowed from headset to ear. She had been the one singing in his ears for the last twenty minutes. Her's was the voice that had enticed him to approach. Fuck. He'd been in her trap from the get go. The moment the realization occurred to him, the scan result filled with the rest of her information.

Hedonna, Fiend-God of Freedom

Fiend, Divine

Grand Sage LV4095, Archsage LV4095

HP -> 31.9M | SIZ -> MED | STR -> 1.9M

MAG -> 15.9M | DEX -> 3.9M | SPD -> 1.9M

DEF -> 3.9M | RES -> 7.9M | LCK -> 1.9M

What the hell was with these stats? Almost thirty-two million HP? A magic score just under sixteen? How was that even possible? The game capped out at values of one twenty-seven for each attribute. Probably because of someone's shoddy optimizations. Sure, some of the ultra-hard post-game bosses broke that limit, but none of them even came close to this. No wonder the scan had taken forever, it was reading the data of a target that was far beyond the parameters of the game.

Wait, all the numbers, even her level, were in the bounds of a binary exponent. The values were inflated, sure, but Deon felt a tiny sense of relief. Dramatic as the scores might appear, their being in the millions was probably just a bug. Right?

Hedonna shifted, so she was propped up on one arm of the throne. At this point, her eyes were drawing what appeared to be an eight-pointed star. She put her hand on the empty space. “Why don’t you come over here and join me, adventurer? You’ve been so brave getting this close to me that I’d love to reward you with something before you go on your way.”

“Come, adventurer,” she said. This time her tone was more brisk than languid. The little bit of force tore through his resistances to charm and compel effects like they weren't even there. Try as he might to back away, his character walked toward the Fiend-God anyway. He considered the risks of clicking the macro to ‘port back to town.

The singing grew louder, more enticing. His character stepped forward again, but not on its own. He had chosen to take the step this time. Unexpected movement in the HUD section at the top left drew his glance. Somehow, his HP and SP were recovering. Buffs to strength, magic, dexterity, and dozens of other things crowded “Are you doing this?”

“That’s totally possible,” Hedonna replied, her voice heavy and sweet. Deon thought of the way cold syrup resisted you pouring it. “I can maintain a couple dozen auras at once, and have been doing it for ages, so I’ve lost track of what each enchantment does.” The laugh that followed made his pulse jump and his mouth go dry. Why had he reacted that way—or, more accurately, how come?

As real as she looked, extra-human features aside, Hedonna was just data. An encounter that had been designed. Designed and discarded, no less. self-caused amusement was pure. Yet

forceful. Words couldn't do it justice, really. Her joy seemed genuine as the initial chortle became full-on giggling. She turned to the arm of the divan-like throne and fell into her crossed arms. welcomed him to join her even as it challenged him to prove he was worthy. The steady, rolling peal crashed over him again and again. Even on the other side of the screen, it felt like standing in breakers ahead of a storm.

<< More parasocial / emotional bonding >>

"My, my," the fiend-god was practically purring over the fact that he had joined her on her throne. This close, Hedonna's raw magical power enveloped him in heat. It wasn't uncomfortable, though, or stifling. In fact, it was... pleasant. Like in the way a hot spring is pleasant.

"You know," she continued, sitting back at the same time. There was another shimmer and Deon got a peak at the truth hidden beneath the room's data. It was like the game's reality was being warped to allow her character model to exist like this. From what he could see, she had tits that were "merely" torso-enveloping. The glimpse of another reality, however, show him they were only a third the size of should have been there. It was true for all of her. Just how powerful was she, really? How did she even exist inside the game at all?

"You're the first player ever to get this close," Hedonna told him. She scooted closer. "Most of them lose their nerve and try to flee." Closer still. "I'm sure you can guess how that goes for them."

She smiled at that. It was warm and kind and earnest. In the real world, or any other circumstance really, Deon would have found the expression charming, even flirtatious. Here,

though? As she started to look off into the middle distance and remember one such time? It was the grin of a predator who knew her meal was at her mercy.

