Research Into the Challenge of SoulsBorne Games

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1. Introduction

In this research document, there will be a deep dive into how "*Souls-like*" video games challenge their players, to motivate people to play.

2. Souls-like Games

Souls-like games are a subgenre, which mainly consists of *FromSoftware's Souls* series of games, including ***Dark Souls*** **(***FromSoftware, 2011***), *Dark Souls 2*(***FromSoftware, 2014***) and *Dark Souls 3* (***FromSoftware, 2016***).** Other games that are considered Souls-like are ***Bloodborne*** **(***FromSoftware, 2015***), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (***FromSoftware, 2019***), *Demon's Souls* (***FromSoftware, 2009***)** and ***Elden Ring*** **(***FromSoftware, 2022***).**

The games are played in a third-person perspective and are predominantly melee combat-based.

Souls-like games can be characterised by their high difficulty, which makes frequent and repeated failure and player character death an expectation in the core part of their play experience.

The term Souls-like has become a known phrase in video games and is often said to imply that a game is difficult. The sub-genre carries on qualities that started with Dark Souls, but the intense difficulty is just one factor of a true Souls-like game (Coscia, 2021).

2.1. Rogue lite similarities

Souls-like games share many similarities with rogue-lite games. The main factor is known as a "permadeath" mechanic, in that when a player dies, their character resets and some possessions are lost. In a Souls-like game, the player will lose all their collected XP (with one chance to recover it) and return to the last checkpoint; whereas in a Rogue-lite game, the player is completely reset to the beginning of the game, to start a new 'run' with a new randomised version of the map (Adam, 2017).

3. Souls-like Deconstruction

3.1. Tutorials

Games of this sub-genre, tend not to offer much in terms of tutorials; they teach you the main mechanics, but the main learning curve comes from playing and dying multiple times until you learn the enemy combat patterns and how to counter them. The player is given minimum direction and guidance. Players must uncover mechanics, lore, and strategies all by themselves. This leads to a feeling of exploration and discovery (Gratton, 2022).

3.2. Play space

Level designs often feature interconnected, semi-open-world environments with shortcuts and hidden paths. This nonlinearity adds to the challenge, as players need to navigate complex landscapes.

The play space employed in games of this genre is usually comprised of tight choke points, which are separated by large open spaces for combat scenarios. Sometimes players get

forced into a tighter space during combat to give the feeling of being overwhelmed and constrained (Brycer, 2018).

Gates and valves are used to prevent the player from progressing through the level too quickly, this gives the designer the opportunity to craft the balance and flow of the player's experience. Which allows adjustment to the intensity of the challenge. Most titles in the subgenre feature secret shortcuts, which are intentionally hidden for the player to find.

A good example is when the designers place obstructing objects blocking entrances to other areas. In **Bloodborne** (*FromSoftware,* 2015) when navigating ***Central Yharnam***, there are some breakable crates blocking a shortcut to a later section which aren't immediately obvious to the player. Once the player has found the shortcut, they will learn on the next playthrough they have the ability to complete the level in a much quicker manner. ***Fig.1*** shows the ***Bloodborne*** kennels shortcut is highlighted in a blue line rather than the red line which is the main progression.

