Exploring Resilience Building in Soulsborne Games

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Abstract

This study investigates how players experience psychological benefits, specifically in promoting resilience and positive behavior change, in Soulsborne games. It is important to note that this study does not suggest video games as a substitute for professional therapy or mental health treatment. This inquiry holds significance for game researchers and designers, and broadens the conversation on the psychological impacts of video games, particularly in unconventionally challenging games. The methodologies used include a close reading of common design elements and a content analysis of public online discussions, underpinned by the principles of the self-efficacy theory and Self-Determination Theory. The close reading highlights four design elements of these games and how they leveraged essential factors for developing self-competence and motivation. These elements overlap significantly with strategies used in professional resilience training programs. The content analysis reveals a strong connection between the difficulty and design philosophy of Soulsborne games and player experiences of coping with personal difficulties or challenges. The findings support the hypothesis that active engagement with Soulsborne games may boost player resilience and catalyze positive behavior alterations, with potential implications for real-life personal development. However, the potential for researcher bias in the detailed examination and content analysis techniques should be acknowledged.

Keywords: Soulsborne games, Psychological benefits, Resilience, Positive behavior change, Game design, Self-efficacy theory, Self-Determination Theory, Close reading, Content analysis.

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The growing interest in Soulsborne games, defined by their strict game design and complex backstory, has initiated fascinating debates among gamers and game creators. Although these games have been notorious for great difficulty and perceived inaccessibility to novice players, an increasing number of testimonials from players highlight the psychological benefits they have experienced through their engagement with these games. This contrast between relentless difficulty and reported psychological rewards provides a compelling landscape for academic exploration.

FromSoftware's Soulsborne series, encompassing titles such as *Elden Ring* (2022), the Dark Souls trilogy, and *Bloodborne* (2015), deviates from traditional player-centric storytelling and mechanics. While controversial, these choices create a distinctive gaming atmosphere that prompts many personal stories about the transformative impact of their gaming experiences among players. These accounts range from helping to overcome personal difficulties, increasing self-confidence, to experiencing existential revelations, suggesting a depth of impact that extends beyond the realm of the game itself.

The fascinating aspect of these experiences is that they deviate from established theories about game design related to mental benefits. The dominance of the punishing death mechanics, a feature highlighted by the slogan of the first *Dark Souls* (2011), "Prepare to die," contradicts theories that suggest a mix of wins and manageable losses for the best player satisfaction and empowerment. Nevertheless, the reported psychological benefits derived from playing Soulsborne games are substantial and warrant further investigation.

An integral part of the exploration is the recognition of the psychological mechanisms at play when individuals engage with these games. As theoretical constructs, the self-efficacy theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offer valuable perspectives on understanding player experiences. Self-efficacy theory posits that individuals' belief in their ability to succeed in

specific situations or accomplish tasks can influence their motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1977). On the other hand, SDT proposes that individuals strive for growth and fulfillment, satisfying basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness as critical drivers (Ryan & Deci, 1985). More specifically, the study situates itself within the context of how these theories interface with the unique design choices in Soulsborne games. Understanding how players perceive their capability to overcome the game's challenges and the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs in such a rigorous environment is of utmost interest.

This study hypothesizes that engagement in Soulsborne games could result in improved player resilience and positive behavior changes that can be applied to scenarios outside the digital space. To test this hypothesis, the methodologies used in this exploration include close reading and content analysis. Close reading was applied to investigate the psychological impacts embedded in player experiences with selected design elements of the Soulsborne games. Content analysis was used to gather and interpret relevant player comments on public forums and social media. The combination of close reading and content analysis provides a complementary perspective, providing both depth and breadth in understanding player experiences.

Despite the qualitative nature of both methods, the insights generated from this study add to the discussion on the psychological impacts of video games. This study highlights the potential of games as spaces for fostering personal growth and resilience, which further invites an expansion of current game design ideologies. However, it is important to emphasize that these findings do not suggest that video games, including Soulsborne games, should be viewed as a replacement for clinical therapeutic interventions. Instead, they draw attention to the potential for games to be deliberately designed and utilized as resources for positive mental growth.

Chapter 1: Background

In February 2022, the release of *Elden Ring* brought Soulsborne games into the spotlight again; while this major hit attracted more players to the genre, it has also received multiple criticisms from other game developers. Several members of well-known studios openly criticized the game design choices in the game, arguing that the gameplay and combat were frustrating and inaccessible for less skilled players (Gailloreto, 2022).

FromSoftware, the Japanese studio that created these titles, has long been known for producing exceptionally challenging games. The Soulsborne titles, a term coined by the gaming community, refer to a series of action role-playing games the studio has made, including *Elden Ring*, *Demon's Souls*, the Dark Souls Trilogy, *Bloodborne*, and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019). These games are characterized by their challenging difficulty, deep and intricate lore, interconnected world design, and distinctive gameplay mechanics.

These games lack options for modifying difficulty, pausing, or managing learning progression, which was previously considered essential for crafting engaging, player-driven experiences (Grodal, 2000). Despite the daunting nature of these games, players have repeatedly reported psychological benefits from playing these games, with increasing discussions on social media platforms like YouTube and public forums such as Reddit. For instance, u/IAmAbomination commented: "I never thought it possible without outside means like doctors or replacements or anything, but the point is - dark souls is making me an ACTUAL better healthier person, and that's just on the drug front" (Appendix C). Writing on Games (2016) also stated in his video that "I realized that the complexities of choosing whether or not to end my own life were entirely reflected by the duality of almost everything in the game (Appendix E)." As well as NakeyJakey (2018), said the following in his YouTube video (Appendix D) with over 1.7 million views:

It not only rekindled my love for video games, but also made me proud of myself, gave me some sense of control in my life. that I somehow went from sucking ass, fighting the skeletons at the beginning on accident, and beating the game. That I somehow went on that journey and came out of it all the better…But Dark Souls, it felt like a religious experience that was like "Oh man, if something like that can exist in this world, this is a world I want to live in." Which it took a virtual thing to make me appreciate my real life a lot more, and be inspired and whatever.

While these are just a few examples out of many more that could be discussed, it seems counterintuitive that such punishing games could have positive psychological effects. Previous studies in the field have developed models to assist individuals experiencing performance-based challenges by designing gaming experiences with numerous victories and controllable defeats (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). Interestingly, the design of Soulsborne games does not follow this framework. Players face more defeats than victories, as evidenced by the in-game global death counter recorded over 500 Million deaths (u/lakinightmare, 2021) in *Dark Souls II* (2014), and more than nine billion deaths in *Elden Ring* during the first year after the release (Chisolm, 2023).

With the therapeutic impact of these games remaining surprisingly potent, the question remains: What is the basis for this strong presence of positive psychological effects in such challenging games?

1.1 Objects of Analysis

As the focus of this study focuses on the experiences and impacts associated with the Soulsborne titles, it is fundamental to specify and have an overview of the games selected for investigation. Underscoring the key features and design elements of each individual game and shared across the franchise provides a solid foundation for exploring the source of the reported mental health benefits of playing these games.

Demon's Souls

  Demon's Souls is a third-person action role-playing game directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, the current president of FromSoftware. The game was exclusively released on PlayStation 3 in 2009, and got a remake version in 2020 for PlayStation 5. The game experienced a poor reception initially after its launch for its unconventional design that demands players to master its systems or risk facing significant punishment (Parkin, 2015). However, after just a few months, the game's popularity started to increase, and soon some publishers expressed their interest in releasing the game outside of Japan.

  The renowned combat system features an extensive and methodical approach emphasizing patience, strategy, and precise timing. Players can choose from various weapon types, each with unique move-sets, strengths, and weaknesses. In addition, players can utilize shields for blocking or parrying, and use consumable items to provide various effects.

  Demon's Souls features a level design structure comprising a central hub area, the Nexus, and five separate worlds, each with multiple stages and bosses. Character progression in *Demon's Souls* is driven by the collection of souls, the in-game currency earned by defeating enemies. Souls can be used to level up attributes, purchase items, and upgrade equipment, primarily accessible in the Nexus. However, upon death, players drop their accumulated souls and must recover them by reaching the location where they died. If they die again before recovering their souls, they are lost forever.

  Unlike later Soulborne games, *Demon's Souls* uses a unique World and Character Tendency system that passively influences the difficulty of the game world, as well as the availability of certain non-player characters (NPCs), events, and items, based on the player's actions and choices.

  To convey its narrative, the game employs environmental storytelling, item descriptions, and interactions with NPCs. Its story is set in the kingdom of Boletaria, a land consumed by a

mysterious fog that has unleashed powerful demons who feast on the souls of humans. The player character, also referred to as the "Slayer of Demons," would learn about the tragic history of Boletaria and the characters they encounter as they progress through the game.

Demon's Souls also introduced the unique multiplayer system that would become a hallmark of the Soulsborne titles, allowing players to interact with others through messages, summoning, and invasions. Players can leave messages on the ground to provide tips or warnings, summon others for cooperative play, or invade other players' worlds for competitive gameplay. The game also features the Old Monk boss battle, an innovative encounter that summons a player-controlled invader to serve as the boss.

Demon's Souls is often considered the spiritual predecessor to the Dark Souls series, introducing many gameplay elements and design philosophies that would later define the "Souls-like" subgenre.

The Dark Souls trilogy

The Dark Souls trilogy is a series of critically acclaimed action role-playing games that began with the release of *Dark Souls* in 2011, followed by its sequels, *Dark Souls II* in 2014 and *Dark Souls III* in 2016. While Miyazaki directed both *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls III*, he took the supervisor role in the development of *Dark Souls II*. Building upon the foundation laid by *Demon's Souls*, the trilogy has developed a passionate fan base and profoundly impacted the gaming industry, inspiring a new subgenre of games often referred to as "Souls-like."

The first installment in the series, *Dark Souls*, introduced players to the world of Lordran. Players assume the role of the Chosen Undead, who embarks on a pilgrimage to ring the Bells of Awakening and uncover the fate of the cursed land. The central plot revolves around the Age of Fire, a time of prosperity brought about by the power of "the First Flame." As it begins to fade, the world is threatened with an impending Age of Dark.

Dark Souls adopted *Demon's Souls*' minimalistic and cryptic narrative style, and implemented an interconnected and non-linear world design. Each location is meticulously crafted with shortcuts, secrets, and environmental storytelling that reward exploration and contribute to the depth of the atmosphere. In addition, the game expands on the multiplayer features by introducing covenants, which serve as in-game factions that offer unique multiplayer objectives and rewards.

The second installment, *Dark Souls II*, takes place in the kingdom of Drangleic, a land similarly plagued by a curse. Players control a character who seeks to break the curse of the Undead and restore their humanity. The story centered around the fall of Drangleic and the player's quest to seek the cure for their curse. Though not directed by Miyazaki, the sequel builds upon the core gameplay mechanics of the first game while introducing new features and refinements.

Dark Souls II features a more linear world design compared to the interconnected structure of the first game, and adds a new resource called Human Effigies, which are necessary to restore the player's humanity and reverse the effects of hollowing, a gradual process of weakening that occurs each time the player dies. Additionally, this entry introduces a new stat called "Adaptability," which affects the player character's agility, the speed of item usage, and the effectiveness of rolling to avoid attacks, which adds a new layer of customization to the game's character-building mechanics.

The final entry in the trilogy, *Dark Souls III* (), takes players to the decaying realm of Lothric; the player-controlled character is referred to as the "Ashen One," an undead warrior who has failed to become a Lord of Cinder. The narrative follows the player's quest to gather the Lords of Cinder, who have abandoned their thrones, in order to rekindle the dying fire and avert the Age of Dark. Miyazaki returned as director for this installment and delved deeper into the themes of rebirth throughout the series, exploring the consequences of the world's continued reliance on "the First Flame."

Dark Souls III continues the series' tradition of interconnected world design and cryptic storytelling, featuring returning characters and locations from previous entries, offering a more comprehensive conclusion to the trilogy's overarching story. As the final entry in the Dark Souls series, *Dark Souls III* refines and builds upon the core mechanics of its predecessors, introducing new features such as the concept of password matchmaking in multiplayer and special weapon moves. The game also offers a faster-paced and more aggressive combat system incorporating elements from FromSoftware's other title, *Bloodborne*.

Like *Demon's Souls*, the trilogy also uses fog doors to separate areas, typically in front of boss arenas. Besides a wide array of boss battles, the progression of each game is built around a series of bonfires, which serve as checkpoints and safe havens for players. Resting at a bonfire replenishes health and most resources but also respawns most enemies in the game world. This mechanics has been solidified as one of the most distinctive and fundamental characteristics in the Soulsborne titles.

One key aspect of the Dark Souls trilogy's impact is establishing a recognizable formula for game mechanics and design principles. The signature formula creates a shared identity and experience across Soulsborne games; and numerous games in the "Souls-like" subgenre.

The series' success has shown that there is a significant appetite for games that emphasize challenges, patience, and experimentation. Furthermore, it has also influenced the aesthetic and thematic elements of Soulsborne games, inspiring a dedicated fan community that actively engages with the games' lore, mechanics, and shared experiences. The gained popularity has led FromSoftware to continue to develop games that share these core principles, reinforcing their unique identity within the gaming industry.

Bloodborne

Bloodborne is a third-person action role-playing game released in 2015 exclusively for the PlayStation 4, with no sequel or remake. Directed by Miyazaki, although not directly connected to

the Souls series, *Bloodborne* shares many gameplay elements and design philosophies with the Souls formula, while expanding on it by introducing new mechanics and a unique setting while retaining the challenge and atmosphere that the Dark Souls series is known for. The game takes place in the Victorian-inspired city of Yharnam, a once-thriving metropolis now plagued by a mysterious *Bloodborne* illness that has transformed its inhabitants into grotesque creatures, where players assume the role of a Hunter seeking a cure for their affliction.

The narrative of *Bloodborne* adopts the distinctive style of minimalistic scattered storytelling, immersing players in a dark and atmospheric world plagued by a mysterious *Bloodborne* illness. The game's story is heavily inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft and the medical practice before the Victorian era, featuring themes of cosmic horror, madness, medical metaphors and the consequences of knowledge. As players progress through the game, they delve deeper into the city's dark secrets, uncovering the tragedy of human curiosity and eldritch beings known as the Great Ones.

Combat in *Bloodborne* is faster-paced and more aggressive than any previous Soulsborne titles, encouraging players to take risks and engage in offensive tactics. The game introduces a "rally" mechanic, allowing players to regain lost health by quickly counterattacking enemies after taking damage. Players can choose from a variety of trick weapons, which have unique transforming move-sets, and firearms, which are used primarily for parrying enemy attacks. In addition, *Bloodborne* also introduces a new weapon enhancement system, allowing players to customize their weapons with various effects.

The game also employed an interconnected and labyrinthine level design. Maps with multiple paths and shortcuts can be accessed in a central hub area, the Hunter's Dream. Character progression relies on the collection of Blood Echoes instead of Souls; similarly, the currency can be earned by defeating enemies and used to level up, purchase items, and upgrade weapons at the Hunter's Dream. Death would also result in players losing their accumulated Blood Echoes, but there is a chance that nearby enemies consume the dropped

currency. To retrieve the lost Blood Echoes, players must defeat the enemy possessing their currency without dying again.

On top of the summoning and invasions multiplayer system, *Bloodborne* adopted the concept of covenants from previous Soulsborne titles. The game also features procedurally generated Chalice Dungeons, offering additional challenges and loot for players to discover and share. The player interactions extend beyond the game itself, fostering an affluent and engaged community that continues to grow and evolve,

Bloodborne introduces new mechanics while retaining the depth and difficulty that have made the Soulsborne games so popular. The game's unique setting, rich lore, and innovative gameplay have earned it widespread praise and a dedicated fanbase, further cementing its place as a distinguished addition to the Soulsborne family of games.

Elden Ring

Elden Ring is an open-world action role-playing game released in 2022. Miyazaki directed this game with worldbuilding provided by fantasy writer George R. R. Martin, the renowned author of the A Song of Ice and Fire series. The game has been a commercial and critical success, with over 12 million copies sold in the first month of release (Egan, 2022). While FromSoftware has always had a dedicated fanbase, *Elden Ring* has brought new fans to the franchise, pushing what many considered a niche genre into the industry limelight.

The in-game content of *Elden Ring* is significantly larger than any game in its family. Although this latest hit of FromSoftware does not have direct connections to any of the previous titles, it embraces the design principles, thematic aesthetics, and gameplay mechanics that define Soulsborne games, ensuring that the core experience remains intact albeit its sheer scale while adopting an open-world format.

In keeping with tradition, *Elden Ring* also employs minimalistic, cryptic storytelling, but seems more cohesive and focused than earlier titles. The game is set in a

Norse-mythology-inspired world known as the Lands Between; players take the role of a nameless "tarnished," and embark on a quest to become the Elden Lord by reassembling the shattered *Elden Ring*. The game's story explores themes of power, ambition, fate and destiny. Players are encouraged to explore, piece together the story of their respective worlds, and unravel the hidden depths of the game's lore through subtle cues.

The game gave players access to a wide array of weapons, spells, talismans, and armor sets, with a similar combat system as other Soulsborne games. *Elden Ring* also maintains the familiar level-up and upgrade system found in previous titles. The in-game currency earned by defeating enemies is Runes instead of Souls or Blood Echoes. Besides, the death mechanics are also preserved, with players losing their accumulated currency upon death and having to recover it by returning to the location of their demise.

However, *Elden Ring* distinguishes itself from its predecessors by presenting a massive open-world environment that provides opportunities for more diverse gameplay experiences. Departed from the more structured progression of previous titles, *Elden Ring*'s design encourages exploration and offers players the freedom to take on challenges at their own pace. Players can choose to avoid boss fights, focusing instead on leveling up or seeking out side quests and secrets. Once they feel better equipped and prepared, they can return to these challenges with renewed confidence.

Elden Ring calibrated the flexibility that allows for a more approachable gameplay experience for newcomers, while staying true to the challenge and depth that long-time fans of the Soulsborne titles have come to expect and appreciate.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice was developed by FromSoftware and published by Activision in 2019. Although it still demonstrates the influence of the Soulsborne design principles and shares some elements with the games listed above, such as challenging combat and

interconnected level design, *Sekiro* diverges significantly regarding gameplay mechanics, atmosphere and narrative, progression systems, and overall structure.

      Sekiro caters to a different playstyle than the Soulsborne games by emphasizing stealth and agility, providing a distinct experience that does not aline with the precise and deliberate combat style of Soulsborne games. Furthermore, the game does not feature the same multiplayer components that are characteristic of the Soulsborne titles, opting instead for a purely single-player experience.

      Given the substantial differences, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* is ruled out from the analysis of this study. By excluding *Sekiro* from the analysis, a clearer understanding of the core experience in Soulsborne titles can be examined, allowing for a better understanding of how the shared characteristics and design contribute to the reported psychological benefits.

1.2 Concepts of Resilience

      The distinctive nature of Soulsborne games, characterized by their punishing difficulty and the necessity for trial and error, creates an environment where players are repeatedly confronted with adversity. It is required to develop the capacity to adapt and overcome, and enhance the ability to persevere and recover in the context of the gameplay experience. The immense challenges may hold the key to understanding the unique phenomenon of improved mental well-being as claimed by a large number of players, which makes the exploration of the concept of resilience and its relevance to the player-reported benefits essential.

      Resilience, an essential aspect of personal growth and mental well-being, refers to an individual's capability to adapt and recover positively in the presence of significant adversity. Even though the notion of resilience has been defined and operationalized in various ways throughout the course of scholarly investigation, this study will primarily draw upon the insights provided by two seminal articles in the field: Luthar et al.'s "The Construct of Resilience" (2000) and Masten's "Ordinary Magic" (2001). These works laid the foundation of the present discussion

by offering a crucial understanding of the attributes and fundamental mechanisms of resilience, as well as addressing indispensable methodological considerations within the scope of this multifaceted concept, making them invaluable resources for further exploring the topic.

The study of resilience has a rich historical foundation, stemming in part from its potential implications for advancing the field of developmental psychology. In the early stages of resilience research, the focus was mainly on traits of "resilient children" (Luthar et al., 2000); both scientific research and mass media portrayed resilient children as remarkable or special, often using terms like "invulnerable" or "invincible" to describe them (Masten, 2001). As the field progressed, it became evident that resilience appears to be a common occurrence rather than a fixed trait, resulting primarily from the functioning of the basic human adaptational systems (Masten, 2001). Consequently, the term "resilient" was adopted later to represent better the concept of thriving in hardships (Luthar et al., 2000).

Following the reconceptualization, resilience has come to be recognized as covering a class of phenomena (Masten, 2001) characterized by a dynamic process influenced by the combination of external factors (Luthar et al., 2000). It is vital to employ a developmental perspective when studying resilience, as this process could change over time and across different domains, which is particularly relevant when analyzing the design formula of Soulsborne titles.

In the context of Soulsborne games, where players continually need to overcome challenging enemies and complex levels, face the trial-and-error nature of the gameplay in order to progress and succeed. Resilience, the capability to adapt and recover from challenging situations, aligns well with the core elements of such demanding games.

In contemplation of its inferential and contextual nature, resilience requires two key judgments during evaluation (Masten, 2001): the threat level or risk factor and the quality of adaptation or developmental outcome. One cannot be considered resilient if there is no presence of significant adversity and demonstration of positive adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000). In

connection with Soulsborne games, the threat or adversity is represented by the continuous obstacles that players must overcome, while the positive adaptation is manifested by players' progress in mastering game mechanics; both serve the aim of ultimately beating the games.

Accordingly, delving into the elements that enable players to become proficient at adapting to the in-game environment is presumptively akin to investigating the factors that foster resilience. Examining the connections between the reported psychological benefits and the resilience theories can offer a sturdy structure to better understand the underlying mechanisms through which players develop coping strategies and enhance their mental fortitude.

