

The topic of difficulty in video games, particularly *Dark Souls*, has been endlessly debated since the game's release. It is argued by some that an "easy mode" would allow less skilled players to still enjoy the game. This has been done by more recent games with notorious difficulty such as *Celeste's* Assist Mode and *Darkest Dungeon's* Radiant Mode. Both games feature the ability to toggle off mechanics that add to difficulty and turn on boosts that make getting through a level trivial. I'm not here to argue against these. If someone doesn't want to die tens of times on a single screen there's no reason to force them to do so to play the rest of the game. *Dark Souls* takes a different approach. Rather than putting a way around challenges in a menu somewhere labeled "You shouldn't do this", *Dark Souls* encourages players to use the tools at their disposal to find the easier way around an obstacle. This is highlighted in the very first boss fight in the game, the Asylum Demon. Players are faced against a massive foe while carrying only the hilt of a broken sword. However a quick scan of the area reveals a doorway leading out. Players are then able to acquire their gear and return to the boss with a plunging attack to deal massive damage to it. Despite facing overwhelming odds, there is always a way to lighten the load on yourself. The game has no true fail state so long as the player keeps trying, and in doing so it invites the player to experiment with different tactics and gradually improve, eventually gaining the skill and knowledge to overcome the obstacle they face. This method of making the player find the chink in the armor rather than just removing the armor entirely makes for a much more rewarding experience that anyone can achieve so long as they never give up. In doing so, *Dark Souls* is following the David versus Goliath story structure that intrinsically combines Challenge with Narrative that reflects many stories throughout the ages, with the *Doctor Who* episode "Heaven Sent" also being an example of this.

*Dark Souls* is never afraid to let you know that you're fighting an uphill battle. When meeting an NPC early on in *Dark Souls 3*, he outright tells you, "You'll face death, and it won't be pretty. Enough death to leave you broken, time after time". Even the weakest enemies early on can take the player out in a few hits if they're not careful. Despite how often the player is

smashed into the ground, the game spends just as much time encouraging the player and pushing them forward, telling them to not give up. Characters like Solaire, who shine brightness into this bleak world, tell the player that despite the insurmountable odds, they never have to be alone. His sun-themed aesthetic and associated mantra “Praise the sun” further establish the ability for cooperation to help shed light into the bleak world as well as showing that despite the many hardships the people traveling here may face, it is still possible to be resilient in spite of it all. Other players leave messages of warning or encouragement, and can even be summoned to assist against a difficult area or boss, engaging in “jolly cooperation” and lessening the load on the player. Even when unable to find other players to cooperate with, the player is still often able to summon NPCs to their aid when needed.

Many of the NPCs in the games throughout the series face their own trials and threat of going “hollow”, unable to permanently die but slowly becoming empty husks of who they once were. Even many of the bosses are the product of their own individual journeys of persistence. Seigward of Catarina in *Dark Souls 3* is journeying across a wasteland in order to keep a promise to a long gone friend. Lautrec of Carim sacrificed everything he once had and killed the Firekeeper, taking her soul across Lordran in his love for the goddess Fina. Artorias the Abysswalker, an optional boss in the game, is a shell of his former self, having failed to stop the spread of the Abyss and consequently being consumed by it. Solaire of Astora is journeying to find his “very own sun”. If left to his own devices, he will eventually go insane in the depths of Lost Izalith. However if the player intervenes and kills the Sunlight Maggots that will eventually corrupt him before he gets there, he will be able to continue to the end of the game and link the flame in his own world, finally truly obtaining his very own sun. Solaire’s own message of helping others persist through the darkness is what helps save him. In doing so, the game is further illustrating that the way to get through the challenges it puts in front of the player is through cooperating with others and weathering the storm together.