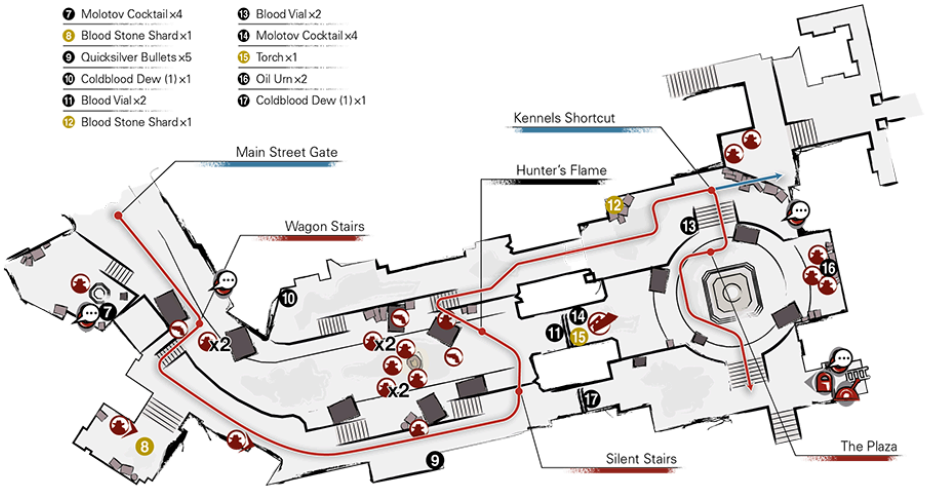


Figure 1: Bloodborne Kennels Shortcut

Landmarks are present in souls like games to give the player a sense of direction and their bearings of which way they are headed. A good example of a landmark would be the Erdtree in **Elden Ring** it gives the player a guide as it is always visible in the sky.



Figure 2: The Erdtree

3.3. Gameplay

3.3.1. Balance

Gameplay is all about balance (Schell, 2020), the player has a health bar along with a stamina bar and when the player suffers damage, the health bar will deplete, forcing a break from combat. When a player uses abilities such as sprint or dodge, the stamina bar will deplete. Once the stamina depletes the player must take a break from fast movements, , this leaves them vulnerable to an attack and therefore strategic thinking is mandatory.



Figure 3: Elden Ring Health Bar (Red), Stamina Bar (Green)

3.3.2. The three-act structure

The three-act structure is a guideline to show how a narrative is made:

-**Setup** – the player is given a challenge to overcome.

-Confrontation – the player then confronts the challenge.

-Resolution – the player overcomes the challenge.

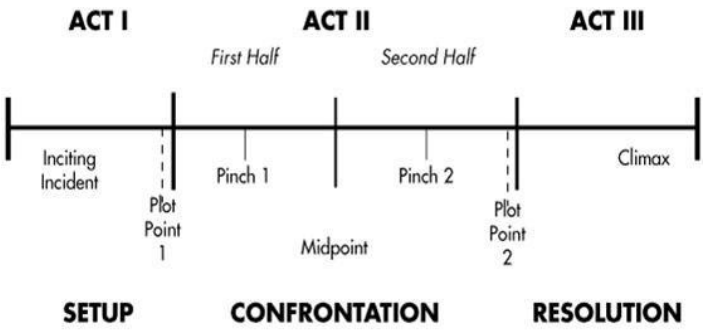


Figure 4:Three Act Structure

The intensity over time graph is based around the Three-act structure. When the intensity rises, the game challenges the player more. The graph below shows how the intensity is adjusted over the course of the three-act structure. The rise in intensity creates a more challenging progression for the player.

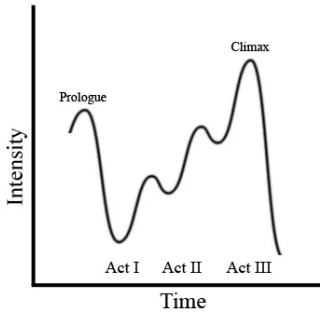


Figure 5:Intensity Over Time

3.3.3. Level Beats

Gameplay beats raise and lower the intensity of gameplay (Ellis, 2015). The game can achieve this in different ways, by changing the number of enemies in an area, adjusting the enemies' power or altering the size of the play area, which reduces the ability to dodge enemy attacks.



Figure 6:Kirby and the Forgotten Land Gameplay Beats

3.3.4. Level Beats in a Souls-like

Level beats specific to the souls-like genre, generally have a higher average intensity, this allows the genre to hit its target demographic, that being more competent players. Comparing the level beats of **Kirby and the Forgotten Land** (*Nintendo, 2022)* and **Bloodborne,** Kirby has more low-intensity areas shown by green boxes, whereas Bloodborne, although section 1 carries a low intensity, section 2 follows with an abundance of heightened intensity areas shown by orange and red boxes.