In order to identify the underlying components that aid in surmounting challenges with adaptive responses, two primary theories and approaches have been proposed to corroborate the determining factors responsible for these positive outcomes at both individual and environmental levels (Masten, 2001):

1. The variable-focused approaches utilize multivariate statistics to examine the relationships of risks, outcomes, and qualities of function that can potentially compensate or protect individuals from negative consequences.

2. The person-focused approaches compare people with different profiles within or across time, based on the naturally occurring configurable patterns of adaptation to determine what distinguishes resilient individuals from others.

Evidence from recent studies using both approaches across various situations and research strategies converges on several protective factors that are well-established correlates associated with resilience (Masten, 2001). These attributes, including supportive relationships, cognitive and self-regulation capabilities, positive self-perception, and effectuating motivation, collectively contribute to one's ability to cope effectively with challenges and maintain psychological well-being.

Building on the understanding that positive self-perception and effectuating motivation are necessary components of resilience, it is essential to examine the theoretical frameworks that

underpin these concepts. Given the limited research specifically addressing resilience concerning challenging video games, further exploration can yield insights into the broader implications of game design, particularly in terms of how specific design elements and mechanics influence players' personal growth in real-life situations.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

In light of the intertwined nature of positive self-perception, effectuating motivation, and the shaping of resilience, it becomes apparent that investigating relevant theoretical perspectives is warranted to gain a more nuanced comprehension of which elements and their roles in the therapeutic effects reported by Soulsborne players.

When directly addressing the cognitive and motivational processes formulating the key aspects of resilience, the self-efficacy theory and SDT stand out as particularly pertinent. Dissecting the interplay between self-efficacy and self-determination theories could elucidate the synergistic effects of these perspectives in resilience-building.

Positive self-perception is closely associated with self-efficacy, which is rooted in an individual's belief in their capabilities and competence. According to Bandura (1982), perceived self-efficacy refers to judgments about one's ability to effectively execute courses of action necessary for handling prospective situations. These judgments influence their approach to challenges and obstacles.

Effectuating motivation, on the other hand, exhibits strong correlations with the SDT. As proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000), this theory suggests that the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, leads to increased self-motivation and behavioral self-regulation. These enhanced factors, in turn, supports persistence and engagement in the face of adversity.

When examined separately and in conjunction with one another, these theories can serve as a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the impact of Soulsborne designs on players' development and maintenance of resilience.

Self-efficacy Theory

The concept of self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to execute the necessary actions to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977), has been extensively researched and theorized in the realm of psychology. Self-efficacy directly indicates the capability of individuals to intentionally and purposefully influence their own actions and life circumstances (Bandura, 1982). The theory, therefore, serves as a unifying framework that seeks to explain the mechanisms underlying the process of human behavior change (Bandura, 1977),

As a critical cognitive component that mediates the relationship between knowledge and action (Bandura, 1977), self-efficacy beliefs play a central role in the interaction and influence of an individual's behavior, cognitive factors, and environment (Bandura, 1982). These aspects actively influence one's expectations about the likelihood of success and the potential outcomes of their actions, contributing to the development of a sense of personal control. Higher self-efficacy thereupon allows individuals to feel more capable of managing their environment and taking responsibility for their actions (Bandura, 1982).

The significance of self-efficacy in shaping an individual's approach to challenges and ability to navigate their environment effectively becomes increasingly evident through this perspective. To gain deeper insights into the contributing factors, Bandura (1977) identifies four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states, which can be understood in the context of Soulsborne games:

1. Mastery experiences: Successful past experiences can reinforce self-efficacy beliefs if performances are perceived as resulting from skill than from fortuitous or special external aids. It correlates with the process of the in-game mental representation of players, and the players themselves, evolve through repeated exposure to brutally tricky encounters.

2. Vicarious experiences: Observing others succeed in similar tasks can lead to enhanced self-efficacy, especially if the observer perceives themselves as similar to the person they are observing. Linking to Soulsborne players, this can be seen when players watch other players through the online feature in games, video streaming, or shared gameplay experiences, overcoming difficult areas or bosses.

3. Verbal persuasion: Positive feedback and encouragement from others can boost self-efficacy, while negative feedback can lower it. Within the Soulsborne community, players often seek assistance or advice, share strategies, and encourage each other to persevere through the complex challenges of the games. These supportive interactions can positively impact players in similar ways.

4. Physiological and emotional states: Positive states can enhance self-efficacy, whereas stress, anxiety, and fatigue can reduce it. Considering the setting of the Soulsborne games, managing emotional states, such as feeling relaxed and focused on balancing the frustration from multiple defeats and avoiding physical exhaustion, is crucial for players in maintaining the confidence to beat the game.

The emotional arousal experience players achieve from a course of interactions is a powerful source of information that can affect perceived self-efficacy, which serves as a driving force behind the initiation and perseverance of behavior (Bandura, 1977).

Perceived self-efficacy significantly contributes to exercising human agency, shaping cognitive processes, influencing motivation, and impacting emotional states (Bandura, 1982). Higher self-efficacy enhances problem-solving and coping skills, promotes a sense of autonomy, and buffers the impact of stress (Schwarzer & Warner, 2012), which leads to more optimistic

expectations, a greater likelihood of setting challenging goals, and better management of negative emotions. As a result, individuals with greater self-efficacy exhibit a higher degree of effort and persistence in the face of challenges, in other words, a greater manifestation of resilience.

The link between perceived self-efficacy and resilience has been explored in different populations, such as children, adolescents, and adults (Schwarzer & Warner, 2012). These studies have found that self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in determining how people respond to adversity and cope with stress. Higher levels of self-efficacy were consistently associated with greater resilience, suggesting that individuals with stronger beliefs in their capabilities are better equipped to overcome adversity and bounce back from setbacks.

Self-efficacy as an integral determinant of behavioral change shares some overlapping principles with the SDT, which emphasizes the significance of satisfying an individual's innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness to promote intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the context of Soulsborne games, a player's self-efficacy beliefs can be considered a crucial component of the need for competence and autonomy. Additionally, the gaming community's shared experiences and social interactions foster a sense of relatedness, further enhancing players' motivation and resilience.

By nurturing the development of self-efficacy beliefs that directly influence actual performance (Bandura, 1982) and the acquisition and retention of new behavior patterns (Bandura,1977), these games can reinvigorate players' self-identity in the real world.

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan (1985) established the foundation of SDT, which has then become a foundational framework in the field of motivation and has influenced research across various domains. The theory seeks to understand the factors that drive intrinsic motivation and promote personal growth.

Intrinsic motivation and self-determination have been identified as crucial components of human behavior. Intrinsic motivation, defined as engaging in activities for the inherent satisfaction derived from the activity itself rather than for external rewards or pressures, is associated with increased engagement, persistence, and task enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 1985). While self-determination refers to the extent to which individuals feel a sense of control, autonomy, and ownership over their actions and choices (Ryan & Deci, 1985).

SDT emphasizes the importance of satisfying an individual's innate psychological needs underpinning these concepts, the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which can be understood in the context of Soulsborne games:

1. Autonomy: The need to feel control and ownership over one's actions and choices. When playing these skill-demanding games, players have the opportunity to face challenges head-on without any external aids or special power-ups, providing sources of autonomy and control over their in-game decisions.

2. Competence: The need to feel effective and capable in one's environment and activities. The emphasis on learning and growth in these games often requires players to adapt their strategies, develop perseverance and learn from their failures, which aligns with the principle of competence needs.

3. Relatedness: The need to feel connected and have meaningful relationships with others. As players participate in shared in-game experiences and social interactions online or offline within the Soulsbborne community, the engagements match the standards of relatedness needs.

The fulfillment of these basic psychological needs cultivates intrinsic motivation and enhances self-determination, enabling individuals to pursue activities that align with their personal values and aspirations (Ryan & Deci, 1985). They also played a vital role in the interventions of stress incursion and responses (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011), implying that the

resilience developed through engaging with these games might extend beyond the virtual world, contributing to improved stress management which can translate into real-life situations.

Satisfying these basic psychological needs is essential for overall psychological functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and can significantly influence individuals' self-regulation processes under stress (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). For instance, individuals with high need satisfaction may be more likely to engage in adaptive coping strategies and maintain effective self-regulation as the need-satisfying experiences act as a buffer against the adverse effects of stress. In contrast, those with low need satisfaction may struggle to manage stressors effectively. The absence of these needs can weaken an individual's ability to manage stressors effectively; the experiences that thwart basic psychological needs can also contribute to maladaptive coping strategies.

When an individual perceives an imbalance between their demands and the available psychological resources, stress can arise due to psychological and physiological strain (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). To foster positive outcomes, Ryan & Deci (2000) provided guidelines for creating environments and implementing practices that support these essential psychological needs. One key strategy is providing autonomy support by encouraging individuals to make choices, take the initiative, and express their opinions. Another approach involves offering optimal challenges by presenting challenging and achievable tasks, fostering a sense of competence. Lastly, it is vital to establish a sense of relatedness by creating an environment where individuals feel connected, supported, and understood by others.

In the context of personal development and resilience-building, the psychological needs addressed in SDT play complementary roles along with the theories of self-efficacy:

The need for competence aligns with self-efficacy beliefs, as both emphasize the importance of individuals feeling capable and effective in their environment and activities. When individuals experience a sense of competence and their self-efficacy beliefs are strengthened,

they are more likely to engage in challenging tasks and persist in overcoming adversity (Bandura,1977).

The need for autonomy is closely related to the development of self-efficacy, as individuals who feel ownership over their actions are more likely to perceive their successes as resulting from their own abilities and efforts (Bandura,1977).

Furthermore, the need for relatedness can contribute to enhancing self-efficacy through social interactions, as individuals may receive verbal persuasion or observe the successes of others, both of which can positively impact their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977).

As a result, the increased self-efficacy can further enhance the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, creating a positive feedback loop that promotes intrinsic motivation and resilience.

Within the context of Soulsborne games, a player's self-efficacy beliefs can be considered a crucial component of the need for competence and autonomy. Additionally, the shared experiences and social interactions within the gaming community foster a sense of relatedness, which further enhances players' motivation and resilience.

As gaming continues to be a significant aspect of modern culture, it is essential to consider the role of these theoretical perspectives in shaping the gaming experience of Soulsborne titles. Self-efficacy theory and SDT provide a foundation for exploring the impact of game design on players' psychological well-being and resilience.

1.4 Theoretical Exploration

Video games are often distinguished from other forms of media entertainment due to their interactivity, which enables players to actively process information and contributes to the development and outcome of the game (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). In earlier years, research on video games predominantly focused on identifying potential adverse effects. However, recent studies examining the positive impact of games on cognitive skills, problem-solving abilities

(Granic et al., 2014), and training selective visual attention (Green & Bavelier, 2003) indicate shifts in the controversy debating about video games.

It is evident that gaming environments hold significant appeal, and participation in games is generally voluntary by players outside laboratory settings (Ryan et al., 2006). For this reason, it is crucial to explore research avenues that imply or emphasize intervention-focused approaches. Noticeably, Self-efficacy theory and SDT have been employed as analytical frameworks to investigate the cognitive and motivational processes underlying player engagement, satisfaction, and prospective self-improvement in gaming.

The action of play, characterized by its intrinsic motivation as it focuses on the process or results of the activity rather than external rewards (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), is often viewed as a unique type of action. In gaming contexts, the intrinsic motivation of play is heavily related to the state of "presence," defined as the feeling of being inside the game world rather than perceiving oneself as an external person manipulating controls or characters (Ryan et al., 2006). The occurrence of "presence" enhances the perceived completeness, realism, and pervasiveness of the narrative world depicted on-screen (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), subsequently highlighting the importance of players' effecting experience.

Effectance is the innate desire to have an effect on one's environment to establish and maintain a sense of control (White, 1959). The reflectance of players can be enhanced by providing clear goals, constructive feedback, and opportunities for mastery increase in the game, which also positively influence self-efficacy (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). Experience of effecting boosts players' persistence, problem-solving strategies, and emotional responses to in-game challenges. These factors enable players to maintain a positive self-perception and further motivate them to continue playing (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006).

Engaging in media entertainment consumption such as gaming is often a recurring activity; from a psychological perspective, rapid and intuitive decisions to play video games can be seen as intended actions that emerge from self-reflection (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). In

which individuals compare their anticipated cognitive and emotional states during gameplay with their desired states. Past studies have used the concept of mental models to define the internal cognitive representations (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), formed through a combination of perception and prior experience of one's potential future emotional or cognitive state following the execution of a specific action. Repeated exposure to related objects or processes in a gaming context can contribute to developing and evolving these mental representations (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), thereby shaping their adaptivity to the demands of specific game environments, hence contributing to the decisions and actions towards resilience-building.

Incorporating SDT into this perspective, video games are particularly well-suited for satisfying the three basic psychological needs. The extent to which a game satisfied these needs was positively associated with players' engagement and persistence in playing the game (Ryan et al., 2006):

1. The need for competence is satisfied when games implement intuitive controls, tasks that offer ongoing optimal challenges, and opportunities for positive feedback.

2. The need for autonomy is satisfied by game designs that offer significant flexibility in movement and strategies, choice over tasks and goals, and rewards that provide information on performance rather than control players' behavior.

3. The need for relatedness is satisfied through in-game cooperation, competition, and social interactions with fellow players and online communities.

SDT can be applied at the level of the player's motivation to play a game and factors that may motivate the player's character or avatar acting within the game (Ryan et al., 2006). Following each play session, players' understanding of their experiences during a particular type of action, such as computer gameplay, is expanded, modified, and refined (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). Linking this model to the context of Soulsborne games, a quote from Hidetaka Miyazaki, the executive behind FromSoftware, specified the following design philosophy during an interview (MacDonald, 2011):

But the main concept behind the death system is trial and error. The difficulty is high, but always achievable. Everyone can achieve without all that much technique – all you need to do is learn, from your deaths, how to overcome the difficulties. Overcoming challenges by learning something in a game is a very rewarding feeling, and that's what I wanted to prioritise in *Dark Souls* and *Demon's Souls*. And because of the online, you can even learn something from somebody else's death. I'd say that was the main concept behind the online, too.

Evidently, the design formula of Soulsborne games aligns well with the principles mentioned above through their challenging and immersive nature. However, these games' difficulty levels and learning curves indisputably may not appeal to everyone. While the long-term effects or issues related to gaming have not been extensively considered in conjunction with motivational theories in these studies, the importance of individual differences in video game engagement has been heavily acknowledged (Ryan et al., 2006; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006).

With this theoretical groundwork in place, the exploration into the compelling question of how these challenging games can yield positive psychological outcomes can be further examined, contributing to the broader understanding of this widely reported therapeutic influence of these games in the player community.

Chapter 2: Hypothesis

This study aims to answer the following research question: How do players experience resilience boosts in Soulsborne games, and what are the psychological mechanisms underlying specific design elements?

Based on the existing literature, this study hypothesizes that: engagement in Soulsborne games, which employ a design formula that promotes self-efficacy and basic psychological needs, will lead to an increase in player resilience and positive behavior change that can be adapted into real-life personal growth.

To test the hypothesis and address the research question, this study employs two qualitative methods: close reading of common design elements and content analysis of public online discussions. The results of this test will provide insights into the relationship between the design philosophy of Soulsborne games and the increase in resilience of players, contributing to the existing knowledge on this phenomenon and informing future research on the psychological mechanisms underlying game design.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to thoroughly evaluate the hypothesis, a mixed-methods approach is adopted to examine specific design elements and player experiences, combining close reading of common design elements with content analysis of public online discussions.

The close reading involves a detailed examination of four common design elements shared across Soulsborne games through the theoretical framework established in the background of this study, while comparing these elements to resilience training programs used in high-risk professions such as military, healthcare, and police. These two analysis provides a deeper understanding of how Soulsborne games may foster resilience in players by implementing or diverging from established resilience-building techniques.

The content analysis examines public online discussions about Soulsborne games and their perceived psychological benefits. It analyzes players' experiences and perceptions to help identify common themes and patterns of the impact on resilience derived from these games. This method also serves as an essential tool for validating the findings that emerged from the close reading as well as verifying inconsistencies or gaps. The content analysis allows a better understanding of specific aspects that enhance psychological resilience, while refining and augmenting the close reading's findings.

Combining these methods allows for a comprehensive examination of the research question, and provides a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.1 Close Reading

This study employs close reading with two analytical lenses: Competence and Motivation Development, and Resilience Training and Application. Using multiple lenses corroborates findings and fills gaps from each lens. Both perspectives complement each other, revealing insights into the potential implications of the relationship between specific designs and

established resilience-building strategies while exploring the complexity and nuance of the selected elements. These lenses serve as a framework to focus the observation (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011) and reading on selected designs within the extensive experience of Soulsborne games.

Selected Design Elements

Four key design elements have been carefully selected for analysis. All four designs are shared across Soulsborne games, except *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. These elements are integral to the game experience in each title:

1. Fog Doors: Fog doors are barriers that separate different areas or sections of the game, often leading to boss encounters or new areas to explore. Once players choose to enter the fog door, it would be sealed behind them, preventing them from returning.

2. Death Mechanics: Upon dying, other than the large "YOU DIED" screen, players lose all accumulated in-game currency, which is the only resource for attribute upgrades, and must retrieve them from their previous location.

3. World-building: The dark settings in Soulsborne games often consist of a bleak atmosphere, a fragmented but complex narrative, and a despairing objective. Players often cannot influence the world or the story to a positive end.

4. Online Features: The online features consist of cooperative and competitive multiplayer options, as well as asynchronous interactions such as leaving or reading messages, replaying player deaths, and viewing the phantoms of other players.

Analytical Lenses

Lens One: Competence and Motivation Development. The first lens focuses on developing competence and motivation, drawing upon the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977)

and the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Both theories acknowledge the importance of individuals believing in their abilities and skills to navigate challenges and accomplish goals successfully.

In self-efficacy theory, perceived self-competence influences one's vulnerability to self-arousal. People who start to believe they are more capable than previously assumed are more likely to function better in threatening situations; therefore, successful performance consequently reinforces self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Similarly, in SDT, the satisfaction of the need to feel competence contributes to motivation and engagement in activities, ultimately influencing one's well-being and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 1985).

Therefore, four critical factors for developing self-competence and motivation can be identified within the combination of both conceptual frameworks:

1. Autonomous mastery experiences: Successfully completed tasks or challenges that are self-directed, reinforcing one's belief in their abilities and skills (Bandura, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1987).

2. Intrinsically motivated goals: Personally fulfilling objectives that inherently stimulate and drive individuals to engage and persist in activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Locke & Latham, 2002).

3. Constructive feedback: Meaningful inputs about one's performance, assisting in identifying strengths and areas for improvement (Butler & Winne, 1995; Schunk, 1983).

4. Social connections: Interpersonal trusting relationships and interactions that offer emotional support, validation, and opportunities for learning (Hsu, 2007; Reis et al., 2018).

Applying this lens when analyzing specific designs helps identify which elements contribute to competence development and motivation enhancement, and how these elements align with the principles of self-efficacy and self-determination theories.

Lens Two: Resilience Training and Application. The second lens involves comparing specific design elements of Soulsborne games to targeted resilience training programs used in training among high-risk professions. The factors mediating the psychological impact of

Soulsborne games, which require players to face challenges and repeatedly pick themselves up, are likely similar to those found in these programs. This comparison aims to identify similarities and differences between these programs and the game elements, and assess how they contribute to fostering psychological resilience in players.

This section examines the design elements through a comparative lens of the following established programs:

1. The SMART program (Sood et al., 2011): The program is an adaption of Attention and Interpretation Training. Attention training involves mindfulness techniques, while Interpretation training involves cognitive restructuring techniques. The study showed that medical professionals who took part in the program experienced significant improvements in their resilience, perceived stress, and anxiety.

2. Trauma resilience training(Arnetz et al., 2009): This is a trauma resilience training program specifically designed for police officers, involving education about stress and trauma, imagery and verbal exposure exercise, promoting coping skills and fostering personal growth. The study found that the officers who underwent the training demonstrated improved psychophysiological responses and performance.

3. Transforming Lives Through Resilience Education: The program aims to equip students with cognitive skills to cope with academic stress, through educational modules focused on coping modes, responsibilities, interpretation of events, and social connections. The study suggested that students who completed the program exhibited increased resilience and better stress-coping mechanisms (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008)

4. The MRT program (Reivich et al., 2011): The Master Resilience Training (MRT) program implemented in the US Army is designed to enhance psychological resilience and overall well-being among soldiers. The training focuses on teaching soldiers to recognize and dispute irrational or unhelpful thoughts, develop practical mental skills, enhance emotional awareness and regulation, and cultivate social support networks.

Applying this lens helps determine where specific design elements are situated in the basis and techniques employed in these professional resilience training programs, providing insights into how Soulsborne games may mimic or diverge from validated resilience-building techniques.

3.2 Content Analysis

This study further employs a content analysis as the complementary method to the close reading. Focusing on examining public online discussion about Soulsborne games and players' perceived psychological impacts, the content analysis helps provide knowledge to this phenomenon (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) by identifying common themes and patterns related to resilience derived from these games. By evaluating real-world player experiences, this method not only corroborates the findings of the close reading but also uncovers potential divergences, adding richness and depth to the analysis.

Data Collection

To investigate the impact of Soulsborne games on players' mental strength, specifically the capability to self-regulate in the face of adversity, this content analysis collects data from publicly available comments and discussions on social media platforms, namely, Reddit and YouTube. The inductive approach utilized during data collection allows for identifying categories and themes directly from the raw data without predefined codes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Thomas, 2006), making it particularly suitable for understanding players' perspectives on this topic.

Relevant data is gathered using a combination of keywords and phrases related to the Soulsborne games and mental strength. Search terms, such as "[Game Title] saved me" and "[Game Title] helped me," are used to identify applicable threads or videos containing players' accounts of their own experiences and descriptions of how the games boosted their psychological resilience, compilatory videos or posts are not collected.