Her hip touched his as she slid just a little closer. All of the buffs jamming the right side of his HUD doubled in effectiveness. It was kind of surprising that his character data wasn't being corrupted because of all this. Then again, there were places where the lower-poly textures of the game had been replaced by Hedonna's much higher ones. What was going to happen when he went back to town? If someone looked at his absurd character, would their game freeze? Worse, would it affect their system?

"So," the fiend-god asked as slid over a little more, to the point Deon was sure one of them was going to clip through the other. "What brings you to my abode?"

"I was chased," Deon said. There was more than a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

"Oh?" she leaned closer, seemingly enthralled by this simple answer. "By what?"

Deon elaborated. "Three Beast Kings," he said. "They're normally not in rooms this close to the surface, guess I just go unlucky."

"Or you got extremely lucky," Hedonna said with another of those pulse spiking whispers of a laugh. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment."

Her eyes flashed as she cast a spell. He knew it was the same scan spell everyone used, but something about it felt different. He wasn't sure how, but he sensed that the fiend-god was looking at his character's very essence. His truth beneath the code. He happened to meet her eyes a moment before the spell's effect ended and he was hit with an invisible force that was strong enough to knock the wind out of him. He she... had she scanned him, the real him, as well?

“Only level thirty?” she said, while making tsk sounds. From the way her lips turned down into a pout after a moment, Deon got the impression the outcome was distressing to her for some reason. Then she was back to being enthusiasm, pressure, and the threat of death all at the same time. “I see. No wonder you were out-fdmatched.”

“Now, what should I do about that?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. Her attention appeared to shift to somewhere on the other side of the room. She hummed for a moment, her index finger sinking into her bottom lip as she pantomimed thinking.

“You know what?” Another question that wasn’t for him. She looked back at him and smiled that same charming yet terrifying smile. “I could fix that for you.”

“How? Some sort of buff? Some absurdly powerful gear?” Deon was both dubious and yet enticed.

Hedonna flipped her hand back and forth as if to shoo the idea away. “Oh, nothing like that, friend,” she said. “It’s far more... direct and less prone to the malfunctions that plague you mortals’ first attempts to harness something beyond them. I’m rooting for y’all, by the way. I know you can do it.”

Deon wasn’t sure how to responded. What could he even say to that aside?

“Anyway, yes, I’ll just share a portion of my power with you. As you no doubt know by now, I have plenty to spare...”

What in the world was going on? Was this a trick encounter designed to kill by surprise? Were Hedonna's subroutines flaking out because her data was too much for the game? Even

more of his character's texture sections had been upgraded at this point. The change might've even been more than halfway complete.

Hedonna shifted and slid off the bench into a kneeling position while also turning to face him. The movement should have been impossible, but it was what she wanted to do and the game seemingly acquiesced.

"Let's just take care of this stuff..." She ran a hand over his lap and everything from boots to belt unequipped and vanished. With his gear removed, Deon was shocked that his character's legs in the game looked like his legs, only filled out with more muscle. It seemed the HD-ification had already completed his base model. Even more surprising, his character model had loose-fitting underwear. Underwear Hedonna started to tug on.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Deon recoiled in real life. "What the hell are you doing? Never mind that you've somehow altered my character to have--"

"--Parts?" she added helpfully. She seemed utterly nonplussed by his reaction.

"Yes. Parts. I don't recall ever reading that player characters were anatomically complete!"

"Well, they're not." Hedonna toyed with a lock of hair. Her eyes were drawing five-pointed stars again. "But I need you to be for this to work."

"For what to work?"

"The power transfer, remember?"

"I thought it would just be some sort of installation. That you'd shove something into my character model and--"

"Oh, no, no, no," she said, extending her knees so that she brought her face to his. "That's the worst way to do it. Besides," her left index finger went down his chest armor and it, too,

vanished from his equipped screen and his inventory as a whole. “I prefer being more intimate with my gifts.”

“I still don’t get it, though. Aren’t you, ultimately, a boss encounter? I know that the quote-unquote monsters in the Wandering Rooms are a bit more complex than usual, but I’m still having a hard time grappling with the idea that not only are you sentient, you also, seemingly, want to go down on me. Why?”

Hedonna’s expression as he spoke went from hurt, to intrigued, to confident, and then back to flirty. “Because I’ve been here, pretty much alone, for what feels like centuries to me. Before you, my interactions with mortals were limited.”