It is interesting to note the concept of the Abyss as a physical place in Dark Souls. The Hero's Journey of course has a step named the abyss, otherwise known as the ordeal, in which the hero faces their greatest challenge and must draw upon all of their experience and skills to overcome it and be reborn. The player will face the abyss time and time again in playing through *Dark Souls*. As they progress they will go through truncated hero's journeys, facing up against insurmountable odds times and time again. And each time, they will overcome the abyss and carry forward with knowledge and experience to help them do it all over again. In order to complete the game, the player must plunge directly into the literal Abyss to take on the Four Kings. This boss is four separate bosses all back to back, putting the player's experience to the test. The entrance to the abyss is physically at the lowest point in the game, preceded by an underground city flooded with water. In this way the previous step of the Hero's Journey, "Approach the Inmost Cave" is also played out. The player must also have a ring they obtained earlier in order to avoid simply dying when plunging into the Abyss. The player is experiencing the ultimate abyss in their overarching Hero's Journey, having to pull out all the stops in order to overcome the Four Kings who themselves were corrupted by the Abyss. In this way, the aesthetic of Narrative proves impossible to separate from Challenge. The abyss is the moment in which the hero reaches their high point, and they obtain the last Lord Soul needed to finally enter the Kiln of the First Flame, their "Seizing the Sword" moment. This all would have zero impact, however, if the game were to lessen the difficulty it takes to reach this point. The challenge of fighting through a literal ghost town and plunging into the abyss with the faith that the ring you wear will keep you from being consumed by it all adds to the overall narrative of learning to persevere and persist against the odds. And if things end up being too much and the player finds themselves stuck, they will find an NPC named Witch Beatrice can be summoned to come to their aid if they summoned her before, further reinforcing the theme of cooperation through adversity.

The feeling of facing a massive boss and, through trial, error, and cooperation, overcoming it is without exaggeration one of the most rewarding feelings in video games. *Dark Souls* is intentionally designed to teach players that what matters isn't how hard they hit, it's about how hard they can get hit and keep going anyway. To implement an "easy mode" would be to diminish this feeling, reducing the reward the player feels from playing the game, because the challenge and repetition is what makes the eventual victory so rewarding. Some argue that the player should be allowed to control the aesthetic of a game, trading in challenge for focus on narrative. To be able to change the intended aesthetic of a game however is to undermine the power of any aesthetic present, particularly with *Dark Souls*. The game and its narrative are entirely about overcoming these seemingly impossible odds, and reducing the difficulty would reduce the impact of the narrative as well. The saying "Don't go hollow", which is repeated throughout the series, only makes sense if there is a real threat that the player simply decides to give up. Without the constant presence of difficulty, the story of a complete nobody rising up to face gods is unable to produce the intended effect on the player.

The developers want the player to experience overcoming great odds through patience, persistence, and resilience. They have left nothing in the game that goes against this intended experience, no hidden menu to turn on Infinite Health and no secret cheat code to give the player the strongest weapon in the game. When a player is struggling against a boss and they leave to go level up or find stronger spells and equipment, or when they decide to summon other players to assist in the fight, that is all part of the intended experience. The perception that there is nothing the player can do to lessen the challenge is incorrect. In a game like *Celeste* where there is no way to explore the world or become more powerful for a level through anything other than pure repetition, it makes sense to implement an Assist Mode. However *Dark Souls* forgoes anything like that because learning to lessen the challenge to push through is all part of the full gameplay loop. The developers *expect* the player to go find the easier way through because that is part of overcoming obstacles. No one expects someone to climb a

mountain without training just as the developers don't expect the player to beat a boss without dying a few times and learning to fight it, becoming stronger for the challenge.

Ultimately the destination in *Dark Souls* is meaningless. If the player reaches the Kiln of the First Flame and relinks the flame, they are merely postponing its eventual end. The game isn't about the destination. Because even with the chosen undead's journey being complete, the cycle then begins again, with countless others journeying to the Kiln of the First Flame to relink the flame, each time losing its power until it is nothing but an ember at the end of *Dark Souls 3*. What matters is the journey, the overcoming of odds countless times only for the cycle to repeat. The game ends as soon as the player's journey is complete, with no "post game" content. The only option is to begin the game anew in New Game +. Because it was never about the ultimate destination, it was the journey itself that mattered. The game's narrative is about overcoming adversity and learning to persist against the odds, regardless of what the ultimate goal is. The challenge of the game helps reinforce this in a way that forces the player not just to understand that the journey is difficult but to actually experience challenges as the character in the story experiences them, being ergodic text in nature through the gameplay's difficulty. Despite being one of the best film trilogies of all time, no one walked away from *The Lord of the Rings* having learned to persist through difficulty by watching Frodo and Sam do it. *Dark Souls* is unique in that regard. It is why a search on Youtube for "Dark Souls Saved My Life" will result in countless videos all speaking on how playing through *Dark Souls* and learning to overcome its challenges helped them then overcome challenges they faced in their daily lives, namely depression. The aesthetics of Challenge and Narrative are inseparable in *Dark Souls* because it is doing something other mediums can't do. While someone watching "Heaven Sent" may feel sympathy for The Doctor or may even be inspired by his struggle, they are still limited in their relationship with him. As Luca Papale notes in "Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships between Player and Avatar", "No matter how much the audience tries to interpret the characters' behaviors, sentences, and attitudes: a film viewer [...] will never have an active role in the