Upon pinpointing applicable threads and videos, three Reddit threads (see Appendix A, B, and C) with the most upvotes and two YouTube videos (see Appendix D and E) with the most views across searches from all strings of keywords were selected for further analysis. This approach aimed to source the most engaging and popular content, reflecting a broader consensus of the player community. The selected posts and videos were then thoroughly examined, paying particular attention to the comment sections and replies to specific comments. Relevant comments from each thread and video were selected based on their relevance to the study's objectives. This process started from the top of the default ranking of the comment section. Also, it included replies to specific comments, as they often provided additional context or extended the discussion on the topic.

Due to the constraints of conducting this study individually, the collection ceased when the number of selected comments reached 20 from each thread and video to ensure a focused analysis. Albeit the limitation, the point of saturation has been reached with gathered comments, which ensured the data's adequate representation of players' experiences while maintaining analysis feasibility (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Ethics. The data collection phase involved extracting comments from public threads and videos, operating under the premise that these are open-access, public domains, namely Reddit and YouTube. It should be noted that these platforms have no imposed restrictions on access or privacy settings, which ensured that the collection process did not involve any interaction with users that could alter the organic nature of the online environments.

The comments collected for this study were made voluntarily by players in public online spaces. It is reasonable to posit that these comments have a diminished expectation of privacy, considering the open-access nature of the platforms. These comments are inherently intended for public consumption and discourse. And the lack of registration requirements means the comments are accessible to any internet user, irrespective of their membership status on these platforms.

The gathered data consisted solely of the commenters' usernames and the creation dates. While this approach may seem to bypass traditional informed consent, it adheres to the ethical guidelines for research in public online spaces (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Following collection, the data was carefully reviewed to ensure no accidental inclusion of personally identifiable information, prioritizing the protection of commenters' identities and upholding confidentiality.

Given the nature of the data and the platforms from which it was sourced, it was deemed that informed consent was not necessary (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). The absence of informed consent does not suggest a disregard for ethical considerations but represents a nuanced understanding of the genuine perspectives of Soulsborne players.

Coding Scheme

All posts, videos, and comments were thoroughly examined following the inductive approach outlined by Thomas (2006), which refers to where themes and keywords emerge directly from the raw data during inspecting. In developing the coding scheme for the analysis, an iterative process was employed to ensure the depth and breadth of data were appropriately encapsulated. Initially, an exploratory coding process was applied to the first set of data collected from the first Reddit thread documented in Appendix A. Multiple read-throughs allowed the identification of recurring themes of two corresponding upper-level categories: Player Experiences and Game Elements. The initial coding helped in formulating a preliminary labeling framework, which included lower-level categories such as "personal challenges" under Player Experiences, and "arts and visuals" under Game Elements.

Next, the preliminary coding framework was applied to the reading of the comments gathered in the second Reddit thread documented in Appendix B. Modifications were carefully made as needed to accommodate new themes or patterns in the comments. This process of applying and refining the coding framework was repeated in each set of comments gathered, till

a stable and comprehensive set of codes was established. The coding scheme was then applied to analyze the longer and more elaborated data, two videos with transcripts documented in Appendix D and E, to determine whether adjustments are necessary. After this step, the final coding scheme served as a guide for consistent labeling across the data gathered.

Player Experiences. This upper-level category, Player Experiences, was formulated to capture the broad spectrum of personal descriptions and perceptions of the emotional and psychological impacts related to playing Soulsborne games. This category was not developed inductively but directly configured to test the hypothesis in dialogue with the close reading. This category encompassed four lower-level categories that emerged from the data rather than being predefined: Personal Challenge and Coping, Emotional Empowerment and Refuge, Social Support and Community, and Existential and Philosophical Resonance.

Personal Challenge and Coping: This recurring theme applies to comments that give attention to descriptions of personal difficulties, from dealing with life-altering events to mental health struggles. It encapsulates players' journey of building perseverance and the capability to not "go hollow" fostered within the in-game environment. Example:

So glad I'm not alone. Dad spent 3 months fighting cancer before he passed, I would stay up until 2am to give him meds and spend the quiet nights playing *Bloodborne*. Its comforting having something we can control, a challenge we can rise to meet (u/MarcusOhReallyIsh, 2000). (Appendix B)

Emotional Empowerment and Refuge: This category was used to code player comments that explored the feelings of accomplishment and competency derived from playing the games, as well as instances where describing the games served as safe spaces for satisfaction or distractions from real-world concerns. Example:

Dark souls was a very safe space for me during that time of my life. I would come home and vent my frustrations on the game, would keep getting back up despite repeated

deaths. It gave me accomplishment I didn't have in my own life at the time

(u/MasterKaein, 2021). (Appendix A)

Social Support and Community: This category labels comments that raised the social aspects of these games, including the online multiplayer features, player communities on social platforms, making connections, receiving and offering help to fellow players. Example:

I've found that one of the things i get the most joy from in Souls games is being a sunbro. I always imagine myself as being that guy who helped someone beat a boss they'd been at for hours on end, and I helped them achieve their goal (egirlSkeletor, 2016). (Appendix E)

Existential and philosophical resonance: This theme applies to comments that presented transformative experiences or metaphorical implications through the gameplay, including developing deeper connections to reality, finding new meaningful purpose in life, and the complexity of a broader sense of self-development or self-reflection. Example:

Dark Souls made me understand Buddhism. Seriously. I was a Buddhist all my life, but I never really understand it. Then playing Dark Souls and it dawns on me: if you obsess with every single success or failure in your life, you will never get anywhere (VT-mw2zb, 2016). (Appendix E)

Design Elements. The other upper-level category, Design Elements, was also established before the initial coding process. This category aims to aggregate various aspects of the games' design, ranging from gameplay mechanics to the arts and storytelling, that players identified as contributing to their experiences of emotional and psychological impacts. It intends to connect to the Player Experiences category, to scrutinize the interpretations drawn from the close reading. Four lower-level categories, representing different game design aspects, were derived from the data: Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy, Narrative and Worldview, Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics, and Online Multiplayer Features.

Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy: This category labeled comments highlighting the games' challenging mechanics and the underlying trial-and-error philosophy. Mentions and discussions of the death system and boss fights were also coded in this category. Example:

I haven't been as happy in years as I was when I beat O+S and the four kings the other day. I am incredibly sad I finally beat it (best 187 hours of my life) but I am more excited than before to dive back in and get to the dukes archives so I can play the DLC (u/IAmAbomination, 2015). (Appendix C)

Narrative and Worldview: This category applies to comments that delve into the lore and storylines of these games. Occurrences of NPCs' backstories, different endings, and quoting game scripts were also considered relevant to the overall worldview of the games. Example:

Solaire reminded me so much of my older brother whom I've hardly seen at all in the past 8 years, summoning him felt like he was always looking out for me like my brother did when we were growing up (u/FurockBeast, 2015). (Appendix B)

Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics: This theme was used to categorize comments that described the game's visual-auditory style and level design, including the intricate map layout and shortcuts, graphics and soundscape, and the immersive environments created by the detailed world-building. Example:

I was working a full-time job, going to class and dealing with the biggest (and most important IMO) breakup of my life. Funny thing was, in the area that I lived and the time of year, the sky looked like it did in the undead burg...... so ya'know, that helped me praise the sun…(u/Cheesecake_Delight, 2015). (Appendix C)

Online Features and Multiplayer: This code was assigned to comments discussing the games' online features and multiplayer aspects. Which included discussions about cooperative or competitive play, asking for assistance in the community, and other shared experiences with other players. Example:

And relating back to the games' coop elements, that it's okay to reach out to others for

help. There will always be people who would be glad to render their assistance to you

(haziqzaq, 2021). (Appendix D)

With the coding scheme established, the data went through another close review. Each

piece of comment was assigned with applicable labels according to their relevancy defined by

the coding framework. The two videos and some comments have fallen under multiple

categories, as expected.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process commenced with systematically assigning codes from the

two upper-level categories to each comment by meticulous examinations. Alongside text

comments, the two videos included in the data gathered were also subjected to rigorous

analysis. A similar coding and categorization approach was employed, with breaking them into

segments and highlighting relevant sentences within the transcripts.

Throughout the analyzing process, the comments are thoroughly read and reviewed

several times to discern the experiences players had with the mentioned Soulsborne game, as

well as the psychological impact they described. Reflexivity and transparency are maintained by

addressing biases or preconceptions that may influence data interpretation when reporting

findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

As the content analysis aimed to investigate how specific design elements of Soulsborne

games contribute to players' psychological experiences, significant attention was given to

identifying and marking down the link between codes from Player Experiences and Design

Elements when these categories intersected within the same comment. These intersections

formed crucial data points to reveal the specific type of model in which the category is integrated.

According to Thomas (2006), potential frameworks include open networks, temporal sequences,

and causal networks. To maintain consistency with the inductive process, the models of the data

gathered are not predetermined. Identifying these models or frameworks presented in the data

indicates the endpoint of the content analysis.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

The investigation of this study intends to extend beyond the surface-level mechanics of Soulsborne titles. The close reading of selected design elements, and content analysis of public social platforms aims to explore the matter further into the factors that formed the core player experience.

4.1 Close Reading

The close reading serves as an essential tool for discerning the nuanced psychological impacts interwoven into the player experience, necessitating a comparative examination of selected elements across the games. The insights derived from this methodical analysis are integral to the broader investigation, and correlate with the findings from the content analysis to create a holistic view to evaluate the hypothesis.

Fog Doors

Fog doors, also known as "fog walls" among the player community, are a common gameplay mechanic in Soulsborne titles, serving as gateways that separate different areas, boss fights, or other significant encounters (see Figure 1). They appear as walls of fog with a translucent or mist-like quality that shimmers and obscure the player's view of what lies beyond them.

Figure 1

Fog doors in Soulsborne games

Upon approaching a fog door in front of a boss arena, the player can choose to enter, but it is only possible to use it in the opposite direction once the boss has been vanquished. Once the boss is defeated, the fog gate that led to its arena usually disappears, providing a clear path to proceed further into the game world.

Fog doors compared. In *Demon's Souls* and its 2020 remake, fog doors take a transparent appearance with a predominantly white hue, and serve primarily as barriers to boss battles as well as to separate different sections within a level.

Like *Demon's Souls*, the fog doors in the Dark Souls Trilogy are also tinted with grayish white, but they are not transparent anymore. Depending on which installation in the trilogy, the volume of fog doors can differ. The fog doors in the trilogy are placed before boss battles and in-between different areas.

However, the fog doors in *Bloodborne* have brought back the translucent effect, making what is behind them even clearer than *Demon's Souls*. They also appear to be glowing ethereally with the pale-blue swirling mist.

The fog doors in *Bloodborne* are not used to separate different sections of the map; they only lead to boss fights, and are only visible after the player has been in the boss arena before.

Instead of the typical veil of fog, *Elden Ring* uses walls of gold and black as the color of its fog doors leading to the boss arenas. Typical white fog doors still exist to serve as barriers to separate sections in dungeon levels. The golden fog doors are completely nontransparent, while the white ones provide a glimpse of what is in the following area.

Reading for Competence and Motivation Development. Examining the fog doors in Soulsborne games through the analytical lens of competence and motivation development, it becomes evident that this mechanic plays a pivotal role in fostering autonomous mastery experiences and is spontaneously construed as the embodiment of intrinsically motivated goals.

A fog door serves as a physical and metaphorical barrier that players must confront, and it presents a choice for players to decide whether they should interact with it. Autonomy refers to people experiencing themselves as initiators of their own behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1987); each time the player faces a fog door, they still have the choice to keep exploring other areas in most Soulsborne games. Some exceptions exist when players encounter the boss for the first time in several games, but the option to not enter the fog doors would still be accessible after the first encounter. When contextual elements support autonomy rather than exercising control, individuals generally exhibit increased intrinsic motivation, creativity, cognitive adaptability, and positive emotional responses, consequently leading to elevated perceived competence and an increased willingness to engage in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

The fog door also creates a sense of anticipation and urgency, as players know they will be tested and must take responsibility for their progress and develop the necessary skills to achieve their goals. Considering the difficulty of boss fights in these games is more often than

not very high, the intention, which refers to the determination that arises from one's desire to achieve positive results to engage in specific actions (Deci & Ryan, 1987), to enter the fog door often takes a certain degree of courage. However, there is a positive linear relationship between goal difficulty and performance, with the most challenging goals resulting in the highest levels of effort and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). Correspondingly, the fog doors promote this determination and performance by placing a clear boundary between the player and the upcoming challenge.

Moreover, fog doors can make players do better during boss fights. According to SDT, different types of goals lead to distinct behavioral and emotional outcomes. Setting specific, challenging goals can constantly lead to better performance compared to easy or vague goals (Locke & Latham, 2002); likewise, if there are only simple and easy successes, people come to expect quick results and quickly lose their determination to failures (Bandura, 1999). When comparing the fog door mechanics with the four primary factors of goals that influence performance (Locke & Latham, 2002), evident correlations can be identified:

1. Fog doors provided well-defined directions by focusing players' attention and effort on relevant targets while diverting from irrelevant ones.

2. Fog doors indicate obstacles behind them, setting a higher effort requirement than safe areas. As a result, energizing players.

3. The challenges implied by fog doors' presence extend the time players decide to spend on their endeavor, hence impacting their persistence.

4. Fog doors stimulate the arousal, discovery, and utilization of knowledge and skill relevant to impending challenges, indirectly affecting players' actions.

Goals serve both as an objective or outcome to strive for and as a standard to evaluate satisfaction (Locke & Latham, 2002), just as the fog doors encourage players to reflect on their current capabilities and devise strategies to overcome the impending obstacle.

The relationship between goal setting and performance is strongest when individuals are committed to their goals, with commitment being particularly crucial for challenging goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). By defeating the boss encounter and progressing to the next area of the map, fog doors serve as a personal validation of the player's actions, that they have bested the challenges behind them and they have indeed done it independently. When a goal is carried out autonomously or with a strong sense of volition, goal-oriented behaviors can be well-motivated and lead to more positive outcomes associated with self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

After players become convinced that they have what it takes to succeed, they perverse in the face of upcoming adversity and will be more capable of rebounding from setbacks (Bandura, 1999). This result means that even when the challenge behind a fog door is not that difficult, it can still enable players to go beyond their current skill attainment and give them the confidence to accomplish more in new circumstances. The satisfaction derived from overcoming these challenges is intrinsically rewarding; it involves acquiring cognitive and behavioral self-regulation skills for creating and executing effective actions, producing a more robust and generalized efficacy belief than relying on observed experiences or verbal persuasion (Bandura et al., 1999).

From a symbolic perspective, fog doors serve as transitional points, signaling a shift in challenge or environment; they are a tangible representation of progress and salient milestones throughout the game. The fog evokes a sense of obscurity and uncertainty; stepping through the fog door signifies that the player is ready to face a new challenge, overcome obstacles, and learn from their experiences.

The fog doors, which play the role of intrinsically motivated goals that facilitate autonomous mastery experiences, impart vital cognitive skills and behavioral changes that can be harnessed in real-life circumstances, potentially fostering a greater sense of self-efficacy and improving their resilience to stressors.

Reading for Resilience Training and Application. The comparative examination of the fog door mechanic in the landscape of resilience training utilized in professional settings

illuminates an undercurrent of shared principles and mechanisms in their respective approaches to cultivating adaptivity and alleviating excessive thinking. In both contexts, a shift away from the instinctive human tendency to focus on future threats and past imperfections can be observed, emphasizing delaying judgment and fostering openness to novelty and change instead.

One primary notion of the SMART program, which was used in training physicians and medical faculties, is to target the tendency of human attention to dwell on past failures and future uncertainties (Sood et al., 2011), an inclination which often results in a cycle of excessive thinking and ineffective thought suppression.

Much like how the SMART program navigates the threat-focused cognitive landscape, the fog door mechanic works against the player's instinctual preoccupation with presenting only a boss fight for the player to focus on. It does not allow the player to see or predict what lies beyond the arena until they have succeeded and crossed the threshold on the other side.

This element is designed in such a way that it demands engagement from the player rather than reaction. It functions as a metaphorical exercise in mindfulness, echoing the principles of Attention and Interpretation Therapy (Sood et al., 2011) as incorporated in the SMART program. By focusing on the immediate experience and not allowing for anticipation of what is yet to come, both the fog door mechanic and the SMART program assist individuals in reframing their cognitive processes, redirecting their attention to the task at hand, ultimately cultivating a mental state that promotes resilience and adaptability when facing adversity.

In connection with limiting players' cognitive activities, the Resilience Education Program (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008) has also introduced the concept of one's circle of influence during one of four two-hour classroom sessions. The Resilience Education Program emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for "above-the-line" situations, referring to the ability to make choices and create within one's circle of influence (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). Similarly, every decision made, every tactic employed, and every step taken towards a fog door is a manifestation of the player's power to choose and act. Players cannot rely on extra resources or

additional assistance to combat what holds inside the fog. Their circle of influence lies within their choices, including the decision to step through the door and face the challenge that awaits.

Conversely, a player's reluctance to only focus on what they chose to face might be seen as an example of a "below-the-line" response in the context of the Resilience Education Program (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008), which can consequentially cause one's circle of influence to shrink. Suppose the player wants to save resources, like health potions, for the next area after the boss fight. In that case, this can be seen as a "below-the-line" response, leading them to hesitate or even be unable to successfully defeat the enemy as the fight is outside their shrunken circle of influence.

The fog door mechanics also parallel the resilience competencies taught in the MRT program used in the US Army (Reivich et al., 2011). Before passing through a fog door, players must consider their current health status, available healing items, the potential intensity of the imminent encounter, and their physical and mental energy levels. This skill can be seen as a technique corresponding to the concept of energy activation and performance, one of the competencies introduced in Module Two of the MRT program. Energy management, defined by the program, is where optimal performance necessitates understanding the level of energy required for a task and the ability to self-assess one's current state (Reivich et al., 2011) and ultimately promoting a form of resilience that can be found in the objectives of the fog door mechanic.

A further comparison can be drawn between the fog doors and the skill of minimizing catastrophic thinking. As introduced in the MRT program, the fundamental technique for limiting these thoughts is to distinguish between contingency planning and catastrophizing (Reivich et al., 2011); equivalent exercises can be found in the SMART program and Resilience Education Program. To successfully walk out of the fog doors, the player must learn to anticipate likely outcomes and plan for them, rather than succumb to irrational fears of the worst-case scenario. This mechanic shares the same propositions of the three professional training programs,

strengthening players' ability to think positively yet realistically, and remain motivated and confident under challenging circumstances.

Death Mechanics

When a player's character dies in a Soulsborne game, the player is greeted with a large "YOU DIED" message displayed prominently on the screen (see Figure 2). Then the player would be resurrected at the last activated checkpoint. All non-unique enemies in the game world would respawn, forcing the player to retrace their steps and re-engage with previously defeated foes.

Figure 2

Death screens of Soulsborne games

Upon death, the player loses all of their currently held currency; they have one chance to recover their lost currency by returning to the spot where they died and interacting with it.

Death Mechanics Compared. In *Demon's Souls*, the player loses all their accumulated "Souls" upon death and reverts to "Soul Form," which has half the maximum health of the "Body Form" before death. "Body Form" also enables players to summon help via online features. To regain their maximum health and revert to the "Body Form," the player must either defeat a boss, use a rare item, or help another player defeat a boss as a summoned phantom. Additionally, dying in "Body Form" affects the game world's "World Tendency," making the game harder as it shifts towards "Black World Tendency."

For the Dark Souls series, the player not only loses all their "Souls," but another resource called "Humanity" when they die, which has a wide range of consequences.

In *Dark Souls*, "Humanity" points are consumables used for various purposes, including kindling "Bonfires" (checkpoints), increasing damage and defense, and reviving players to "Human Form," which serves a similar function as the "body form" in *Demon's Souls*. The held "humanity" points will be left with the bloodstain located where the player died in addition to the "Souls," thus increasing the price of dying twice in a row.

In *Dark Souls II*, the player's "Humanity" will be stripped away each time they die; this process is called "Hollowing," with the effect of reduced maximum health and visually degraded appearance. To revert back to "Human Form," the player needs to consume an item called "Human Effigy." Instead of enabling online play like previous games, this item can limit certain multiplayer features when used on bonfires. In addition, *Dark Souls II* has a death count which tracks the number of deaths that occurred in-game globally.

In *Dark Souls III*, "Human Effigy" is replaced by "Ember"; it will boost the player's maximum health and allows a player to become a multiplayer host. If the player acquires a "Dark Sigil," the process of "Hollowing" will begin and accumulatively influence them every time they die. However, even though the player character's appearance may start decaying, this has no negative effects, such as in *Dark Souls II*.

Death mechanics in *Bloodborne* are similar to those in the Dark Souls trilogy; the player loses their accumulated "Blood Echoes" and respawns at the last activated "Lamp" when they die. The player also needs to return to their bloodstain to retrieve the lost currency. However, in *Bloodborne*, nearby enemies can absorb the player's bloodstain, and the player must defeat that specific enemy to regain their "Blood Echoes."

Lastly, the process of dying in *Elden Ring* works similarly to other Soulsborne games. The player drops all their "Runes" and respawns in either a "Site or Grace" or a nearby "Statue of Marika." Instead of a bloodstain, the player's lost currency will appear as a small cluster of golden branches. It will also be marked on the in-game map for easier retrieval.

Reading for Competence and Motivation Development. Upon analyzing the death mechanics in Soulsborne games through the lens of competence and motivation development, it is apparent that this system is far from a simple punitive measure. It serves as a robust system that provides constructive feedback to the players and significantly contributes to shaping autonomous mastery experiences.