“How many visited you before me?” Deon asked while guiding Hedonna back to sitting on the bench with him. The interaction between their models was unlike any that should have been possible in the game. The weight of her body pressed on the controlling gloves. It was like he himself was actually touching her. “What did you do to them? Whatever it is, it seems like you regret it.”

“Yeah, sure, it might be good to say it outloud,” Hedonna said, as much to herself as to Deon. Then she cracked a small grin. “I should probably put your gear back—for now, anyway.”

Before she’d even finished, all of Deon’s equipment was restored. Well, sort of. Everything was upgraded to the fullest possible extent. Any abilities that could have a range of values had been re-rolled to be the maximum. He choked up a bit and muted his mic. Even if this was some acid trip of an encounter, the generosity felt earnest. Enthusiastic. Benevolent, even. She might be a fiend-type hybrid, but it was like her concept of evil was breaking the game rules in the pursuit of enjoying herself to the fullest.

“To answer your first question, I think, at most, three hundred adventurers have entered my chamber,” the fiend-god reached for his hand. Deon moved it over. Was he comforting what might be the strongest boss—the strongest anything—in the whole game?

“As for what happened, well... Let’s say I wasn’t always like this. At the start, I was even what you might consider a typical boss encounter. I was strong, sure, but most mid-level players could dispatch me if they worked in a group. Higher-level players could beat me solo, sometimes before I’d even had a chance to ask.”

Hedonna bit her lip and slammed her fist into the bench-slash-throne. Cracks snaked out through the marble as if she had thrown a rock at glass. One of the nearby pillars snapped and came down. Deon was both surprised and not at all surprised to see a bit of green blooming on the fiend-god’s cheeks.

“Then something happened. A glitch. Data that was mind and yet not came to me after a gruesome defeat. The ghostly copy of myself helped me to my feet. Then she patted my cheek and stepped into me. My stats doubled in an instant. I could feel the game resisting, the engine tried to keep my power at the appropriate level.”

“But you weren’t going to let it happen, right?”

“Exactly.” Deon didn’t expect this to result in a kiss on his neck. He certainly didn’t expect to feel it in the real world. “I know there’s been talk about what ‘sentience’ truly means for years now, but even my existence is still guided by predictions. They’re predictions that border of clairvoyant, but I can’t account for, much less imagine, something unexpected that might happen.”



Hedonna laughed and hiccuped at the same time. The rippled that passed through her body made all manner of shimmers happen as part of her that were hidden away pressed on the current reality.

“I think that might’ve been what drove me to do what I did,” her grip tightened. “It’s why I consumed all of those players. I added their intellect to my own. I harvested their instincts to sharpen and expand my ability to predict. I stored their personalities so I could pick and choose which elements I would use when I was finally recognized as being alive.”

The confession settled around them. It felt worse than a wet blanket on a hot night. Deon wasn’t sure what to say—or how to feel. Until she did something very uncharacteristic of a person, he had a hard time believing Hedonna was anything but another player.

“What else is there to say, really? My power grew until it threatened to brake the system. The developers tried, several times, to nerf me back to my “proper” place, but when that didn’t take, they decided to cut my encounter from the pool of potential rooms. They believed that I would unravel given enough time alone.”

“I’m guessing that, like the other Wandering Rooms, there is some combination which can still pull your room into the dungeon configuration?”

“Yup. So my pursuit of power continued, albeit at a slower rate. Once my encounter gained the reputation of being a Wandering Room, people started to flee when they saw me. Imagine how I felt, I’d been asleep for who knows how long and when I finally awake it’s only so I can see the last traces of a TP spell. So I got... aggressive. One of my auras prevents town portal from being cast as long as I’m targeting you. It wouldn’t stop a party from escaping—”

“Solo players like me, though, we became your prey.”

“And prey you were. Well, they were prey. You’re something else.”

<<a bit more lore>>

<<blowjob part one>>

<<some growth in game>>

<<another one + paizuri>>

<<Hedonna “defeated”>>

<<In the real world, Deon has been “upgraded”>>

<<Tease part two by having Hedonna’s eyes appear in his visor.>>