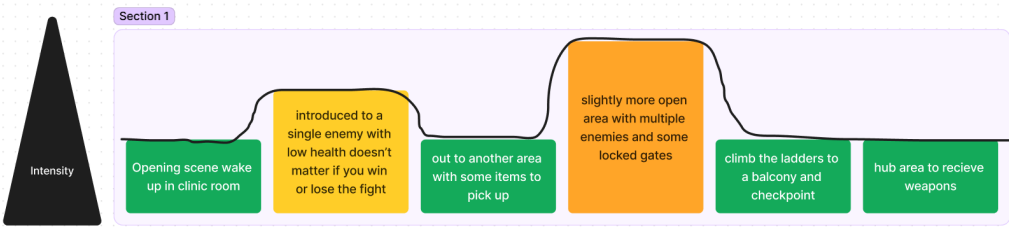


Figure 7:Souls-like Level Beats 1

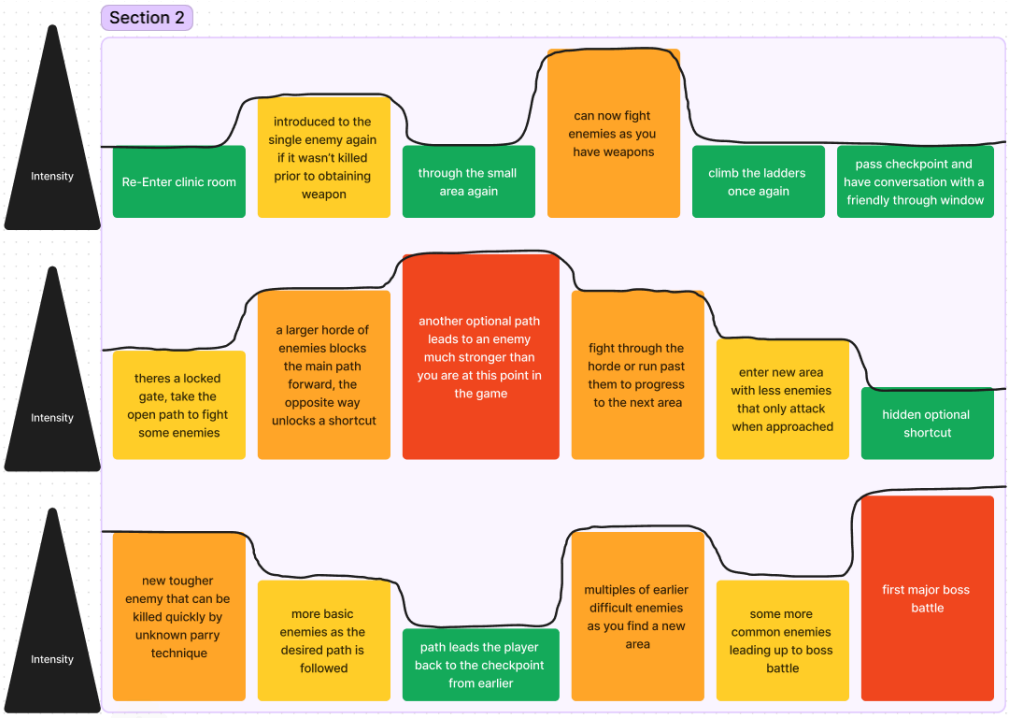


Figure 8: Souls-like Level Beats 2

3.3.5. Good balance in combat mechanics

Enemy combat patterns are crafted in a way that allows the player to learn them. Generally, the more competent player will have the ability to learn the combat patterns much faster than a player of less ability. Souls-like games use iFrames or Invincibility frames, which allow players to become invincible for a small moment when certain actions happen, like rolling (Clark, 2022). The punishing combat leans into the idea of the heightened flow theory.