The games' demanding nature and notoriously high difficulty level are the key aspects of their identity and appeal. The stakes are high, as death carries tangible consequences, making every encounter and decision meaningful. This threat forces players to confront their limitations and develop their ability to self-regulate, as they cannot rely on the game to provide direct assistance or guidance. When players actively set goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies to optimize the outcome of their enemy encounters, the process can be referred to as Self-Regulated Learning (Butler & Winne, 1995).

Feedback in the learning process can take various forms. The simplest and most common type is external feedback. However, feedback can also be generated internally by the learner through self-monitoring, and it is a natural part of engaging in tasks (Butler & Winne, 1995). When comparing the death mechanics in the games with monitoring, which refers to the

process of reflecting on the learning performance autonomously, they are consistent with the three essential components of internally generated feedback (Butler & Winne, 1995):

1. Evaluating task success from different aspects of the goal as players estimate their capability to vanquish the enemy or clear the area.

2. Assessing the effectiveness of various strategies in relation to expected or desired outcomes as players analyze their approach and devise new strategies to overcome their challenges.

3. The emotional responses are associated with judgments about the outcome or progress, as players feel satisfied when victorious or frustrated when defeated.

Monitoring plays a crucial role in Self-Regulated Learning as it assesses progress relative to goals and generates feedback to guide further actions (Butler & Winne, 1995); these pieces of feedback are often attributed to various causes, such as ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck (Schunk, 1983). Therefore, each death in these games serves as a learning opportunity, teaching players about the game's mechanics, enemy behavior, and level design. Death is signaling to players that their current approach is insufficient to overcome the challenges they face.

For example, when players die of an enemy attack, they might realize that their timing or positioning was off, the feedback generated during monitoring prompting them to adjust their approach in the next attempt. Similarly, death may reveal hidden traps or environmental hazards that players need to be mindful of; the eventual success reinforces their self-perceptions of competence and mastery, validating their learning and effort.

Enactive mastery experiences hold the most significant influence in providing efficacy information as they offer the most authentic reflection of whether one can utilize the necessary resources to succeed (Bandura, 1999). The death mechanics are so closely intertwined with the players' sense of progression and achievement that it points to the beneficial purposes of some difficulties and setbacks in the sustainability of effort on the road to achieving desired goals

(Bandura, 1999). Expectations of future outcomes partially depend on the attributions gathered during monitoring (Schunk, 1983), which signifies that attributional feedback can help players by supporting their self-perceptions of progress and validating their sense of efficacy.

Whether from external or internal sources, feedback from setbacks is a type of information that allows a learner to validate, expand upon, modify, fine-tune, or rearrange previous information they had (Butler & Winne, 1995). This information can have an impact on various aspects of an individual, not limited to just subject knowledge; it can change awareness of one's thinking processes or personal beliefs. Correspondingly, the death system in Soulsborne games encourages experimentation and adaptation, as players may need to switch between different weapons, armor, or tactics depending on the situation. This process of trial and error enables players to gain in-depth knowledge of mastering the game and discover their preferred playstyle.

The cognitive basis of developing competencies is facilitated by breaking down complex skills into smaller, more manageable subskills and structuring them accordingly (Bandura, 1999). To expand further, building a sense of competency can not be achieved by only providing rules and strategies; people need to utilize and apply those to know they can exercise better control. Ultimately enhance their expectation of positive outcomes through repeated feedback of success emphasizing the gained control, in other words, mastery experiences.

In these games, players face a world filled with powerful adversaries and insurmountable odds, with death as an ever-present threat. The repeated cycle of dying and learning from mistakes in the game is akin to the process of self-improvement and self-discovery in real-world scenarios; it implies that failures are inevitable and demonstrates the fragility and impermanence of life. However, setbacks can lead to growth; thoughtful decisions can empower people to learn from their mistakes and continue moving forward.

Reading for Resilience Training and Application. Several overlaps can be identified from the assessment of the death mechanics in the Soulsborne games and the resilience

training strategies used in academic and professional settings. These pursuits of bolstering resilience in real-life situations often closely align with the strategies for succeeding in these virtual realms, particularly concerning their approaches to stress management and cognitive flexibility. A detailed exploration of these parallels yields a nuanced understanding of how each system cultivates resilience and handles failure.

The MRT program's first training module introduces the five fundamental principles of resilience-building: accuracy over speed, practice, learning curve, do-over, and optimism. (Reivich et al., 2011), These elements align remarkably well with the experiences of Soulsborne players. These games throw players into a harsh environment with recurrent defeat and death as an inherent part of the gameplay. Accuracy is more important than speed, as rushing can often lead to mistakes and death; practice over defeats, retrying challenges after death, and recognizing the steep learning curve are essential to master the games; finally, the principle of optimism is subtly encouraged as players persist in the face of these brutal fights, hoping to overcome the games' challenges eventually.

The continuous experiences of failure presented in the games function as a form of stressor, much akin to the adversities that the SMART program (Sood et al., 2011) prepares individuals to face. Notably, both systems employ a form of attention training. The SMART program guides individuals to focus their attention, working to hone their capacity to remain present and attentive in stressful situations. While the death mechanics implicitly train players' attention, with punishing consequences for lapses in focus and rewarding successful attention management. The death mechanic prompts players to remain attentive to their surroundings and actions, subtly cultivating the same skills as in the SMART program.

Moreover, both systems strive to enhance cognitive flexibility. The SMART program's therapeutic approach is structured around directing one's interpretations away from fixed prejudices toward more adaptive perceptions and responses to changing circumstances (Sood et al., 2011). The parallels between this technique, and the death system in these games that

encourages players to adapt their strategies and techniques to respond to repeated deaths, promoting a change from potential frustration towards a healthier perspective.

The death mechanics also presents intriguing resemblances to the resilience model taught in the Resilience Education Program (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008), specifically in regards to the four typical responses to stress listed during the training: give up, put up, bounce up, and step up, which can all be used to assess player's resilience against the death mechanics.

The "give up" response, characterized by succumbing to stress and feeling defeated, finds its mirror in players who abandon the game due to their difficulties. This response is commonly seen in the community, as the games' recurrent death can often feel overwhelming. Likewise, the "put up" response in the Resilience Education Program refers to where individuals grapple with the stressful situation but continue to function at a diminished level; it can be observed in players who persist despite the repeated in-game deaths. These players continue to navigate the game, even as their morale or enthusiasm may wane due to the constant defeat.

The "bounce up" and "step up" responses, indicate resilience and growth respectively; these responses manifest in players who adapt and thrive within the game's challenging environment. "Bouncing up" is seen in players who utilize each death as a learning opportunity, adjusting their strategies and techniques to return to their previous level of proficiency. "Stepping up," on the other hand, emphasizes growth beyond previous functioning levels; this is exhibited in players who leverage the game's challenges to exceed their prior skill levels, such as partaking in speed runs or no-damage runs.

The coping mechanisms discussed in the Resilience Education Program include problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. When compared, problem-focused coping can be more effective with actions such as operational planning, positive reframing, and acceptance (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). Likewise, the death mechanics encourage problem-focused coping by providing constructive feedback, stimulating players to actively change their approach, and accepting what they can and cannot do as integral to the game's progression.

The mental agility and self-regulation skills come from continually combating discouraging thoughts stemming from repeated failures and instead focusing on immediate tasks and learning from their mistakes. From the perspective of training coping skills, the death mechanics can be seen as a unique form of resilience training. The sense of achievement players get from the game world can similarly cultivate gratitude as players appreciate their growth and progress.

World-building

Soulsborne games feature a dark and often oppressive atmosphere that contributes to the overall sense of dread and challenge (see Figure 3). The game worlds also are rich in detail and carefully crafted to convey narrative information through the environment. The placement of objects, enemy encounters, and item descriptions all contribute to an indirect storytelling approach, often shrouding the lore in mystery and ambiguity.

Figure 3

Lothric Castle from Dark Souls III (Moopium, 2016)

At the heart of these games lies an indifferent and cruel world that challenges conventional notions of heroism and player centrality. It highlights the insignificance of the player's character in the broader context of the game's universe, as they must actively seek out information to comprehend their role and purpose. Moreover, the lack of a traditional difficulty setting allows no reprieve or tailored experience, further emphasizing that the world does not cater to the player's needs or expectations.

World-building Compared. The narrative in *Demon's Souls* is bleak and minimalistic, but the world-building is detailed and embedded in every corner of this decaying realm. The Kingdom of Boletaria possesses a deep sense of unsettling. Players are faced with two endings: in one, the player succumbs to the power of "the Old One," becoming a new demon and perpetuating the cycle of destruction; in the other, the player resists the temptation of power, only to be left alone in a decayed world, and the souls lost amidst the chaos will be lost forever.

The Dark Souls Trilogy maintains this narrative style with an even more expansive and interconnected world. From the enemy design to the architecture, every aspect across all three games is dark and filled with despair. Each game ends with the player either kindling or extinguishing "the First Flame," with both actions equally resulting in an endless cycle. There are fallen kingdoms, Lordran, Drangleic, and Lothric, with betrayed gods and tragic heroes, but the player character is never one of them. Even in victory, the player is merely a pawn in a larger cycle of futility.

Bloodborne stands apart from other Soulsborne games with its medical, gothic, Lovecraftian setting. Every street and alleyway of Yharnam is presented in front of the player with only hostility and madness. No matter what the player does, most NPCs the player made a connection with still face the same tragic fate. All three endings reveal the insignificance of the player's struggle in the grand scheme of everything. Whether the player submits to Gehrman and forgets everything, or resists and replaces him, or ascends to become an infant "Great One," the city is already without salvation.

In *Elden Ring*, the player character is also a lone figure in the vast world of the Lands Between. For its open-world nature, it offers more story content than previous titles, but without exception, the world begins to decay as players progress through the game. Most NPCs the player encounters or came to know are either dead or suffer a similarly painful destiny. The endings provide three variations of the conclusion for the player; one is to mend the "*Elden Ring*" and perpetuate the same cycle as the new "Elden Lord"; the other one is to inherit the "Frenzied Flame" and become the Lord of Chaos with the task of burning the world; the last variation is to leave The Lands Between with the NPC Ranni to help her establish an Order of her own, left the world without anyone in charge. The player character has never been the focus, and the world's indifference is reinforced by the insignificance of individual actions.

Reading for Competence and Motivation Development. Through a detailed inspection of the world-building characteristics in Soulsborne games, interpreted through the analytical lens of competence and motivation development, these elements symbolically represent the relentless struggle inherent in real-world experiences.

The in-game atmospheres range from the Gothic, decaying grandeur of *Bloodborne*'s Yharnam to the somber, desolate landscapes of *Dark Souls*' Lordran, evoking a melancholy mood through lighting, architecture, and environmental details. The games create a palpable sense of place that is both haunting and captivating. However, they never write their stories focusing on the player character, reflecting the powerlessness of individuals that resonates with the human condition.

This unique approach to storytelling serves as a metaphorical embodiment of intrinsically motivated goals, mirroring the resilience required to navigate real-life adversities. Intrinsic motivation differentiates from extrinsic motivation by its root from the inherent satisfaction derived from an activity rather than driven by external factors such as rewards or punishments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT emphasizes that powerful goals that fulfill one's psychological needs can heavily influence the regulatory processes guiding one's goal pursuits; if not directly

connected to fundamental needs, pursuing the goals would not consistently result in differences in personal well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The worlds in these games are designed to challenge players, to force them into a hostile environment. When the in-game world does not yield easily to the player but necessitates persistence, strategic decision-making, and continuous self-regulation, aside from deterring the players, it also kindles a drive to navigate through the obstacles which inherently associates with the psychological needs of competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This determination fuels an intrinsically motivated goal to overcome the hurdles presented in the game, reflecting life's harsh realities.

On top of that, the challenging characteristic of these game environments created a high-performance cycle, which describes how high goals lead to high performance, which subsequently results in positive or rewarding events (Locke & Latham, 2002). In the context of Soulsborne games, the rewards can be a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction, in turn, bring about an increase in self-efficacy concerning one's perceived ability to tackle future challenges, ultimately leading to the setting of even higher goals.

The progression in the game is thus not just about conquering the game world, but it also becomes a journey of growth and development. Despite its apparent hostility, the intricate world design offers players a platform to hone their skills, develop strategies, and demonstrate their gained competencies. Each triumph, discovered path, and decoded environmental clue contribute to cognitive feedback results from monitoring, which supplies information that connects Indicators and achievement (Butler & Winne, 1995). The impacts of the world-building on players aligned well with the three major types of cognitive feedback:

1. Task validity feedback: Reflects an observer's perception of the relationship between a task's cues and achievement. Which is manifest in the cues presented within the game's environment. The richly detailed worlds of Soulsborne games provide a myriad of vital cues in various forms, such as enemy placements, subtle changes in the environment,

and NPC dialogs. This feedback brings the player's attention to the relationship between a cue and their desired outcome.

2. Cognitive validity feedback: Pertains to a learner's perceptions of the connection between a cue and achievement. Which is presented in the player's perception of the relationship between cues presented in-game and their achievements. For instance, when a mimic enemy has attacked the player, they learned to attack a chest before opening it. This feedback helps to indicate how the player perceives cues and judges performance to be influenced by them.

3. Functional validity feedback: Describes the relation between a learner's estimates of achievement and their actual performance in general. For example, when the player estimates their capability to explore a certain area of the map, they compare their estimation with the actual experience of going to the area of the map. This feedback helps to assess the player's perception and suggest adjustments accordingly.

This feedback from the game world is structured to provide constructive information rather than give what is already known. As a result, the satisfaction derived from subsequential accomplishments provides an intrinsic reward that motivates players to continue their exploration and progress, even in the face of the game world's indifference and harshness. In this sense, the game becomes an allegory of the player's ambitions and aspirations, fueling the pursuit of goals in the presence of the complexity and unpredictability of life.

In the minimalist storytelling style of these games, players are often presented with allusions to past events and narratives of the ascendancy and downfall of formidable beings. This emphasis on the cyclicality of existence, along with the transient nature of power and glory, can echo players' real-world experiences. The games thus cultivate a profound sense of relatability and engagement, creating a resonance that transcends the confines of the virtual realm and connects deeply with the players' personal realities.

Reading for Resilience Training and Application. At first glance, using this lens to look at the world-building characteristics of Soulsborne games with the strategies used in resilience and trauma response training may seem like an abstract, even disparate undertaking. The analysis operates in two distinct spheres, one in the fantastical terrains of games and the other grounded in the authentic high-stakes world of high-risk professions; however, it still attained valuable insights to bridge this perceived gap by exploring the nuanced correlations beneath the apparent contrasts.

Unlike traditional game designs that situate the player's character at the heart of the narrative, these games subvert this norm with an apparent disregard for player-centric conventionalities. When comparing this unsettling narrative philosophy with the Trauma Resilience Training for Police (Arnetz et al., 2009), the design of both systems abstains from the need to accommodate participants' expectations. They leverage critical elements of stress, challenge, and precipitate a kind of psychological shock that demands rapid adaptation.

The Trauma Resilience Training was developed as a primary prevention intervention to equip police officers with the necessary skills to mitigate or neutralize the fear induced by Critical Incident Trauma (CIT) in future exposures (Arnetz et al., 2009). This training focuses on preparing officers to face traumatic incidents and to respond optimally by employing highly realistic critical incident simulations. These severe environments that thrust individuals into discomforting experiences can be recognized in the world-building in Soulsborne games.

The Trauma Resilience Training's deployment of verbal scripts to help officers create mental images of high-stress police work incidents (Arnetz et al., 2009) parallels the games' uncaring worlds and storytelling approach. While the Trauma Resilience Training uses detailed, verbally presented scenarios to encourage mental rehearsal of appropriate responses (Arnetz et al., 2009), Soulsborne games use environmental cues and cryptic narratives to hint at the overarching world-building. In both instances, the active engagement of the individual's imagination deepens their immersion and stimulates adaptive responses.

The subsequent cognitive and behavioral techniques in the Trauma Resilience Training are also mirrored in the gameplay aspect of the world-building. Police officers increase resilience to trauma by a confluence of effective components, including imagery exposure to a range of potential stressors and practices of adaptive responses during and after exposure (Arnetz et al., 2009). Here in the game, players are repeatedly exposed to challenging situations and punishing failures, resulting in a process akin to the exposure exercises; and practice through repeated exposure to failure, mastering skills, and learning to navigate the dark and decaying worlds. Whether in the form of relentless in-game enemies or mental rehearsals of scenario scenarios, both settings help individuals develop a resilience applicable to different stressors.

The MRT program also incorporates a section for building mental toughness in Module Two (Reivich et al., 2011); the skill of identifying deeply held beliefs taught in this module finds a unique parallel in the narrative experience in Soulsborne games. Players may start a game with little hope of finishing it by their current skill levels but exit it with authentic proof that they can do more than they initially assumed. The process of revealing underlying beliefs and thought patterns can heighten self-awareness, fostering the recognition of the counterproductive nature of their initial beliefs (Reivich et al., 2011).

The effects of these strategies are evident in both domains. The Trauma Resilience Training and the MRT program have shown demonstrable improvements in various psychobiological and behavioral measures (Arnetz et al., 2009; Reivich et al., 2011). Similarly, players have repeatedly reported the psychological benefits of journeying through the cruel and punishing worlds in Soulsborne games.

Online Features

The online features in Soulsborne games revolve around cooperative and competitive multiplayer interactions, as well as asynchronous player-to-player communication.

Players can summon other players into their game world for cooperative play. The host player can use specific in-game items to call other players for help. Those offering assistance can use corresponding items to become available for summoning.

Figure 4

Summoning signs in Elden Ring (Troughton, 2022)

Players can invade other players' worlds for competitive Player-versus-Player (PVP) encounters. Invaders use specific items to initiate the invasion. In most cases, the host player must meet certain conditions to be susceptible to invasions.

Players can leave messages for others using a predefined set of phrases and words. Depending on the player's intent, these messages can serve as warnings, hints, or even misleading traps. Other players can rate these messages, with higher-rated messages being more visible than others.

As players traverse the game world, they might see the silhouettes or ghosts of other players who are simultaneously playing the game. Additionally, when a player dies, other players can see their bloodstain in their respective game worlds. Interacting with these bloodstains

allows players to witness the last few moments of the deceased player's life, providing hints about potential dangers or enemy encounters.

Online Features Compared. Online features in *Demon's Souls* are unlocked after defeating the first boss. Players in "Soul Form" can cast a summoning sign; other players in "Body Form" would be able to pull the "Soul Form" players to assist their fight. Similarly, the client in "Soul Form" can cast a red summoning sign, and the host in "Body Form" would be about to interact with the sign and pull the client to their world into a dual. Besides those, there is also an item used to invade another player's world if they are in "Body Form" forcefully.

The Dark Souls Trilogy introduces the system of Covenants into online play, which are factions that players can join to gain unique rewards and abilities. It also impacts interactions with other players online, such as which world they can invade or be summoned to. However, while all three installations in the series have online mechanics that allow players to see the images of other players transverse in other worlds, only *Dark Souls* provides options to interact with other players without summoning. There are four types of shared online events that *Dark Souls* players can experience, which include giving other players near a specific bonfire (in their own worlds) an extra health flask when kindling, amplifying other players in the immediate area (in their own worlds) when using a specific set of skills, seeing other players killed by curse damage as statues in the game world, and hearing the bell of someone else's victory.

Bloodborne keeps the summoned cooperative and competitive play, invasions, and covenant PVP in its online features. However, a new type of resource called "Insights" would be consumed when using items that initiate multiplayer sessions. It also added randomly generated "Chalice Dungeons," allowing players to make their generated levels publicly accessible in-game and shared online. Additionally, *Bloodborne* added the option to add gestures to messages.

In *Elden Ring*, the online features are more diverse than in previous titles. Although the covenants system has been removed, it made the cooperative and competitive play work more automatically. Other than the summoning signs, players can use items to indicate they are ready

to be summoned or beckoned for invasions in any part of the game world. It also added new locations called "Colosseums," where players can engage in PVP matches with up to six people.

Reading for Competence and Motivation Development. Delving into the online features of Soulsborne games using the analytical lens of competence and motivation development reveals their crucial role in nurturing social connectivity among players. The multiplayer option embedded within the games' architecture prompts both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, creating a unique space where players can establish connections with others, even within their predominantly single-player experiences.

During summoned cooperative and competitive play, the system does not provide traditional forms of communication such as text and voice chat. Instead, the games encourage nonverbal communication; players can only use gestures, items, and movements to convey what they want the other party to know. This reliance on nonverbal cues nurtures a unique form of camaraderie and mutual respect among players while shifting the focus toward gameplay and strategy.

The online multiplayer features have given rise to virtual communities that have extended beyond the confines of the gaming environment, establishing a presence on forums and social platforms. This expansion underscores the compelling nature of the game's community-building efforts and highlights the intrinsic motivation that drives players to engage in these activities. According to research by Reis et al. (2018), individuals participating in activities propelled by intrinsic motivation typically exhibit higher levels of emotional well-being. In the context of Soulsborne games, this intrinsic motivation can be observed in the players' eagerness to contribute to discussions, share strategies, or assist others in the pursuit of both individual and shared in-game achievements.

These communities can facilitate learning, innovation, and social support among players (Hsu, 2007). Engaging in online features in-game or participating in community discussions on other platforms can be seen as another activity, besides the gameplay itself, that players can find

intrinsically rewarding. Discussing significant topics and experiencing understanding and appreciation were strongly linked to a sense of daily connectedness (Reis et al., 2018). The more individuals engaged in meaningful conversations that felt understood and valued, as well as shared enjoyable activities, the stronger their feeling of connectedness became, which deepened the player's connection with the community.

In this particular setting, the act of offering assistance and sharing knowledge is directly tied to a player's self-efficacy within the virtual community. This domain-specific efficacy includes their confidence in their ability to contribute effectively and their trust in the reliability, honesty, and competence of other community members. In essence, trust has a solid and significant direct effect on self-efficacy, which can raise one's willingness to contribute cognitive resources and voluntarily collaborate with others (Hsu, 2007).