3.3.6. Difficulty Of Enemies

Souls-like games are known for their steep difficulty curves. Enemies are often hard to defeat, and the player character is relatively fragile. This high level of difficulty forces players to be cautious, strategic, and precise in their actions.

3.3.7. Boss Battles

An obvious challenge in these games is the extreme difficulty and multitude of unique boss battles, which prevent the player from progressing further. They often require learning intricate attack patterns, dodging, parrying, and exploiting weaknesses. Boss battles generally happen in a more open-spaced area, like an arena. The arena’s size and shape can determine the difficulty of the battle.



Figure 9:Elden ring boss Maliketh

3.4. Risk vs. Reward

Many in-game decisions involve evaluating the risks and potential rewards. For example, deciding to explore an uncharted area could yield valuable items or end up leading to a devastating encounter. Sparse checkpoints mean players can potentially lose substantial progress if they die. This sparsity adds tension and encourages players to pre-plan their routes and conserve resources. The added challenge of all enemies being reset whenever a checkpoint is used, only adds to the game's difficulty. Souls-like designers will intentionally place higher-level enemies at earlier points in the game, to punish the player and add difficulty. These are optional, so a player of higher calibre can decide to take on the challenge and get rewarded for their skill and bravery. Some optional areas have a gate-keeper enemy, which is placed purposefully to test the player's current equipment and see if it's strong enough to tackle the enemies of the area ahead.

Upon death in a Souls-like, the player will often lose in-game currency or experience points (depending on which game they are named differently). They may also have the opportunity to retrieve their lost resources, by returning to the point where they died, adding the risk-reward dynamic. The player is punished by tough enemies overwhelming and killing them. However, repeated attempts at challenging an enemy to a fight force the player to learn the combat patterns, which eventually leads to confidence in using the parry and dodge abilities in tandem with the patterns to defeat the foe.

4. Psychology of Engagement

4.1. Flow Theory

In the challenge concept of flow theory, if a player's skill reaches the desired level of difficulty, there will be an increase in engagement. However, if the game has different difficulty levels throughout, it is possible for the player's frustration to increase, but not to the extent that could cause boredom (Sazon, 2021).

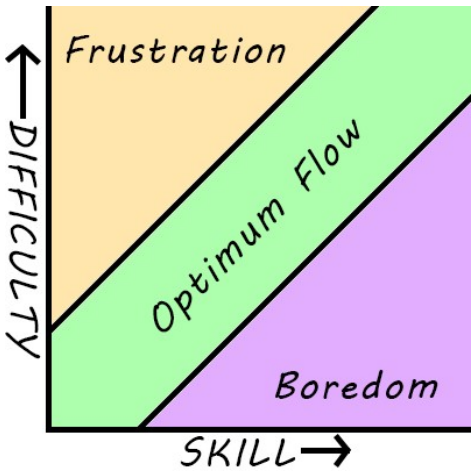


Figure 10: Flow Theory

In the flow, the player should always be playing on the very edge of their skill level, on the brink of falling off, they will feel the urge to climb back on.

Nothing engages the player more than the state of working at the very limits of their individual ability (McGonigal, 2011). The player will only remain engaged in a game if the difficulty is balanced with their expertise, good balance will encourage them to continue to complete the challenge and feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

4.1.1. Souls-like Flow Theory

In a Souls-like game, the flow theory is purposefully adapted to try and force the player to a feeling of frustration and being overwhelmed. This is the expectation of the sub-genre target demographic. This increased offset in flow, requests a higher player competence. Players with lower competence will hit boredom faster as they won't be able to maintain the higher expectancy of the flow channel.

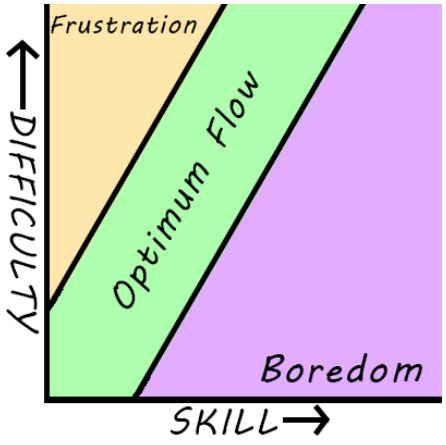


Figure 11: Souls-like Flow Theory

4.2. Self Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality (Deci, 2000).

SDT emphasizes the importance of satisfying the player's innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci, 1987), which can be understood when talking about Souls-like games. Goal Contents Theory (GCT) comes from the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and how they can motivate a player.

Autonomy is the need to feel control and ownership over actions and decisions. When playing these skill-reliant games, players are given 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. When games take away control of player decisions this can lead to frustration, frustration is what will stop the player from engaging and feeling motivated to progress.

Competence is the need to feel effective and capable during activities. The emphasis on learning and growth in the genre often requires the player to adapt strategies, develop perseverance and learn from failures, which fits in with the principle of competence needs.

Relatedness is the need to feel associated and have purposeful relationships with others. As players participate in shared experiences and social interactions online or offline within the community, the engagements match the standards of relatedness needs. The fulfilment of these basic psychological needs creates intrinsic motivation and strengthens self-determination, enabling players to pursue activities that coincide with their personal values and aspirations (Deci, 1987).

4.2.2. Souls-like SDT

Souls-like games give the player full autonomy to control their situation. The player needs to know the decisions they make lead them along the path they desire. The player is given enough power to control any given situation at any given moment. Even if they do not have the required skills at that point, the player still has the ability to defend themselves. Souls-like players carry a high sense of SDT due to them always having full autonomy over their actions. The games are completely skill-based and the idea of luck coming into play is subjective due to the design of the game's mechanics.

4.3 Achievement Motivation Theory

Even though these games are known for their high difficulty, they are highly commercially successful, with a large devoted fanbase pouring an abundance of hours into each title. Studies that demonstrate deep player engagement and enjoyment, despite their frequent failure (Petralito S., 2017). Show that the motivation patterns don't fit the theory of achievement motivation. The players are not motivated by success but are rather motivated by what seems to be persistent failure.

Because of the difficulty when completing the challenge of a Souls-like, the genre is a prime candidate for a level of respect amongst fellow gamers, the results of very low success probability, means that players should avoid the genre altogether and steer towards games where the odds of failure and success are more even.

4.3.1. AMT In Souls-like

To explore the souls-like achievement motivation theory, we must assume that Soulslike players judge their subjective success odds to be higher than the average player, either because they are very proficient players, or irrationally overconfident (Deterding, 2022). The player may also be willing to put in the grind to become more competent at the game, an example could be the extrinsic goal of the social acceptance of having completed a Souls-like game and the player having the opportunity to speak proudly because completion is deemed something to be proud of (Brycer, 2020).

5. Conclusion

After researching the challenge of souls-like games, guided by deconstructing the design and looking at the deconstruction process. We can inform best practice scenarios, using player psychology.

When implementing a challenge, the designer needs to push the player to engage further until they reach the intrinsic goal of satisfaction.

Giving the player complete control of their autonomy is essential, removing the player's dependency on luck to progress, as a result, when the player advances through the levels, the player can feel proud of knowing this is entirely due to their skill competence and not due to a randomised luck factor.

Through the lens of conceptualisation Level Beats in a Souls-like should maintain an average higher intensity than other genres. ***Fig.12*** shows a good example of what Level Beats should look like when crafting the flow of intensity throughout the level.