The in-game messaging system also reflects this culture of trust and collaborative engagement. The death bloodstains left by players and the message system serve as a crucial form of constructive feedback, aiding others in their quest to navigate the treacherous game world. For example, a player might be able to replay a bloodstain left by another player or a message left on the ground to see if a mace trap is swinging from above when they step outside, hence avoiding it. Feedback conveys approval, which is a form of social reinforcement (Schunk, 1983). After the player avoids the trap, they may rate the message as helpful, which can be seen by the message's author, increasing both parties' efficacy in leaving future tips.

These messages, often cryptic and open to interpretation, make trust in the competency and honesty of the message-leavers an implicit part of this system. Nonetheless, trolling and joking messages can also make players enjoy a sense of community as they collectively navigate the challenges of these worlds. This feeling of collectiveness is further supported by the often-encountered silhouettes or phantoms of other players simultaneously in the same area. Although direct interaction with these "illusions" is not possible, players can use gestures to greet one another in a brief moment.

The online features function not solely limited as a supplementary aspect of the gaming experience but also as a vital catalyst for developing social connections and delivering constructive feedback. The fleeting connections between players, where allies and opponents alike ebb and flow during the quest for meaning in these ruthless, unfathomable worlds, stir reflections on the evanescence of life. They serve as a gentle reminder to cherish each shared instant and struggle and to appreciate the beauty in impermanence.

Reading for Resilience Training and Application. Upon closely analyzing the facets of the online features in Soulsborne games and comparing them with the art of resilience building in established training programs, some similar aspects shared in both contexts were uncovered. They are particularly evident when considering creating meaningful connections. While the former occurs spontaneously in a complex online environment, the latter is grounded in a structured training curriculum. However, the strategies are fundamentally anchored in cultivating interpersonal interactions, despite the different forms of presenting.

Commencing in Module One of the MRT training program and the first combat scene in Soulsborne games, a foundational understanding of the importance of resilience is provided generously. The MRT program offered a structured approach, with instruction sessions helping to define resilience and debunking common misconceptions (Reivich et al., 2011). The Soulsborne game, however, prepared an almost impossible boss encounter right from the outset. This difference reflects how the programs and the games handle the introduction of building community and establishing meaningful relationships; the games foster this through experiential learning, while the training programs adopt a more pedagogical approach.

Connection is one of the six core competencies the MRT program puts forth in the first Module. It is defined as the ability to establish and maintain meaningful connections with others through effective communication, showing empathy, asking for help, and providing support to others (Reivich et al., 2011). This competency aligns closely with the collaborative gameplay aspect of Soulsborne games, where players connect and communicate to overcome challenges

for individual or shared goals. However, in terms of depth, the games' online features may only partially capture the range of connections defined by the MRT program.

A critical point of intersection is that asking for help does not equal showing weakness; this thought pattern can undermine the willingness to rely on others (Reivich et al., 2011). The MRT program gives this special attention, while the online feature of the games often puts the chance of asking for help right in front of players. For instance, players that have finished the first playthrough often autonomously leave summoning signs at the entrance of challenging areas or boss areas; the opportunity for summoning for help is commonly accessible and intuitive. After a more skilled player has helped a player, their willingness to offer help can also be enhanced, therefore forming a positive cycle of community support.

Regarding communication strategies, Module Four of the MRT program strongly emphasizes building relationships through effective communication and active constructive responding (Reivich et al., 2011). Soulsborne games facilitate communication, albeit in a more restricted and task-oriented manner. The subtleties and nuances of the synchronous and asynchronous multiplayer experience may not convey the exact extent of the message. However, they still reinforce mutual trust by providing an equal field among all players.

Additionally, the Resilience Education Program mentions the link between interpersonal connectivity and individual well-being; it underscores the correlation between engaging or distancing from social relations and the subsequent effects on cognition, behavior, and health (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). Through this perspective, the parallels can be found within the games' online features, albeit in an implicit manner. Players who disconnect themselves from cooperative play may find their progress hampered, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the adverse effects of social withdrawal. On the contrary, those who actively engage in cooperative play may experience enhanced gameplay.

Despite the lack of face-to-face communication, the online features still utilize similar principles as the training programs, reinforcing the importance of interpersonal relations, shared responsibility, and individual empowerment.

4.2 Content Analysis

Upon completion of the coding process, an array of data was generated, reflecting the assortment of player experiences and perceptions of design elements within the Soulsborne games. The total occurrence of each category code can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Total Code Occurrence

Player Experiences				Design Elements			
PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	DE1	DE2	DE3	DE4
61	44	16	32	46	24	15	11

The labels PE1 through PE4 were utilized to categorize comments within the upper-level category of Player Experiences: PE1, indicative of the Personal Challenge and Coping category, was assigned to a total of 61 comments; PE2, representing the Emotional Empowerment and Refuge category, was identified in 44 comments; PE3, denoting Social Support and Community, was used to labeling 16 comments; and PE4 for Existential and Philosophical Resonance category, was assigned to 32 comments.

Similarly, labels DE1 through DE4 served as placeholders for comments sorted into the four lower-level categories with the Design Elements category: DE1, standing for Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy, was identified in 46 comments; DE2, representing the Narrative and Worldview category, was assigned to 24 comments; DE3, used as labeling Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics, was given to 15 comments; finally, DE4, Online Multiplayer Features, was assigned to 11 comments.

While much of the data was sorted into multiple categories, some comments were exclusively associated with a single code, reflecting a more focused narrative around a particular player experience or design element.

Player Experiences associate with Design Elements

As a substantial number of comments have been sorted into the Player Experiences category also mentioning the codes from the Design Elements category, analyzing player experiences and their association with various design elements (see Figure 5) has generated intriguing insights.

Figure 5

Design Elements mentioned in Player Experiences comment
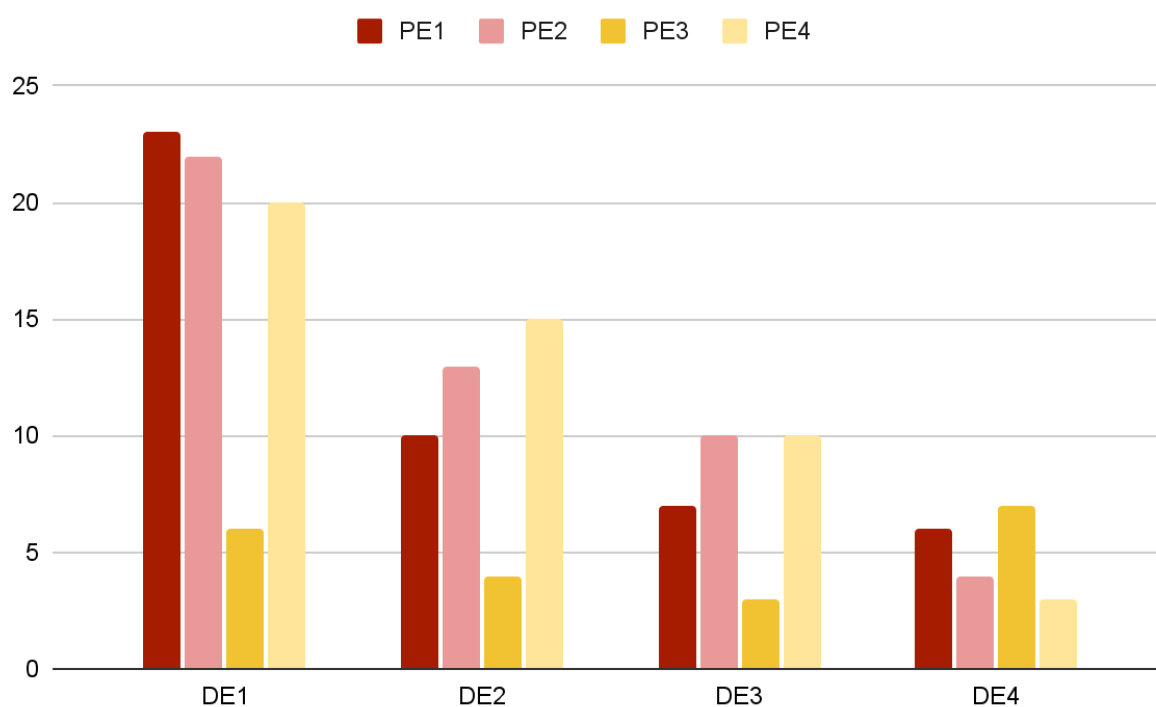
It is evident from the data that the Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy (DE1) design element is prominently mentioned across all categories of player experiences, with the most significant correlation found with Personal Challenge and Coping (PE1) at 23 mentions, which is

closely followed by Emotional Empowerment and Refuge (PE2) and Existential and Philosophical Resonance (PE4), with 22 and 20 mentions respectively. This relation suggests that the challenging mechanics and trial-and-error philosophy embedded in Soulsborne games are salient contributors to these aspects of player experiences.

The second striking pattern is the connection between Narrative and Worldview (DE2) and Existential and Philosophical Resonance (PE4), with 15 instances. This link indicates a strong link between the games' storylines and the ability of players to derive philosophical meaning or transformative experiences from gameplay. This data point is followed by Emotional Empowerment and Refuge (PE2) and Personal Challenge and Coping (PE1), with 13 and 10 instances respectively.

Moreover, the least frequently mentioned design elements in player experiences are Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics (DE3) and Online Features and Multiplayer (DE4). However, the Online Features and Multiplayer (DE4) element has the most significant influence on Social Support and Community (PE3) as expected, evidenced by seven instances.

The strong presence of Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy across all comments mentioning player experiences, particularly concerning Personal Challenge and Coping, Emotional Empowerment and Refuge, and Existential and Philosophical Resonance, highlights a profound connection between the game's design philosophy and death mechanics and players' psychological states. As suggested by the data, the challenging mechanics and trial-and-error philosophy of the Soulsborne games serve as a crucible for players, forging resilience and emotional fortitude. This convergence significantly enhances the reliability and validity when referring back to the findings that emerged from the close reading,

According to the recurring phrases and patterns in these comments, this environment of adversity, where failure is a stepping stone to success, mirrors the trials players face in their own lives, providing a simulated, controllable space to confront and overcome personal challenges. In addition, the significant association between the Narrative and Worldview and

Existential and Philosophical Resonance, alongside the relatively high correlation between Emotional Empowerment and Refuge and Personal Challenge and Coping, unveils an intriguing intersection between game narratives and existential explorations.

The high frequency of mentions also hints that the world presented in the Soulsborne games catalyzes philosophical introspection and transformative experiences, engaging players on a level beyond mere entertainment. This attribute is a testament to the depth of storytelling in these games, evoking contemplation and personal insight, fostering a deeper connection between the player and their sense of self. It reinforces the notion of video games as a medium capable of delivering profound and emotionally resonant narratives that provide the basis for reported potential therapeutic value.

While less frequently mentioned, the Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics category still indicates its power to indirectly shape players' emotional perspectives, enhancing feelings of immersion and facilitating more profound engagement with the game. Which also counts as one contributor to fostering positive coping strategies.
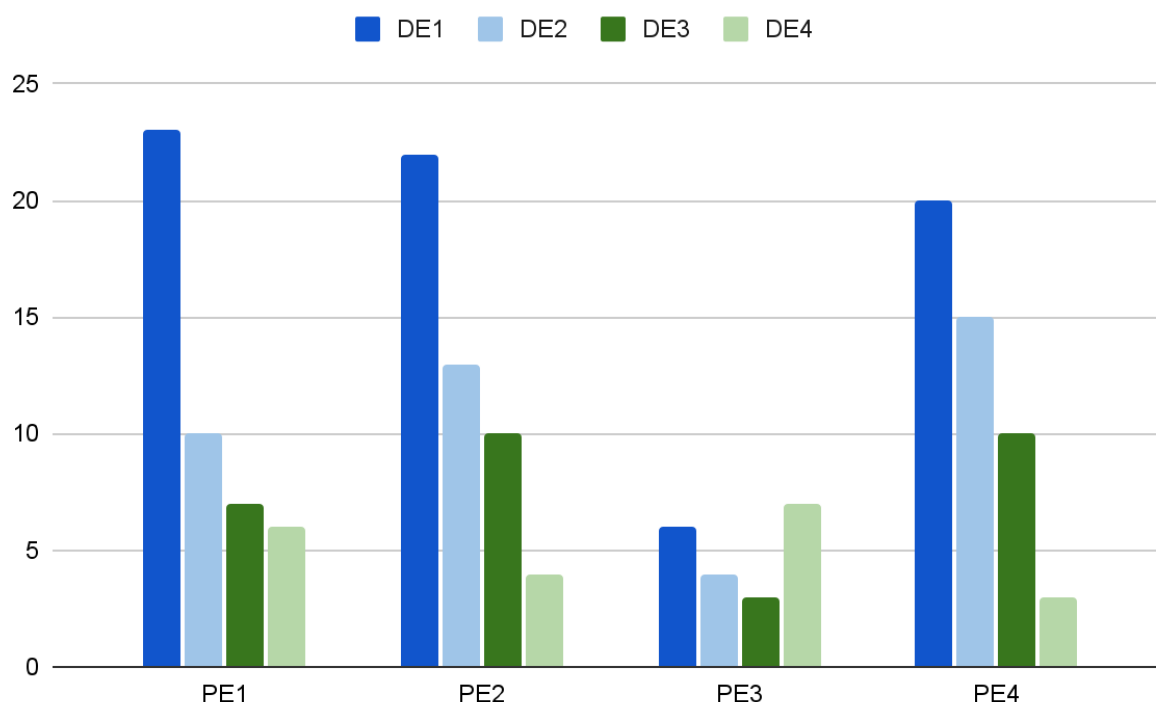
Design Elements associate with Player Experiences

On the other hand, the obtained data can also be analyzed to illustrate the frequency of each Player Experience category appearing in comments that discuss the various Design Elements of Soulsborne games (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Player Experiences mentioned in Design Elements comments

A notable trend is the strong representation of Personal Challenge and Coping (PE1) and Emotional Empowerment and Refuge (PE2) within comments discussing the Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy (DE1), with 23 and 22 occurrences respectively. This finding reinforces the previously observed correlation in the close reading, and the Player Experiences associated with Design Elements, suggesting that the challenging game mechanics significantly contribute to the experiences of personal adversity and coping, as well as feelings of achievement and place of retreat. Existential and Philosophical Resonance (PE4) also correlates highly with Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy (DE1), evidenced by 20 instances.

However, The Narrative and Worldview (DE2) design element is the most frequent association with Existential and Philosophical Resonance (PE4), accounting for 15 instances. This result is followed by associations with Emotional Empowerment and Refuge (PE2) and

Personal Challenge and Coping (PE1), with 13 and 10 instances respectively. The discovery further supports the idea that game mechanics and narrative elements profoundly impact players' philosophical insights and transformative experiences.

According to established patterns, the Social Support and Community (PE3) category is most frequently associated with Online Features and Multiplayer (DE4), and they seldom associate with any other codes. Conversely, the least frequently observed relationships occur between Atmospheric and Structural Aesthetics (DE3) and all Player Experiences categories. These findings suggest that game aesthetics and online features may be less influential in creating experiences related to personal challenges, emotional empowerment, and philosophical resonance.

Overall, these findings complement the previous observations; the data offer valuable insights into ways that facilitate more intricate dynamics between game design and player experiences.

4.3 Discussion

The consistent correlation between Personal Challenge and Coping, Emotional Empowerment and Refuge, and Mechanics and Difficulty Philosophy has again produced a clear echo of the insights gleaned from the close reading. This powerful dynamic at work within the Soulsborne games reflects not merely player persistence in the face of in-game challenges but also a source of comfort and motivation in their personal struggles. The challenging nature of the game, the atmosphere, and the metaphors present in its lore have been interpreted as an allegory for overcoming difficulties in life, particularly with depression and personal loss, as found by many players.

Several player comments, such as those from u/Ptidus (2015) and u/its-a-reddit-user (2021), found the metaphor of the "hollow curse" in the Dark Souls trilogy to be a good representation of mental illness, suggesting that the games encourage players to "fight back"

and find a "cure" with their player characters going through similar struggles. This type of concept aids in generating a sense of camaraderie and shared understanding among players who are facing similar challenges in real life.

The findings of the present study predominantly substantiated this hypothesis. However, several critical considerations warrant discussion. The close reading method is intrinsically an act of turning symbolic and representative input into interpretive meanings (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011). Thus, this technique employed in this investigation may be subject to examiner bias. The knowledge produced by this approach is tied to the specifics of each reading, while able to yield profound and concentrated comprehension of the medium's essence. It relies heavily on the examiner's interpretation. Consequently, the subjectivity inherent to this technique could influence the results, and the conclusions drawn may not be universally applicable.

Similarly, the content analysis, albeit methodical and objective, was executed by a single coder without consistency checks (Thomas, 2006). As such, the coded data and subsequent interpretations could also be influenced by the examiner's preconceptions and biases. Future research may benefit from employing multiple coders and employing inter-coder reliability measures to minimize such potential bias and enhance the validity of the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study effectively leveraged the self-efficacy theory and SDT to frame the investigation and interpret the findings.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Directions

Examining the psychological impacts of Soulsborne games, guided by the theoretical frameworks of self-efficacy theory and SDT, has generated valuable insights. The hypothesis posited that engagement in Soulsborne games, characterized by a design formula that promotes self-efficacy and satisfies basic psychological needs, would bolster player resilience and positive behavior change conducive to real-life personal growth.

The observed correlations between the game design elements in Soulsborne titles and player experiences support the hypothesis. Specifically, the challenging difficulties, trial-and-error philosophy, and the narrative and worldview elements in these games were particularly impactful in fostering players' resilience and positive coping strategies. These findings align with the principles of the theoretical frameworks, which emphasize the role of mastery experiences, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation in competency gain (Bandura, 1982; Ryan & Deci, 1985).

Furthermore, the association of online multiplayer features with a sense of community and connection corroborates the tenets of autonomy support (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Soulsborne games, through their intricate design elements, cater to basic psychological needs for both self-efficacy and self-determination, contributing to the observed psychological benefits among the players. While the findings of this study illuminate the nuanced ways in which Soulsborne games influence player experiences and contribute to personal growth, this is not to say that all video games carry similar benefits, nor that all players will derive the same benefits from Soulsborne games. The unique design elements of these games, coupled with the individual differences among players, create a complex array of possible outcomes.

An important caveat is that these findings should not be construed as endorsing video games as a substitute for professional psychological intervention. While the study demonstrates the potential of Soulsborne games in promoting resilience and positive behavior change, this does not equate to clinical psychotherapy. Although potentially beneficial, video games cannot

replace the expertise of trained mental health professionals in diagnosing and treating psychological disorders. Therefore, while engagement with Soulsborne games may contribute to personal growth and development, they should not be seen as an alternative to formal mental health interventions.

Finally, the role of the player's perception and interpretation of the game's design elements should not be overlooked. The extent to which players perceive and understand the game mechanics, narratives, and multiplayer features may significantly impact their experiences and the psychological benefits they derive from gameplay. Future research could delve deeper into this aspect, exploring how individual differences in game perception and interpretation influence player experiences and outcomes.

In conclusion, the study offers a robust exploration of the psychological impacts of Soulsborne games, elucidating the integral role of game design in shaping player experiences and potential benefits. The findings hold notable implications for understanding the intersection of video games and psychology, yet accentuate the importance of further research, particularly with more extensive, diverse cohorts, and incorporating measures to mitigate interpretive biases.

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Appendix A

Reddit Thread #1 and Comments

This appendix contains the first selected Reddit post and the first 20 relevant comments in response, starting from the top of the default ranking. The thread has 1.9K upvotes by May 14th, 2023. Link to thread:

https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/lblenk/dark_souls_saved_me/

Post

Posted by u/Thief_509 Feb 3rd, 2021

Dark souls saved me

Dark souls was my safe place years ago while my parents were divorcing, I lost my best friend, my girlfriend, and my dog died all in the same month and I had given up.

I dragged myself to my computer looking for something to distract me. I loaded up dark souls for the first time and didn't leave my room until I beat the game. It taught me not to give up and push through.

Praise the muthafucken sun.

Comments

u/MasterKaein Feb 3rd, 2021

Same man. I moved across the country and had no friends. Nobody at my new job really connected with me and I was basically unable to talk to anyone. I invited a bunch of co workers out in an attempt to get some friends and even offered to pay for everyone's tab that night. Everyone agreed, then nobody showed and ended up drinking at the bar alone.

Dark souls was a very safe space for me during that time of my life. I would come home and vent my frustrations on the game, would keep getting back up despite repeated deaths. It gave me accomplishment I didn't have in my own life at the time.

Dark souls is a fantastic game and I'm very happy Fromsoft made it.

---

u/I_Have_The_Lumbago Feb 3rd, 2021

I beat the game 2 days ago. It got me to finally realize that being alive is pretty fucking cool. I'm still sad all the time but that's way better than being suicidal all the time.

---

u/mahar17 Feb 3rd, 2021

My favorite part about the souls game is that it has literally saved countless of ppl I've never seen another game do that, seeing post like this makes my day and warms my soul. I hope ur doing better fellow ashen one

---

u/Melk_One Feb 3rd, 2021

DS2 was my first souls game and helped me after breaking up with my abusive alcoholic girlfriend of over 15 years. I met a lot of cool people on PSN that were close to my age that were really supportive. I hope you continue to heal and grow as a person. Praise the Sun!

---

u/wallander_cb Feb 3rd, 2021

Sometimes life is just as game and the rough times are meant to level us up, to make us smarter, stronger, wiser.

Don't give up skeleton

---

u/LorenN7 Feb 3rd, 2021

I've always picked up a souls game when i start going hollow and there's just a certain magic to it that really does help you persevere in the day to day. Beautiful stuff, glad you're doing better friend! Praise the sun [T]/

---

u/Isaacslegend Feb 3rd, 2021

Darksouls did the same for me, my parents went through a rough divorce when I was 16 that took about 8 months of chaos before they properly separated. I put hundreds of hours into darksouls 1 on my old 360 throughout that time and now anytime I'm feeling down ill always return to Lordran to escape!

---

u/SoulCatcher72 Feb 3rd, 2021

I feel you on this. I find solace in all the dark souls games. I started with demon souls. When things are as bleak in real life as the setting of dark souls and you feel helpless, when you can beat the big bad in any of the souls genre, it lifts you up when nothing else can.

---

u/ogburrdawg Feb 3rd, 2021

Dark souls is a game I call the human condition. You try and fail til you beat its ass. Just like life. Don't quit til you die.

---

u/Consistent_Story_132 Feb 3rd, 2021

That's exactly why I play it, no matter what happens find another way of doing things and keep pushing forward!

---

u/crappyshaw Feb 4th, 2021

I really feel you. Dark Souls was recommended to me by a friend before I ran away from my old life. I was by myself and isolated for the most part, and I started up DS. An old internet friend

reconnected with me as he had fallen in love with the game, and I spent a lot of time in Lordran with him.

DS2 was another escape during that time and last year I picked up 3. I feel somewhat empty after finishing, but it kept me from going hollow. Hope to see your ghost in many NG+ cycles, friend.

---

u/Salty_Mandolin Feb 4th, 2021

Glad it helped you through rough times, it has always drawn me in when I am the most stressed and anxious. It's not the same, but I can see how it can comfort you.

---

u/its-a-reddit-user Feb 4th, 2021

I know how you feel. When I was in a really dark place and feeling like there was hardly any meaning, dark souls really helped me push through it.

Not only in terms of how good it felt that I was able to accomplish it, but because of the underlying understanding that we must always grow and learn and take the time to understand what's happening in order to succeed, and that the only way you could really ever fail was if you have up and went hollow.

My father passed away a few days ago and my mind keeps drifting back to dark souls and all the lessons that it taught me/is teaching me about how to take on even the most toughest of challenges. And also about how to rely on friends to, even people you don't know (praise the sun and the soap stone)

It's a dark game setting with many miserable moments but at the same time there's just so much good feels that they allow players to have and experience

My brother told me dark souls isn't for everyone and I agree. It's hard, it's punishing and in many situations it feels impossible. I mean I still haven't beat Lady Friede and my frustration levels are

off the charts with her fight. But I definitely will say that it's a game that will stay with me and that I'm so glad to have experienced it.

And to anyone who is having a hard time right now please remember to keep moving forward, to keep pushing through all the bosses and the tough fights around you. That there are people who you can depend on and strangers that you can get to help you when it gets too much. And no matter what don't give up and don't you dare go hollow.

---

u/Moonlight-Huntress Feb 3rd, 2021

Goodness me I really hope you're doing better nowadays! Dark souls has also helped me to push through my limits and even make me realize that I AM more capable than I think I am and that even though times may get tough that as long as we have the determination and strength, we can accomplish just about anything we thought impossible! It looks like you found your sun within this so keep on praising it, keep going on and never give up fighting!

---

u/greedy_lion Feb 3rd, 2021

I feel you bro. I started playing dark souls while my parents just separated and I was super depressed but when I found darksouls I was super happy and it was the only thing driving me away from ending it and that was eight years ago. I hope you are better now or at least have a better time.

---

u/PyroFox004 Feb 3rd, 2021

I feel that man dark souls helped me with my depression for a while at least until it got to be too much. But I still remember it as some of the most enjoyable moments of my life.

---

u/jokerzwild00 Feb 3rd, 2021

Dark Souls saved me and then ruined me. Well maybe not saved saved, but it definitely helped out during a rough patch back 4 or 5 years ago. It gave me back some confidence that I had lost during a long illness.

On the other hand, now I have a very hard time getting in to most non-Fromsoft games. I can do Nintendo because it's the exact opposite tone (and their gameplay is top notch) and Doom Eternal felt a little bit like a first person *Bloodborne* thanks to the new dodge mechanic, but usually any kind of 3rd person action game especially gets unfairly compared.

On that note, I was pleasantly surprised by Control yesterday. It actually incorporates a bonfire-like mechanic and is pretty tough. Also lore delivery through items you find and read. I can't get into many games these days but this one has me hooked, I'd recommend it. Souls games have influenced so many that came after it. You see little inspirations all over the place now.

---

u/guilen Feb 3rd, 2021

There are several times in my life I've turned to Dark Souls when times are bad. When my best friend died I played Dark Souls with his widow to help pass the time. It's pretty amazing how effective the game is at helping a grieving person level with life.

---

u/[deleted] Feb 4th, 2021

I was in a similar situation a few years ago, my safe place was Dark Souls, I ended up playing~15 hours daily for like two or three weeks. I've tried getting back in the game but I think only someone as severely depressed as I was is capable of spending so much time on that unforgivable game (still love it though)

---

u/LolTacoBell Feb 4th, 2021

Just wanted to share my support brother. Similar experience for me back when *Bloodborne* came out, and I had found out my ex-wife was cheating and work was hostile, and I didn't feel like I had a single person to turn to. Something crazy about the FromSoft games that gives you solace, it hit so hard when I needed it. I'm so glad you made it through the light at the end of the tunnel.

Appendix B

Reddit Thread #2 and Comments

This appendix contains the second selected Reddit post and the first 20 relevant comments in response, starting from the top of the default ranking. The thread has 1.8K upvotes by May 14th, 2023. Link to thread:

https://www.reddit.com/r/*Bloodborne*/comments/fvxm49/*Bloodborne*_is_saving_me/

Post

Posted by u/FoundedInsanity Apr. 6th 2020

Bloodborne is saving me.

Man this is really hard to write. But I'm currently in the midst of my mom battling a terminal illness. I've been dealing with a lot of grief even though she's still here. For the last year that she was announced terminal it's been an up and down slope of emotions. It rips your soul apart piece at a time. And the only solace I've found is this game. A game that helped me so much in the past is one that helps me so much now in the present. I have the support of my wife and my family. I'm so blessed in that regard. But sometimes just losing yourself in another world with another agenda is just the peace you need. So I just wanted to thank the creators of this wonderful, intriguing and enlightening world. This game is saving me everyday. And thank you to this community for even being a place I can write this.

Comments

u/whackabee Apr. 6th

That's an incredibly difficult situation to go through. It's amazing that you've been able to find something that lets you escape that kind of stress for a little while at a time.

Stay strong, my friend, and remember, a Hunter is never alone!

— u/ FoundedInsanity Apr. 6th

Thanks so much for your kind words. Man this is exactly why I love this community. This game is the definition of perseverance through all odds. Triumph over tragedy. As cliche as that sounds. Good luck in your endeavors my fellow Hunter. May the Good Blood Guide Your Way.

---

u/LeadEnemaMK2 Apr. 6th

This post resonates with me especially because only six months ago I lost my mother after an all too brief battle with cancer.

While it wasn't *Bloodborne* specifically that got me through that time, being able to shut off with a video game or two really helps keep you going.

As hard as it is to imagine, life goes on and you still have your own life to live, and just being able to take time out like this helps to centre yourself.

I wish you all the best, mate, and for what it's worth, if you want to talk about things, shoot me a message. Losing a loved one is hard from the get go, even when they're still around

---

u/IreadyTaken1594 Apr. 6th

Thank you for sharing that with us.

A little "coop" can go a long way in a tough battle, I'm grateful you've found it supportive. Hang in there my friend.

— u/_halalkitty Apr. 6th

Do you think people would be up for co-op without actually doing anything? Just following and emoting and such?

I'd like the idea of a "silent witness" while working out some stuff. Soulsborne has a wonderful effect on me, but the most difficult is mustering the courage to start "fighting back".

— u/AlreadyTaken1594 Apr. 6th

Yep, I do. Actually I think it's a cool idea.

If you find the right person. Some people feel guilty or embarrassed like they're "wasting the summon's time" or something or dying like a scrub in front of an audience, but if you're both on the same page, I think it'd be cool.

I get more satisfaction out of helping someone who clearly appreciates it than killing a boss myself. For example I always try to leave the killing blow to the summoner when I do coop, which I enjoy watching that happen far more than landing the killing blow myself.

---

u/[deleted] Apr. 6th

I feel this is not uncommon. I don't know what it is about this game, but it really helps during tough times. I had a pretty rough moment a few years ago and *Bloodborne* was instrumental in getting me through.

Sorry for your loss and thanks for sharing.

— u/FoundedInsanity Apr. 6th

It's the world it's in. There's something in this dark creepy crawling world. Something that brings the light out in many people. It's funny how that works sometimes. It can be all that you can see but there will always be a light. That's why I love this game so much. Thank you for your kind words. I'm glad the game helped you too

---

u/[deleted] Apr. 6th

When you can't fight the problems in the real world, fight the monsters of the hunt, I was in a similar place hunter. May your bell ring clear and true in the dark.

---

u/Redbeardblondie Apr. 6th

Our loved ones never really die; they live on in our hearts, in our words, in our choices. We are haunted ever by the living and the dead. It is up to us to recognize that, to embrace or deal with the memory of who they were, and we decide how to carry them on through our own lives. She will leave Blood Echoes everywhere. Touch them and remember her fondly.

---

u/PSNnobody_srb Apr. 6th

Hey bro i know life can be hard, my father commited suicide 3 years ago, there is not a single day that i dont think about it but when i play games like BB i simply forget about it all good or bad. Those things will only make you stronger and a better person for yourself and for the people you love. You gotta push it.

---

u/0Inari0 Apr. 6th

I went through something similar during my Highschool and early Uni times. My mother developed early onset dementia (probably Alzheimer's) and my High School years and first two uni years were basically watching her deteriorate without being able to do much. The Souls series saved me as I couldn't play *Bloodborne* at the time. Now amidst all the chaos, *Bloodborne* helps me cope with my crippling anxiety. I send all my love and support to you.

---

u/MenWhoStareatGoatse_ Apr. 6th

Sorry about your troubles. I can't exactly relate it to my own experience 1:1 but I have a somewhat similar story.

My dad got diagnosed with cancer about two years ago and we had to stay at a sort of temp home funded by the American Cancer Society so that we wouldn't have to travel 2 hrs each way to the treatment center every day.

I'd just bought a ps4 for *Bloodborne* and GoW and brought it along, and it really kept me level through the worries about his illness and the tedium of living in basically a hotel room

---

u/TheUnholyBlade Apr. 6th

This game helped me through tough times as well! Don't go blood-drunk, and keep fighting your inner beasts too!

---

u/Prince_Edward_IV Apr. 6th

Bloodborne empowers you and has a lot of themes that apply to life.

You start out confused and weak in the middle of a dark, unwelcoming town riddled with illness and violence. Scary monsters lurk around every corner, waiting to devour you and there are no friends to be made anywhere.

you are weak, and you are alone.

by the end of the game, you have connections with people, you have friends to help you. you can join a covenant and have an entire community of like-minded people both npc and real world to back you up.

you master a weapon or the arcane arts and are able to fell actual gods with your power.

you transition from prey to hunter, and although there are still tough times throughout the game, and bosses that hold their own against you, you ring your bell and a friendly face arrives to struggle together with.

And you know that no matter what happens, you will never again be the weakling cowering in fear from the scary monsters outside because you are strong now and you are a hunter.

and a hunter is never alone

u/ShiningWithMalice Apr. 6th

This post spoke to me.

Firstly, let me say that I'm sorry that you're going through this. It's awful. I'm going through a similar thing. My dad is in a similar boat, and it has broken me. I'm pretty miserable, while having accepted what will happen. It gets me down and has me feeling pretty futile about things to come.

That said, I found *Bloodborne* to help out during this. Not quite to the same level as I found Dark Souls helpful, even though I prefer to play *Bloodborne*. I love FromSoft for crafting worlds that people can appreciate for these reasons.

u/[deleted] Apr. 7th

I'm just starting to play *Bloodborne*, and is helping me too, with all of this covid-19 thing, I have to stay home all the time and that sucks for me because in past times i had depression, and your words define what I feel, escape to another world. Hope you are okay. (sorry for my bad english, i'm from Chile)

u/MarcusOhReallyIsh Apr. 7th

So glad I'm not alone. Dad spent 3 months fighting cancer before he passed, I would stay up until 2am to give him meds and spend the quiet nights playing *Bloodborne*. Its comforting having something we can control, a challenge we can rise to meet. Please remember to hydrate and eat at least a couple meals a day, OP.

u/Joel012 Apr. 7th

Stay strong brother! This game believe it or not helped me lost 40kg before 3 years. It teached me how to commit to a procedure and it made me disciplined in life general. It really changed my

mindset and my life. I will never forget this game. (Also whenever i played the game i was not thinking about food haha)

---

u/shadowkinz Apr. 7th

You're not alone.

Started playing souls games while my mom was in hospice in the other room. This game series has saved many of us and ive noticed there are lots of people who say these games help cope with depression.

Don't let yourself get absorbed in what ifs and things never said, they already know and/or will know how u feel bc they'll never truly be gone, they'll be with u. And even if u don't believe anything happens after death, u still can't absorb yourself in the what ifs, they don't care and won't want u dwelling on that.

Don't drink or do drugs or do anything destructive to yourself, the temptation will be there. You can't give up on everything bc of this. Again, cliche, but u know they won't want that from u..

Appendix C

Reddit Thread #3 and Comments

This appendix contains the third selected Reddit post and the first 20 relevant comments in response, starting from the top of the default ranking. The thread has 1.2K upvotes by May 14th, 2023. Link to thread:

https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/3okk3g/dark_souls_and_depression/

Post

Posted by u/grandmasterpmd Oct. 13th 2015

Dark Souls and depression.

I've struggled quite a bit with depression and currently am going through a fairly rough patch. I can honestly say that I've found Dark Souls to be one of the most therapeutic games that I've ever played.

Yeah. The atmosphere of it is bleak and getting wrecked by a boss or an area over and over again can be really demoralizing but you keep going and you keep getting wrecked... until you figure out how not to get wrecked. The moment where you figure out how not to get wrecked and then manage to take that knowledge to emerge victorious is so amazingly uplifting.

I couldn't sleep. This morning, I battled Ornstein and Smough on NG+. I came close to solo'ing them a couple times. I finally broke down and summoned Solaire and after many attempts managed to win the fight. This is the third time I've managed to win against those two (First two times were new game playthroughs) and with each victory, I've felt like maybe I can emerge the victor over the Orsteins and Smoughs that exist in the real world.

You're free to think this is the cheesiest post ever. Yeah, it's kinda cheesy. I just felt compelled to share these sentiments. This game will always have a special place in my heart because it helped me navigate many a dark night of the soul.

Don't any of you dare go hollow.

EDIT: I wanted to say thanks for the gold. The overall response to this thread has really brightened things for me. Thanks internet strangers. Srsly.

Comments

u/Metal-Lee-Solid Oct. 13th

You and I both, OP. When I discovered Dark Souls, I was going through an awful break-up. It's almost like the frustration this game gave me while starting out distracted me from being upset with real-life problems.

— u/SU-Cordist Oct. 13th

Yup, I actually started playing Dark Souls to distance myself from other things that reminded me of my ex after we broke up. It kicked my butt so many times, but getting back up and beating what I once thought impossible made me feel so good about myself. It reminded me that yeah, things were rough, but you can always get through them by staying determined and never going "hollow." :>

— u/Cheesecake_Delight Oct. 13th

I am 100% there with ya brother, I was working a full-time job, going to class and dealing with the biggest (and most important IMO) breakup of my life. Funny thing was, in the area that I lived and the time of year, the sky looked like it did in the undead burg...... so ya'know, that helped me praise the sun...

---

u/Raiks Oct. 13th

I've been there too. The first time I beat Dark Souls was during a particularly bad point in my life.

One weekend when I couldn't bring myself to do anything; eat, sleep, bathe, you name it. I sat

there and just played, and played, and played. I emptied my mind and just focused on one thing.

The next boss, getting that next item, finding the next area. Soon enough I faced down Gwyn and

emerged victorious. After that, I got up for the first time in over 48 hours. Made some coffee and

cereal and actually took time to make sure I was clean and clothed and taken care of.

I went outside, and found the sun again.

If people think stuff like this is cheesy, let them. Stay determined, op.

---

u/Shanbo88 Oct. 13th

I've heard a lot of people through the years say this about Games, but Dark Souls in particular

seems to be one that gets mentioned a lot more than any other when it comes to depression.

Personally, I think a big part of it is that Dark Souls subconsciously teaches you that everything

can be overcome through perseverance. That no matter how dark and bleak life seems,

everything gets better if you're willing to put in the hard work.

I'm really glad Dark Souls is helping for you pal, I know how rough it can be.

---

u/TheShadowKick Oct. 13th

Dark Souls sticks you in a bleak, hopeless world where you face impossible odds and frequently

feel completely helpless to defeat the challenges you come up against. It hits a lot of the

emotional points that depression can trigger.

Then you overcome the challenges. You step into that bleak world and make it your bitch. Gwyn

falls and your victory is complete. For someone weighed down by depression and staring at a

hopeless life that's a very uplifting message, all the more visceral because they did it

themselves.

— u/SewenNewes Oct. 13th

I think the Buddhist undertones are a factor as well. One of the big sources of anxiety/depression is a feeling of helplessness, that everything is out of your control. Buddhism is a lot about understanding that, yes, almost everything is out of your hands, but that's okay.

— u/A_Light_Spark Oct. 14th

I'm not the Redditor you replied to, but let me try to elaborate.

What is the "Zen/Buddhism" influence, anyway? It's probably 1) be objective and mastery over yourself, 2) being at peace with yourself, 3) spread and feel the love.

We know Souls games are very fair (except maybe DkS2, but that's a can of worms I'm not opening). In order to progress, first we need to understand ourselves. Are we good at parrying? Do we even like parrying (playing defensively)? Do we like poise, and how much do we want? Do we allow ourselves to cheese the AIs? Once we established how we want to play the game, then we start to play for real. Your end game character's style is the manifestation of those answers. And then, we master the outer factors. Why is this thing killing us? What is its weakness? What is the rolling timing for that attack? The game asks us to be objective, to pay attention to details, and we are rewarded with triumph. It's the same thing with life. Analyze your target, identify the problems, and try different tactics.

At the same time, we know our weaknesses too, and failure is okay. For example, we can't use magic, but that's okay. Or we don't have enough strength for this weapon, but that's okay. We don't have enough skill to solo this boss, that's okay too. We learn to accept our shortcomings, and we move on, because being imperfect isn't the end of the world. What's key is to try - and try hard. Give it all you've got, and if we fail, we fail. Learn from our mistakes, and usually there are other ways around. Just like real life, nothing is 100% absolute. And knowing that, is the beginning of peacefulness.

Finally, Souls is a community, inside and outside the game. We've become "better," so we reach out and help (or sometimes cause others trouble by invading/trolling). The NPCs really appreciate our help, but the game world is brutal. The players enjoy interacting with each other, because the game is fascinating. These contribute to build rapport and support, and both are essential to ease depression. And we realize, life can be pretty good.

— u/DratWraith Oct. 14th

I also love how Dark Souls mixes the message of overcoming adversity with a message nihilism: whether you overcome it or not, everyone dies and nothing matters. It's all about what each person finds is important to them in the world. I find this somewhat comforting, since the mistakes in my life aren't going to last forever as everything dissolves into the gray heat-death of the universe.

— u/saedt Oct. 14th

This is exactly what I'm always thinking when I play, shit happens and everything is moving, the outcome is bad for some and you make mistakes and get annoyed or whatever. But it's always in the back of my head now, ever since I was rushing to one of my bloodstains, that I gotta keep my cool. No matter what happens, you just gotta stay focused.

— u/pointerbunny Oct. 14th

Wow, yes! Dark Souls is just so damn intelligent. Many of the greatest aspects of the game aren't really apparent at first and may be easy to miss. There is just a deliberate touch to everything, a depth and maturity to every single design decision. Im playing through it again for the first time in a while, and still revealing new connections. I'm also loving how obscure and confusing it can be and how, without a guide, the first playthrough will always be kinda messy. Most decisions you have to make in the game are often hard decisions with permanent effects,

like life itself, yet it is always possible to find a way to prevail through will and dedication. I can completely understand how the reality of Lordran might be familiar to someone with depression.

---

u/Ptidus Oct. 13th

It's the hollow curse. It's a great metaphor for depression: you're in a world where everybody has morbid thoughts, they're cynical, afraid of the world, they laugh but you can hear that it's a grotesque façade. They laugh because they want to convince themselves that they won't give up. That their current incarnation isn't the last and that the next time they die, they will still be humans.

Spoilers about most of the NPC arcs:

I feel that when you're struggling in your life, seeing all these poor bastards struggle helps you. It shows you that even if everything seems wrong with you current life, you have that spark within you. It won't help you accomplish anything by itself, but at least it makes you not give up. You survive, whatever happens. And when you can endure whatever life gives you, you're virtually unstoppable.

At least that's my interpretation of the hollow curse. The game has helped my a lot, too.

---

u/Crimsonial Oct. 13th

What it does, I think. The practical themes of the game are frustration, despair, and hopelessness -- you're told from the start that you're just going to go hollow, just going to fail. I played the game with the understanding that your character only wants death or escape, not necessarily conquest.

Yet, you're slowly given the tools you need. One after the other, through trial and error, you find yourself winning fight after fight, and the game emphasizes impossible odds. I can't speak for every player, but my first play-through was defined by fear and apprehension, "Can I do this? I'm not sure that I can do this."

I think there's something very much relatable in Dark Souls. Cheesy? Yeah, a little, but no less real for it.

— u/RenegadeFade Oct. 14th

I feel what you're expressing here. I felt the same way on my first play-through. Every boss was another test, and each time I was unsure and thought that this is the time where I get beaten, where I give up... but each time I pushed on, and surprised myself a couple times too.