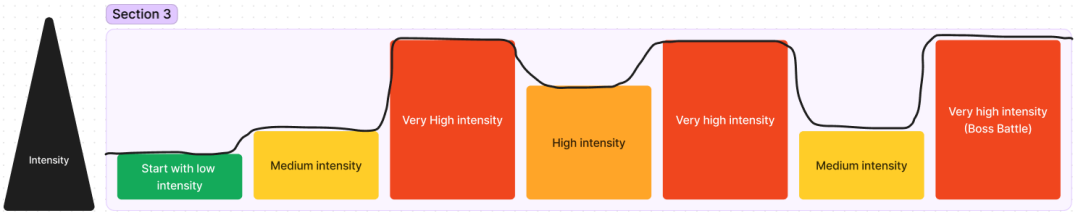


Figure 12: Level Beats Concept

The action loops in the game must consist of enemy patterns that enable the player to study and determine when to attack. The long-term cognitive loop must contain boss fights that unlock new areas to progress; alternatively the design can feature secret shortcuts to progress if the player explores enough to find one. The emotional loop is the player consistently knowing that they are in complete control in an entirely skill-based game. The player's emotion informs flow theory as the player understands that if they fail to defeat an enemy, it is entirely their fault due to lack of skill or lack of knowledge. Good practice when designing the game's mechanics would be to use iFrames mentioned in 3.3.5., these reinforce confidence in the player as it gives them the ability to avoid taking damage when dodging an attack during combat. Implementing shortcuts across levels also promotes exploration to the player, once a shortcut is found, this informs the player that shortcuts exist and they should look around to potentially find more.

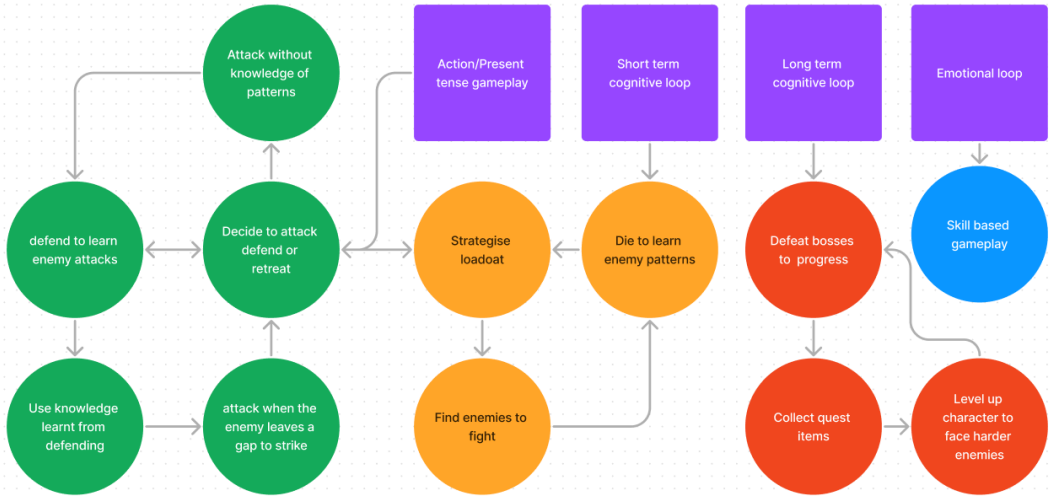


Figure 13:Souls-like Core Loops

The games' challenges use human psychology to motivate the player, by deconstructing the souls-like flow theory, we see that the flow channel is heightened, so the player skill must either already be competent or willing to put themselves through multiple death scenarios and get better at the game.

Good practice in design would be maintaining the heightened flow theory, keeping the player constantly cautious of what could be around the corner, this can be achieved by placing an enemy ambush behind a wall or having a large crowd in a confined space overwhelming the player. The heightened flow theory maintains the target demographic, which is players with high confidence or high competence. Due to the sub-genres popularity which is supported by their known high difficulty, they also have the ability to draw in new players that may want to take on a new challenge and be a part of the respected players that enjoy these types of games (TMG, 2023).

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