The other day I beat Kalameet and Manus for the first time, on my very first character that I haven't beaten the game with yet. They always kicked my ass.. and thought those guys were gonna be the bosses I couldn't beat.

That victory against seemingly impossible opponents felt awesome. Had me thinking for the last couple days about the game and why it was so meaningful... Like you said there's something very much relatable about the game. In every challenge Dark Souls presents, there's a way through, and a way to refuse to go hollow.

---

u/rxninja Oct. 13th

It's because Dark Souls emulates the general feeling of depression quite well.

Things are shitty. Things are really shitty.

That said, they're not going to get any less shitty, so you can either waste your time sitting around or you can figure out how to deal with it.

Some things will make it easier for you (e.g. better equipment) but nothing in the world is going to solve your problems for you. You have to face these situations yourself.

Finally, when in doubt, get help from a friend. Sometimes a problem that's insurmountable alone is made immeasurably more manageable with help.

---

u/G102Y5568 Oct. 13th

Dark Souls succeeds precisely because it's a game that encourages failure. Other games deal with failure in pathetic or childish ways: they lower the difficulty for you, make it impossible to lose, or reset your progress if you fail too many times.

Dark Souls is one of the few games that tells you: No, you didn't do it right, but that's okay. Try as many times as you want, but you need to do it right.

In our society, we are terrified of failure. People who fail are heroes, and people who are successful and wealthy should be ashamed for it. In a culture where everyone gets the same medal regardless of their accomplishments, it's easy to get depressed when you don't have any motivation to succeed.

But Dark Souls shows you that there are still ways to challenge yourself to be a better version of you wherever you go, whatever you do.

---

u/TomHauser Oct. 13th

I love the post, I had a similar issue where I was newly sober from...non liquid...things...and struggling greatly to maintain. I picked up scholar of the first sin and every night just played, and played, and played, it got me through the roughest of patches, the rewarding feeling of failure bringing success is an excellent lesson.

— u/IAmAbomination Oct. 14th

Man Dark Souls has the power to do amazing things. I also had a non liquid addiction(still do) but I realized on my days off All I want to do is play Dark Souls and said substance was preventing me from playing it since I would fall asleep and waste my day off. I have since lowered by more than 3/4 of what I was taking and soon plan to stop. I never thought it possible without outside means like doctors or replacements or anything but the point is - dark souls is making me an ACTUAL better healthier person.

and thats just on the drug front. If we get into the depression I can't say how much the game affects my mood and general outlook on life. I haven't been as happy in years as I was when I beat O+S and the four kings the other day. I am incredibly sad I finally beat it (best 187 hours of my life) but I am more excited than before to dive back in and get to the dukes archives so I can play the DLC.

corny, cheesy, whatever anyone wants to call it. But Dark souls is the only game that has changed me as a person and I am all the better for it

---

u/Twitchy-Kana Oct. 13th

I was dealing with depression on my first playthrough. The game really helped and every time I think back to when I parried that nerd Gwyn, I nostalgically remember how I parried the fuck out of depression.

---

u/FurockBeast Oct. 13th

Yeah man, this post hits home pretty hard. It sounds pretty fucked but Andre of Astora was probably more of a father to me than my actual father, I always felt happy visiting him.

Solaire reminded me so much of my older brother whom I've hardly seen at all in the past 8 years, summoning him felt like he was always looking out for me like my brother did when we were growing up.

And finally Laurentius, yeah I can't put into words how great of a friend he was.

Ultimately though darksouls is a video game and leaving lordran each time reminded me how alone I was, In time IRL stuff slowly got better, It's still not great but there are now some people I value quite a lot. I want to share darksouls with one of those friends as I think it may do him some good too.

Appendix D

YouTube Video #1 Transcript and Comments

This appendix contains the transcript of the first selected YouTube video along with the first 20 relevant comments, starting from the top of the default ranking. The video is titled "Dark Souls Saved Me", uploaded by the channel NakeyJakey on Jan. 20th, 2018.

The video has 1.7M views by May. 14th, 2023. Link to video:

https://youtu.be/iSJkxLdllyE

Video Transcript

So usually when I make videos, I have a script, or at least like a basic outline of what I'm gonna talk about or plan of some sort. But this one, I haven't really written anything down. I'm just going straight from the heart. So I think it was like 2015. It would have been like February or March or maybe January. It was. It was early 2015 and I was living in Denver with my sister. Mary Ann, one of my five sisters. I have five sisters and two brothers. I can't remember if I've disclosed that information or not, but I was living with my sister, Mary Ann. We had an apartment downtown. If you're familiar with Denver now or in the past couple years, it's pretty expensive. And I was working at a restaurant I was hosting and busing tables, and I made decent tips, but I didn't work a whole lot, so I was pretty poor, which partly was on me, because I wanted free time to do things creatively, but nothing was really happening and I was very depressed. And of the two brothers I have, Isaac, Isaac had played Dark Souls and he had suffered through it. Because it's it might be my favorite game ever made, but it is obscenely obtuse for someone to get into it that doesn't know anything about it.

And Isaac had been trying to get me to play Dark Souls for probably a year, maybe over a year at that point. Because, you know, like anyone else who's played it and actually persevered

and gone through it, it kind of ruins them because they don't want to play anything else, because it's it had it, is that good or had a profound effect on them or whatever. And the first time I tried it, like a lot of other people, I immediately went to the graveyard, and got my ass kicked by skeletons. And then I was like, yeah, fuck this game. And I didn't play it for probably a year until early 2015, which I guess is the point I'm trying to get to is for whatever reason, I decided to give it a second try. And because Isaac had already suffered through it and he knew all that, you know, a really weird stuff like, oh, you need this ring to do this, or like you have to beat this wolf so that you can go iln New Londo without being a ghost and all the stuff. He was basically my strategy guide and he made it so that I could play through the game essentially on easy mode, which I'm not ashamed of because if that's what it took to get me into the Soul series, I'm I'm OK with that. But told me enough to get me started. And then I just went hog wild with the game and it was…

I remember when I made it back to Fire Link Shrine after going through Undead Burg and before you fight the Gargoyle dudes and just hearing the Fire Link Shrine music and like, being like, oh holy shit, like realizing where I was and where I had gone and like mapping out, you know, all of the locations in my head, realizing the map was fully connected. I remember that was the moment that I was like, OK, there's there's something going on here. And then I for the next month or couple weeks at least, the game just like consumed me because I was super depressed and I was working on music and…

But other than working and sleeping and hanging out with the few friends I had, and there's some girl stuff going on in there somewhere, all I basically thought about was playing Dark Souls because I had kind of been getting burnt out. Like the only games I would really play were like Smash or Left or Dead with my brother with my friends, and Dark Souls like Rekindled that like, holy shit feeling of playing a video game like nothing had made me feel as like completely immersed. It's people use that word a lot but it just it was a complete escape playing that game like, and I'm OK to admit it, that it was the thing I looked forward to was playing Dark

Souls. Which is it's ironic that that was the happy part of my life because that game is it's dark, pun intended. And it's depressing and it kicks your ass. But it like I can remember exactly how I felt of signature moments like fighting O&S over and over and over and finally beating that by myself nonetheless and never feeling as like proud or satisfied with myself ever. Which is sad. And I don't mean to like, knock other achievements, because up until that point I'd most of my life had been about playing the drums and like junior high or high school. And I actually won a bunch of awards. Like, I'm not trying to toot my own horn, like I had things to be proud of, but I remember when I finally beat O&S and I was just like…Oh man, I was so stoked.

And then, you know, from that point anyone who's played Dark Souls knows that the game, it falls apart a little bit because not everything is connected on the map. I mean, even in honor Londo, it's it's not connected. And you know, lost Izalith is the bed of chaos. All that bullshit sucks. But yeah, there's just a there's a lot of moments in Dark Souls that I can clearly remember. Because I was just that sucked into the game and I'm not a big fantasy fan, but I was like reading up on the lore and I was watching the VaatiVidya channel. But I just, I I dove head first into it and I it's like one of the few games that I've actually bought like the art book for. Because I I was just obsessed with it. And one of the main things I think about the game that really stood out to me was that it was it was dark and it was depressing, but it was there was just…Like a beauty underneath all of the the the backstories of the characters of the the tragedies or the bosses. Or like I the the Artorious boss fight is probably my favorite boss fight in in any game. Just because it's super fun and it's he's such a sick character. And like there was just so much connection between everything in the game of the lore and just the feeling of the different environments and the fact that the map is connected and you can see Ash Lake from Tomb of the Giants and you know you make it to Ash Lake after going through the Great Hollow Tree, and you realize how crazy vertical and and deep the map goes and it's…

Drink break. Why is there a 40 by your bed well? God works in mysterious ways.

In a time where I was super depressed and I didn't have any direction and all my friends that I had were in college and I was barely making any money. And as kind of stupid as it sounds, it made me feel like I had some sense of purpose of the 2nd that I got sucked into the game after I realized the map looped back to Fireling Shrine. I I like knew that I had to beat the game. Like I knew that I had to see it through and, not just because it was like, oh, it's fun or it it's an escape, which it was both of those things too. It was very satisfying to beat the bosses, but it was like, I just, I it was like my divine. It was like my divine destiny to beat the game. Like it was just something I knew I had to do. And I just remember at, you know, 3:00 or 4:00 AM after I beat the game, just sitting there watching the credits being like. Holy shit. Why did I not play this game before and not only rekindled my love for video games and just, you know, made me proud of myself and made me feel, I don't know, gave me some sort of sense of control in my life. That I somehow went from sucking ass, fighting the skeletons at the beginning on accident and beating the game. That I I somehow went on that journey and came out of it all the better. And it was…

There is just no part of me that thought I had wasted any time playing Dark Souls. Like maybe I had playing other video games of just being mindless distractions from what I had going on or whatever. But Dark Souls, it felt like a religious experience that was like, oh man, if something like that can exist in this world, like…That's, this is a world I want to live in, which it took a virtual thing to make me appreciate my real life a lot more, and be inspired and whatever. But this random or seemingly random to me fantasy game that my brother just kept telling me to play ended up being like the best video game I think I've ever played and set me on whatever course I am now of wanting every game to be Dark Souls and making a YouTube channel and talking about it a lot. And like there's a reason the second video I ever made was a games that should bang with Dark Souls and Max Payne. Because those are probably my two favorite games and I think that if I shove them together they'll both be better, Which probably isn't true, but it just totally invaded my brain and I think made me a lot better for playing it.

So as another YouTuber I'm sure most of you are familiar with would say, thank you Dark Souls.

Comments

@ajbaker1213 10th Oct 20

I was seriously considering suicide a few years ago, after beating in this order Bloodbourne, ds1 and then ds3 i figured i could manage anything. Clearly I'm still alive and the soulsbourne series is the reason why.

— @randomness4989 27th Feb 21

Bruh I m legit a scarycat irl,everything unknown make me scared but after I got my ass kicked by zombies with broken knives,got obliterated by some giant wolf with a giant sword in his mouth everything else that happend afterward was funny to me,and I got more confident that everything is possible if you don't panick and think slow and steady !

— @wolfWWHS 25th Jun 21

I guess what I find really inspiring in the souls games is the concept if death and reborn. In dark souls every achievement you make is something that you obtain through peseverence and strength of mind. If you are willing to try over and over again you can overcome any obstacle. It might take weeks, months or even years, but if you keep trying you will succeed. At the end of the day you only fail when you decide to give up and that... that is beautiful.

@robert1209 11th Oct 20

The fact your brother insisted you play Dark Souls and you fell in love with it really shows how well your brother knows you. There are bands, shows, and games friends have introduced me to

that have changed my life in all sorts of ways and I feel eternally grateful to them for bringing me into them.

@chadszymanski4941 3rd Nov 20

Same. I know that this video is old, but I still want to share my piece. I had a traumatic experience in 2011. I quickly developed PTSD, and I was really overcome by it. I wasn't experiencing time, I wasn't present in any room. I was stuck in the time and place of my trauma, reliving it over and over with flashbacks and nightmares, while spending the rest of the time trying to process how this happened, what this meant, and how I'd ever put myself back together. I couldn't engage with anything in real life anymore. For months, I kept getting worse instead of better.

I didn't play Dark Souls on release. I didn't own a PS3, I had barely played *Demon's Souls*, and Dark Souls wasn't even on my radar. I was staying over at my older brother's place for a little while, and he pointed out his copy of Dark Souls and asked me to play it. I didn't want to play it, really, but I did at least have some interest in seeing the game that came after *Demon's Souls*. My brother pushed me through character creation and got me to start playing. It came easier than *Demon's Souls* did, probably because of my experience with that game. It somehow engaged me, even though nothing else could, and I started clearing content. It was a miracle I was engaged at all. My big moment came at the Centipede Demon. It was so hard, and I almost quit after over an hour. Then, something clicked. I solved how to survive and fight the boss just enough to progress the battle. I got the ring. I equipped it and downed the boss in no time, and something about it was special for me. The struggle, the patience, the perseverence, the problem solving, the grind, the ring's novelty, all led to feeling driven, valuable, and proud. Dark Souls was my first connection back to the real world, and it kicked off my very long and labored recovery. I don't know that any other game could have had the same effect on me. It will never stop being special to me, and I will never stop being grateful. I've heard similar experiences

from others, even before this video. I'm so glad to see there is a video out there from one of us sharing that confoundingly healing effect this game has, that I believe games, in general, are capable of. Thank you very much for sharing, and thank you for giving this emotional notion exposure. I'm glad it helped you so much; it helped so many of us. Never stop trying.

— @catcrapinahat 17th Apr 22

Getting blindsided by a divorce made me feel numb to everything, I had no motivation to do anything. A friend grabbed my hand and pulled me out of that dark place by inviting me to stay at his place so i wasn't alone. For a week straight we played dark souls 2 together and i felt motivated to stop just laying in bed staring at the wall, I could feel again. It's crazy how a video game can affect you like that, this community is amazing and I'm so very thankful I got to experience this series and hear people's stories about how important these games are to them.

@reaperluke3518 29th Jun 21

Dark Souls taught me that life is hard but you MUST NOT give up, ever.

@deek13sniper 16th Dec 22

I used to think Dark Souls was just for people to brag about how good they were at stupidly hard games, but after *Elden Ring* I can truly say I resonate with so much of this. Just an amazing video, Jake

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@aleksi6012 15th Oct 20

The most important thing I learned from Dark Souls:

No matter how many times the obstacles of the world knock us down, we will always get up. And one time we get up, we have developed ourselves enough to beat the obstacles, and to come out as a winner.

— @ironwolf1689 24th Oct 20

Yea I can definitely relate to that life is a bitch, but if you keep pushing through it you can eventually find a reason to keep going its ultimately up to you to make that decision to find that thing that is worth living for in your mind.

— @haziqzaq 5th Apr 21

And relating back to the games' coop elements, that it's okay to reach out to others for help. There will always be people who would be glad to render their assistance to you.

@Madmancer 30th Mar 21

my mom passed away a few months ago, soulsborne games were the only games that can be my distraction, their dark and lonely themes somehow matched with my mindset, therefore they became my sense of purposes

@seefore5409 30th Dec 20

Dude, this was my *Bloodborne* experience. I've never been prouder of myself than when I beat Ludwig the Accursed. I have a master's degree, but Ludwig is my greatest achievement..

@williampugh5976 8th Jan 21

Was 17 when I played Dark Souls and was struggling to figure bout my future. Can confirm that this game gives you some kind of conviction and determination that grows you as a person.

@pheenmachine 29th Dec 20

When my dad got sick and passed away , this helped me keep fighting on. Now that my mother has also passed I have come back to Lordran for some familiar places

@samuraishuyin 15th Aug 20

Whoa man you described my personal experience with the game. I had just gone through my first break up, made a lot of stupid decisions, realized my life wasn't going to be what I was hoping it would be, dropped out of college,got a job hosting at a restaurant, abandoned all connections with any friends I had, and just fell into this looming depression. I picked up Dark Souls and it completely absorbed me, it was almost like some catalyst for me coming out of a really hard time in my life. Dark Souls and Bioshock really helped me grow and that's the most bizarre thing.

@TheLastGame666 30th Oct 21

I would say it saved me from boredom, games misjudging, family and life problems, it actually made me feel like I'm doing something, things were hard for me to do back then, trying to keep going and do something of my own without any progress.

@MrBommelicous 20th Jan 18

Quit drugs a couple of months ago, started dark souls around the same time. I can accurately say dark souls saved me from getting back into drugs. I had to finish, I had to continue and find the next boss. I didn't want to stop playing the game, something I hadn't done and felt since I was a kid. It made me a better person, relieve myself from depression and fuckery in general.

@salimnetwork888 8th Nov 21

I'm listening this while I'm getting my first teste of ds , I finished the first one two days ago abd jumped right to ds3 and it's consuming me in all the right ways, I'm also at the same situation (depressed lol) and this game did what a shrink couldn't do , this video manifests everything, and I hope everyone who's going through shit will feel better

@Kowazuky 18th Dec 21

its just like a fully realized world. its a crazy almost impenetrably harsh realm, but it operates on rules and can be learned. its a true game: its like one of the only games that actually makes you feel that you have accomplished something and learned the world. everything in the game actually exists in like it was there before you and will be there when you leave, like somehow desoite the load screens there is a feeling of object permanence, in part because the enemies you kill respawn when you die. you live in it by playing it. eventually you conquer it. simply perfection.

Appendix E

YouTube Video #2 Transcript and Comments

This appendix contains the transcript of the second selected YouTube video along with the first 20 relevant comments, starting from the top of the default ranking. The video is titled "Dark Souls Helped Me Cope With Suicidal Depression", uploaded by the channel Writing on Games on Jan. 20th, 2016.

The video has 353K views by May. 14th, 2023. Link to video:

https://youtu.be/viP4psS3MUQ

Video Transcript

The character of Razzum, in Dovstoevsky's Crime and Punishment, states that pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence in a deep heart. The really great man must, I think, have great sadness on Earth. Hi, I'm Hamish Black, and this is writing on Games. FromSoftware's Dark Souls, due to a number of factors, has spawned its own legacy as a piece of media that revels in the grim and the macabre. A grand Guigen, all of the developers sadism and the players masochism. This is due in large part the way the game was marketed upon its release. "Prepare to Die" graced almost every piece of promotional material associated with the game, as well as becoming the nomenclature of the complete Edition of Dark Souls, which included the Artorious DLC. Its unflinching sense of constantly escalating challenge also played a part in this. The game was described in almost every review as one of the most difficult games made in recent years, and many likened it to the often sadistic difficulty of many older games, whilst seemingly also forgetting that those older games, even on consoles, were still very much in the mindset of the arcade, where the goal was to extract as much money from gullible infants as possible. In any case, it is clear that many regard Dark Souls legacy as one of unrelenting

challenge and intimidation of the macabre and the miserable of death. Are they correct in asserting this view of the game? You could certainly make an argument for that case, but to do so, I believe, would be reductive. In fact, I would go as far as to say that Dark Souls is actually about as uncompromising a celebration of life as the medium of games has produced up to this point.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down there, Hamish. Where are you coming from with this? Well, this, albeit totally anecdotal, argument, comes from a very personal place. In fact, it comes from my own experiences wallowing in what I imagined to be the endless sorrow of life and imagining my own ideas of death. That is to say, they come from my experiences with severe mental illness, specifically major depression, anxiety, and to a lesser extent, OCD. For context, I have dealt with these issues for many years, and they have driven me to some incredibly dark places in my time, including multiple attempts on my own life. Depression robs you of your rationality, your personality, and your energy. And without those, your brain develops a pretty warped view of what it means to exist, and a fairly nihilistic approach to existence, as laughable as it may seem to some, is almost inevitable in cases like this. Why am I talking about this? Well, because I believe that my experiences with suicidal depression and my experiences with Dark Souls resonate with each other in some pretty odd ways. Not only does depression warp your ideas of what it means to exist, surviving something as traumatic as suicide attempts and deciding to carry on necessitate viewing life in a totally different way. Just like during depressive episodes, what other people might view as totally innocuous, you might view as a threat to your very being after surviving your own irrational urges to end your own life and coming out the other side of that, it's impossible to view life and death in quite the same way as you did before, and that we still may not line up with what is considered to be normal. For me, I moved into a state of what I like to call affirmative nihilism, retaining the feeling of relative insignificance whilst also feeling freed of the burden of having to live my life for anyone else as a direct result. How does this relate to my experiences with Dark Souls, then? Well, in short, I would say that the revelation

that occurred after my last suicide attempt regarding my views on life and death were enforced by the way Dark Souls tackles the very same ideas. Dark Souls came into my life just at the right time and, I would argue, minimize the very prevalent risk of relapse that comes from a traumatic experience such as suicide. You see, every element of Dark Souls design resonated with me in a way that at first fell in line with the surface legacy of the game that I mentioned at the start.

However, as time went on and I moved from my point of being suicidally depressed, to realizing that I wanted to get better and live, I realized that the complexities of choosing whether or not to end my own life, were entirely reflected by the duality of almost everything in the game. This was as revelatory inexperience to me as the post suicidal realization of wishing to perpetuate my own existence, and I would argue it played a substantial part in teaching me how to get better, and also in reinforcing my newfound ideas regarding life and death. In short, Dark Souls helped convince me that it was alright to keep fighting through what I originally saw as unbeatable, and has led me to a point where I'm making good progress in tackling my illnesses. How does it do this? Well, people talk all the time about the harsh but fair nature of Dark Souls difficulty, but arguably this extends to not only the visceral nature of the combat, but the narrative and lower in the world design, right down to the mechanics of life and death within the game. What's key, at least to me however, is that ultimately Dark Souls is not a game that wants to beat its players senseless. It thrives on player triumph. It wants you to succeed. You just need to learn the rules and how to work around them. For me, the idea that a game was finally representing what I perceived to be the harshness of the world I was living in, despite his fantasy aesthetic, yet was simultaneously urging me to fight through it, was quite refreshing.

Depression and the lack of energy to do things it creates, arguably leaves most with quite a bit of spare time. And my lowest point. I was jobless, broke. I just graduated from university with a degree I knew wasn't going to get me anywhere. I had shut myself off from many of those closest to me, and was becoming more and more of a recluse thanks to the depression. During this time, understandably, I devoted a lot of my time to video games. They helped me feel

connected to at least some form of universe or world. They allowed me to become immersed in interesting narratives, or they allowed me to maintain some form of reflexes with a minimal expenditure of energy, which, when you are depressed, becomes the most valuable of commodities. However, I couldn't shake the feeling that these games I was playing, no matter how grandiose their narratives and writings seemed in their quest to show us the human condition, they almost always failed by placing us at the center of the action. Even if the center of the action is a place where you have to conserve ammo or healing items, or make choices regarding who gets food and who doesn't for example, you're at the center of all of this. You decide these things that affect others around you. Whilst I get this, sometimes this can be used to great effect. See Spec Ops the line. I never felt that these were actually representative of the situation I found myself in. They automatically place the player in a possession of empowerment, and as I talked about in my video on Player Agency, sometimes that is not the way to truly immerse the player in your world.

Regardless of your views on life, we as individuals are largely insignificant, and that's an important thing that doesn't often get reflected in games, due to the inherent need for the player to control and be at the center of the action. However, Dark Souls manages to navigate this duality and with a great deal of panache. It places the player in a possession of relative insignificance, in a world that isn't just hostile to the player, but crucially indifferent to them. The world would exist whether or not the player was there to experience it. Things would keep on moving. Your goal within the world is either to prolong the age of fire, or extinguish it and bring about the age of darkness. The path to achieving this goal, however, twists and turns to the point that it's easy for the goal to become obfuscated to the player, for them to forget what the larger narrative even is. This isn't bad storytelling, quite the opposite, It brings the narrative down to a singular, relatable level. The main cataclysm and how you affect it no longer matters in the same way it might in a more linear, player focused game. The players goals as a result become one, making the experience in this cold, indifferent world as bearable as it possibly can be. Because

there is joy to behold in this world if you can get past that. And two, reclaim as much agency within this world as you possibly can.

I can't tell you how much this realization of what Dark Souls or what I think Dark Souls is trying to do help me deal with my own emotions and mental illness. This game is life. The world around us is completely indifferent to any of us and would continue whether we were here or not. With that in mind, the way to live a happy life becomes clear. Take the little steps to gain as much agency over your life as possible and make the lower points as bearable as possible so that you can experience the numerous high points that come after them.

The small things in Dark Souls include learning the mechanics of combat. Learning went to dodge, went to parry, how to manage your stamina and inventory. These are all fairly small elements when taken on their own, and they each get learned and honed separately as the requirements in combat become clearer to the player. But when added together, they become an incredibly deep combat system that make the player feel like a master of the systems in a way that no other game allows the player to feel. Compare this to how I was viewing my life at the time. My idea of where I wanted to be, compared to where I was seemed like this incredible gulf, and this arguably contributed a great deal to my feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness because I thought nothing could change. It was too big to change by focusing on the tiniest things, like forcing myself to get showered and dressed when I wake up, or finishing that piece of music that I was writing but was going to give up on. Or cooking myself a healthy meal, or lifting weights or working on this damn show. Most I'm still very much in the early stages of getting to where I want to be in life. Breaking it all down and focusing on one element at a time allows me to progress in my life, no matter how glacial that progress might seem at times.

Dark Souls taught me that it was OK for that progress to be slow. Working to achieve that progress is enough to keep going with it. What initially seemed like another brick wall of difficulty in Dark Souls, I was able to chip away at gradually, until I became actually pretty good at it. What's more is that I trained myself to become good at it. The world of the game didn't help

me do it. It couldn't careless about me. The design of the game, however, subtly encourages you to keep going with it so you can feel the celebratory feeling when you overcome an obstacle. Taking this approach and applying it to my life allowed me to realize that even if I didn't have a concrete goal in mind, as long as I was working to make sure that I could see the joy of life, then that was good enough. And there is joy in life, both in Dark Souls and subsequently I discovered in the real world. One might think of the joy of Dark Souls being as simple as mastering each combat encounter, as this is arguably the gameplay mechanic. Sure enough, the mastery of the combat system is the payoff for training yourself to become better at the smaller systems that make up the larger whole, and as a result, every combat encounter and victory feels more substantial, because it's all truly earned by the player.

But for me, there was a much more simple source of joy that I found within Dark Souls. The views. That may sound silly, but the stunning world design and the vistas and Dark Souls encouraged me to keep going, even when the difficulty felt insurmountable. Even when the design is at its most grim, such as in Blight town or Sens fortress, there is a level of detail and architectural consistency to the design of these places that they take on a warped beauty of their own. And as such, exploring them is just as rewarding as any other area of the game to me. Why do I mention this? Because it actually encouraged me to go outside and explore the world around me in real life. For the longest time. My depression had rendered me a recluse which led me to feeling incredibly isolated and alone, whilst also viewing everything outside my curtained bedroom window as a threat. Dark Souls reminded me that I actually am fortunate enough to live in a fairly pretty place myself in Western Scotland. And the joy I had of discovering new places and simply taking in the atmosphere and staring into the distance of Dark Souls vistas encouraged me to get out of my self-imposed prison and experience it for myself. It took a long time to get to that point, but as Dark Souls also taught me, as long as you are teaching yourself and training yourself in little steps, no matter how glacial the progress might seem, it will eventually yield rewards for you. You just need to know where to look for them. What's best is

that From Software is acutely aware of all this. From the legacy the game is garnered to the ways in which they very deliberately subvert this legacy.

For one, difficulty is not the main element of the game. In fact, Director Hitetaka Miyazaki has stated that, "The main concept behind the death system is trial and error, the difficulty is high, but always achievable. Everyone can achieve without all that much technique. All you need to do is learn from your deaths, how to overcome the difficulties. Overcoming challenges by learning something from a game is a very rewarding feeling, and that's what I wanted to prioritize in Dark Souls and Demon Souls. And because of the online, you can even learn something from somebody else's death. I'd say that was the main concept behind the online too." The online is another key element of how this game helped me deal with my depression. It helped me realise that I'm not alone. Depression can lead to people feeling more isolated than they ever have done in the past. And this can be one of the main reasons the illness feels so insurmountable. The idea that the world around you is out to get you, and that you are alone in this struggle is utterly demoralizing. However, once you realize that far more people suffer from this illness than many people think, even if their circumstances and the way the illness affects them defer completely to how they might affect you, just knowing that they're ultimately fighting the same battle can be enough to convince someone that the battle is indeed winnable.

I don't think I really need to explain how this relates to Dark Souls multiplayer. But I would argue that the game would flat out not work if not for the summoning system, which, although derided by some as a means of "not playing the game right," can give people a sense of respite when they need it the most. Or even just the specters that set at the bonfires as you approach, they exemplify the game's philosophy that "Hey, you're ultimately the one that's going to have to work hard in order to survive in this world, and the world is brutally indifferent towards your presence. But you can get through this because you're not alone in your efforts." Maybe it's just my warped post suicidal perspective on life talking, but I ended up taking a great deal of comfort from this outlook. This is why I say the Dark Souls is a celebration of life rather than simply a

showcase of death and sadism. It communicates these ideas without a tall feeling patronizing, and just representing what it truly means to live. It's design, mechanics, and writing are all geared to encourage the player to keep fighting through, even when it seems insurmountable. And guides the player as to how they should break down a problem and solve it bit by bit.

In fact, the game actively trivializes death. At least on your first time through, you are going to die far more than you are going to succeed to an almost comical degree. Death becomes inevitable, expected, rote. But not in a way that forces the player to resign themselves to that fact. As I say, through working on those small elements, you can create your own agency and become what you want to be in this world. The world is so consumed by the idea of death that the times you survive will become true moments of triumph to be fully celebrated. And the game will celebrate with you. Before, of course, plunging you into the next terrific difficulty wall head first…because you know, Dark Souls. And because, you know, life. But it's OK, because both can be pretty cool sometimes.

Hopefully. I've made it clear how the close ties between Dark Souls world and the real world reflect and resonate in some pretty interesting ways, for me at least. Like I say, this is purely anecdotal. The science is largely still out on specifically how games affect pre-existing depression. So don't take this as me saying playing Dark Souls will cure you of your depression. However, just know that a lot of the lessons I learned from Dark Souls ended up becoming incredibly useful to me in recognizing the joy in life and teaching me how to achieve it when I previously had been so resigned to the idea of my own death. That's pretty important to me, and it's something perhaps more games should explore. Reality doesn't center around the individual and that's OK, as has been proven to me by Dark Souls, sometimes that's exactly what is needed to remind you that things are alright, and you're not alone. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this slightly different, more personal episode of writing on games. If you enjoyed it, then if you consider subscribing, that'd be really cool and I'll see you next time.

Comments

@mridley64 13th Dec 16

I think Dark Souls is a lot more attractive to people who are depressed or who have gone through

trauma.

In a world with no hope and no light, a little guy worth less than nothing fails over and over and

over again, but with determination (and perhaps some jolly co-operation), he becomes strong

enough to overcome not only the monsters in his path, but also the darkness inside.

All to keep the light going just a little while longer.

@VT-mw2zb 17th Oct 16

Dark Souls made me understand Buddhism. Seriously. I was a Buddhist all my life, but I never

really understand it. Then playing Dark Souls and it dawns on me: if you obsess with every single

success or failure in your life, you will never get anywhere. You will just get frustrated and fail.

The world is full of pain and suffering, so the only way to move forward is to relax and drink in the

atmosphere. Just enjoy the moment to moment wonder and take the failure as it is. Don't

agonise over every failure, nor take too much pride with success.

Dark Souls is basically life compressed into a small space and experience that you can get

through in a few weeks instead of your entire life.

@darthreaper6311 30th Oct 18

I actually tried to kill myself back in February due to depression over my Asperger's preventing

me from getting a job due to being a "liability" as well as my brother's death. Dark Souls is

helping me through my depression as well.

@egirlSkeletor 3rd Nov 16

I didn't come across Dark Souls at such a massively important part of my life but as someone who is struggling with anxiety and depression. I've found that one of the things i get the most joy from in Souls games is being a sunbro. I always imagine myself as being that guy who helped someone beat a boss they'd been at for hours on end, and I helped them achieve their goal. Because we've all been in that spot before. I can't count the amount of time I spent with my gloriously incandescent sign dropped outside ornstien and smough.

Thanks for the great video.

Praise the Sun!

@shadowboxin420 22nd May 16

Dark Souls 1 helped me immensely with my depression that came about from being diagnosed with Leukemia when I was 19 in 2010. Had to do a 3 year straight chemotherapy regimen and I was unable to stay focused on anything at all for more than a few minutes. Even things I loved. Then I decided to give DS1 a shot back in 2011 and became completely obsessed with it and could sit and play for hours at a time without even thinking about the constant nausea and chronic pain I was facing. All in all gaming as a whole played a huge part in keeping me optimistic and got me through my chemo treatment. Competitive fighting games, JRPGs, and the Souls games being the main games that did that for me. And now I'm 25, and considered cured of my Leukemia. I still struggle with PTSD, Clinical Depression, Anxiety, Agoraphobia and some other things mentally that my cancer left me with, but gaming is the one thing that helps me deal with it all. Especially since before diagnosis I was into skateboarding, snowboarding and other super physical, athletic activities that required physical strength. Now I have no balance nor the strength/stamina to do either of those, so gaming is my escape and therapy for all the trauma I endured. Thank you for this video.

@darknitejohanne 2nd Nov 16

I've been depressed for more than 10 years now and we have the same experiences from playing Dark Souls. You just eloquently placed it into awesome words!

@azmin92 16th Oct 16

life is like Dark Souls. It's hard, but it's good.

— @theimperialkerbalunion7568 1st Mar 18

Death Maze Challenge you clearly haven't "git gud" as the saying goes. Nobody enjoys their first hours of their playthrough, but u need a type of patience and resilience to carry on. There is always one point in the game that makes you fall in love. Thia was anor londo for me. I just think you either havent played enough to reach this point or you were not playing with a serious minset to progress in the game effectively.

— @theimperialkerbalunion7568 1st Mar 18

Death Maze Challenge Sorry for labelling you as a unexperienced player. Every time i died in dark souls it was a mistake that I made. Dark souls punishes you for your mistakes and you learn form them. The gaping dragon actually has a very defined moveset. Though daunting at first, on my second playthrough I found him incredibly easy. Though I do agree that the fight can drag on. But its not only the gameplay that drives the experience, its the lore that defines it. Sometimes I would pass an area and just look around at the scenery around me, and wonder how that thing got there and whatnot. Dark souls does communicate the best it can without ruining the experience because the game goes beyond itself, it encourages research and asking friends etc. Its not an experience everybody likes but is an essential part of dark souls. I remember guiding one of my friends through dark souls, and I enjoyed it greatly. I remember the days where me and my friend would sit down and discuss about new areas and such. Though not extremely clear, ds gives hints through item descriptions and npc dialouge, it wants the

player to delve deeper into its history alongside playing the game, not just to play the game meta. How would u explain the hours you have put into ds, you must have been genuinely intrigued at some point.

@definitelynotanAIchatbot 22nd Jan 18

Dark Souls really instilled in me an attitude of "never give up."
Great video.

— @matteopriotto5131 28th May 20

Yeah, as I like to say, in Dark Souls the golden rule is "don't be greedy", the platinum rule is "GIT GUD" and then there's the ultra platinum rule "never ever ever give up, ever"

— @haldir108 25th Apr 16

+Writing on Games I'm glad dark souls helped you claw your way out of the hole, but for me, the "larger than life" successes, trimuphs and achievements in the game, became a comfortable thing, and being one of the things that i isolated myself with. Instead of helping me face the real world, it became an immersive refuge from the things i dreaded were out there. I dug myself deeper into the hole, and said myself content with the game.
Even after beginning to claw myself out of the deep dark hole, dark souls was one of the things that stopped me from investing more energy and time into doing healthy things like physical activity, going outside, or socializing. It was an illusion being a half-step.
I'd tell myself "I played videogames all day, but at least i didn't spend all of today in bed watching netflix" as if it was somehow a more productive activity.
This probably would have been the same with any game as engrossing as Dark Souls, but the sheer immersiveness, and total flight from reality is something i've never found anywhere else.

— @giocommentary 9th Sep 16

dude... just wow...

I can not explain this..

I was discussing with some friends on teamspeak why DS1 and DS3 are way better then DS2 and however i tried i could not voice or say it the way i wanted, i could not explain why these two games touched me so much more.

then i came across your channel, and the way you describe Dark souls effects your life is exactly the point i was trying to convey.

Thank you for your channel and vids, i am stunned listening to your voice and watching your vids, i have been coping with major depression and a severe form of ADD, i've almost never succeeded in something in my life, school was hell, and even now i'm still only a few steps to a brighter future, but now i understand how much dark souls has helped me! have a sub and a patron you deserve it so much! <3

(PS: one last thing, PLEASE allow people to make subtitles for your vids, i want to be able to create subtitles for my fellow dutch people who watch your vids and aren't great in English!)

— @KennethNeal91 18th Oct 16

Great videos dude, keep it up, its definitely speaking to a place that a lot of us can relate to, and I agree 100% with what you say about Dark Souls celebratory tone. It had a very similar effect on me when I found it during a recent dark period of my own life, it was hardening and uplifting, and really helped with slogging through the bullshit and hopelessness that descends during those times.

Affirmative Nihilism. I hear that.

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— @nashs8979 4th Dec 17

I have been dealing with depression for quite a while now. Whenever i feel crippled by it, resorting to playing souls or *Bloodborne* feels like the only respite. I never understood why these games gave me a sense of calm. You managed to articulate that for me. Glad I came across this video

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— @Stubbert 18th Sep 18

I'm glad you've dark souls helped you. I'm also very happy that you're brave enough to speak about this so publically. I had a similar experience with Dark Souls 3. I had a slightly different experience. Literally the morning of when I started, I had had one of my worst self-harm experiences. I started the game because I had nothing else to do and I think it appealed to my mind at the time. Dark, unforgiving, and uncaring. As I played. I realized the beauty of it. Not only did it distract me, but I became obsessed. I latched onto it and it fit so perfectly with my messed up mind. Not to say dark souls is messed up, but that I clung to the atmosphere. It helped me though that time and it holds a special place in my heart because of that

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@modernotaku1764 2nd Nov 16

I had a similar experience about a year ago, but instead of with depression, it was me dealing with the consequences of a mistake. I had been expelled from a college that I had been wanting to go to for pretty much half of my life, and while I was still able to go to a different college, It wasn't the same, and it felt grayer, colder, and less exciting than my first experience. I was stuck looking for a new job since I was now living at home rather than on campus and my parents would never let me live in the same place without at least getting a part time job to help myself get along. The problem arose when I would apply for a large number of places, only to be rejected by a few, and then flat out ignored by every other position I applied for. It didn't help that it was after the holiday season, so few jobs were actually looking for people to hire at the time. Then during that down time (of which I had a lot of) I continued playing video games a lot. Now I had bought Dark Souls back around the time DS2 was still the newest game, so I had played a

good bit of it already, and then during my time at the college I was at I picked it up again for a second go, but it wasn't until this latest time that I persevered. Instead of giving up when it got hard, or refusing to play just because I didn't know what I was doing, I kept going, knowing that I could do it, because I had done it before. This even helped me with life as I refused to give up and finally got a job at the place that not only was the first people to reject Me, but also was the place I had wanted to get a job at since I was in High School. I was doing good, I persevered in both life and in the game and soon enough, I found myself at the Knight Artorias boss fight. My first time playing, I could not beat him, no matter how hard I tried, and I actually gave up on trying and just went and beat Gwyn. I'm still a little mad at myself for that, because, like in life, it showed that I tried to skip the hard part, and I missed out on a great thing (in this case the great DLC) because of it. Finally, just a few days ago, now on NG+ I finally made it through my second time playing all of dark souls, and instead of giving up, I took on Artorias and I beat him after multiple failures. It was difficult, it was frustrating, and it made me want to quit, but I knew if I did, it would just loom over me again. Now I'm secured in my job, I now mostly know what I'm going to do with my future, and I'm doing great with school, and all this as I'm playing a game that shows me that life is unforgiving, sometimes very difficult, and not always clear on what way you need to go, but I learned that you can't give up, you can always beat a challenge no matter how difficult (if people can really beat these bosses without leveling up once I think I can find a job!) and that if I really can't do it on my own, there's always someone who can help me. (Unless it's certain bosses that don't have NPC summons..... In which case I just don't give up!) thanks for such a great video! Sorry to talk so long, but it's great to get that out there. I'm glad to know that you're doing better and It's really reassuring to see that other people have also suffered in certain areas but have still persevered in ways similar to my own.

@MooncrafterUTAU 1st May 16

I'm amazed that while we both have very similar conditions right down to the OCD, we walked away with completely different reactions to the game.

I was hospitalized two years ago for a suicide "attempt" (I had gone to a doctor wanting a referral for a psychiatrist, misunderstanding of self-harm compulsion ended up me being committed for a week), and that experience for me was far more traumatizing than my surviving swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills the next morning. I had no agency. I had to go where others wanted me to be to even be allowed back home. No privacy for sleeping. Strip-searched, and completely robbed of the one thing that helped me combat depression.

Pencils.

Depression took art from me, or rather, still has taken it from me. Sleep is plagued by chronic nightmares, trauma terrors (a type of night terror), and sleep paralysis. Even taking the barest of minimum of classes for Uni it's everything I can do to keep my head above water and even then I just want to drop out and try starting over anew, knowing full well that it really isn't an option to drop out at this point and being this close to finally graduating.

Video games give me those little glimpses of accomplishment that I need to get through the day but at the same time takes away time from music composition and my character designs in sketchbooks. Whenever my OCD fixates on a game, it feels wonderful to do well.... right up until that moment that I remember that I'm wasting my talent. I'm siting there on the couch, having barely eaten and forcing myself to shower playing a game for 8+ hours straight when I could be working on commissions. Completing "actual" achievements that help me in the real world. Nasty cycle, but you know from experience no doubt how it goes.

So when I picked up DS1 for the first time last month wanting to know what was the big deal, I fell in love with it. Obsessively played it even after dying. Re-created my character a few times to make sure I did the best I absolutely could in the world so desperately out to get me just for breathing in the wrong hallway.

Then the narrative hit me. Nothing I did mattered in this world. It wouldn't matter if I made the choice to save characters, they were all going to suffer regardless. Extending the Age of Fire didn't even matter; someone else would eventually come to fulfill the prophecy in my place. Ultimately, I don't matter was what I took from the game and what my illness reminds me of on a regular basis.

I'm still having a hard time getting back to playing the game. It brings up emotions that are hard to deal with, especially having gone through 8 different medications in 2 years trying to find something that works enough to let me do the rest of the hard work. (No dice yet) But your video honestly is making me want to give it another try soon. Albeit under careful watch of the loving spouse to make sure those OCD fits don't consume my life as much.

I don't know if the game itself will help me combat my suicidal depression, but the game with your experience shared I think will definitely do more good than harm in the long run. Thank you so much for making this video., I don't think I can emphasize enough how much your words have helped.

— @andrewhayden9896 26th Jan 20

I always saw the "nothing matters" idea of the game as something truly special. That idea reinforces the fact that the world doesn't give a shit, and that you shouldn't give a shit that the world is that way. You say fuck the world and carve your way through in spite of the world. This game really helped me with a shitty part of my life, it's a shame that it can have the reverse effect on some peeps.

@bigmanstevens592 4th Nov 16

Most important to me is the message or meaning of dark souls is wellbalanced and subtle. It doesn't cram it down your throat, which would turn me off of it being as cynical as I am