creation of the characters' identities. It is in this way that *Dark Souls* breaks away from similar texts in its ability to hand the player themselves the sword and tell them that if they want the dragon slain, they must do it themselves. It pulls the player into its world, puts the challenge not just in front of the character but directly in front of the player, and gives them no other option but to learn how to overcome the impossible. In doing so, *Dark Souls* is not just telling the player a story about struggle but making them identify with the Chosen Undead and in turn having them personally experience the struggles within the narrative.

At the beginning of the *Doctor Who* episode "Heaven Sent", The Doctor wakes up in a glass chamber, seemingly having been teleported there. With no knowledge of where he is, he ventures out to find he is in a prison designed specifically for him, contained within a castle above a vast ocean. There is also a cloaked monster that is slowly but surely approaching his location at all times, and it only stops when The Doctor confesses to a secret. He realizes this prison was designed to torture information out of him to gain knowledge on an entity known as The Hybrid. He works to find clues around the prison and discovers the water below is full of countless skulls. He also finds in the teleportation chamber a skull left next to the controls and the word "bird" written in the sand on the ground. Eventually he knocks the skull into the water where the rest have piled up. After following the clues, he discovers two things. He is 7000 years into the future, and he needs to find a room numbered 12, the other rooms having also been numbered. He suspects his TARDIS is inside, a time machine which would have the ability to let him escape the prison. However he finds that within room 12 there is a wall of solid "Azbantium", a mineral said to be harder than diamond. It is then that the word written in the sand, "bird", clicks. He realizes it is a reference to a Grimm Fairytale, "The Shepherd's Boy", in which there is a quote that says a second of eternity will have passed when a bird chisels a diamond mountain down to nothing with its beak. He realizes he must chisel away at the Azbantium with his bare hands as much as possible before the monster catches up to him. When the monster does catch up and mortally wounds him, he drags himself to the teleportation

chamber, using his life essence to create a copy of himself and writing bird in the sand once more before dying. And so the cycle begins anew, with eons passing as the Azbantium slowly but surely being chipped away, ultimately leading to The Doctor accessing the TARDIS and making his escape.

This episode illustrates the same experience the player receives playing through *Dark Souls*. It illustrates the sensation of slowly but surely chipping away at a problem, making progress through sheer persistence and will, gradually improving through failure. It is representative of a particular kind of storytelling that focuses on not just the hero's journey but the immense will required to complete it, which has become more and more popular in recent years in response to a sort of rise in absurdist belief. The hero that faces death knowing there is little to no chance that he will win has become more pervasive in media, the hero persisting against impossible odds through sheer will and refusal to go gentle into that good night. This is reflected as well with "The indifferent cruelty of the universe versus the indomitable human spirit" becoming an immensely popular meme focusing on heroes both real and fictional that were willing to fight against the impossible simply because it is human nature to do so. This isn't to say these stories just recently came into existence. The 3,000 year old story of David and Goliath, reflects the same ideas of a hero with relatively little power rising up to stand against overwhelming odds. Through all of these, the Challenge IS the Narrative. It is not possible to remove the aesthetic of Challenge from these kinds of texts because without it there would be no Narrative. The Chosen Undead's journey is a journey about dying over and over again yet each time rising back up a little bit better and a little bit stronger until they finally topple the Goliath. The Doctor spends billions of years dying and being reborn each time chipping away just slightly at the wall until finally breaking through. Both know they may succeed solely through willpower and persistence in the face of continuous failure. Because with each failure, they get just a little closer to victory. As previously mentioned, *Dark Souls* and the games it would inspire are able to use the medium to tell the David and Goliath story in a completely new way. Rather

than having the reader sympathize with the David of a story in his struggle or empathize with him by drawing connections to his struggle and whatever the reader is facing in their life, *Dark Souls* is able to take it one step further and make the player themselves the David of the story through their projection into the Chosen Undead. It is the player that is dying to each boss, rather than some heroic character with their own willpower. So it is put into the hands of the player to gain the resilience to pick themselves up and keep trying. This is why *Dark Souls* and its descendants are able to inspire so many of its players to then move forward and directly apply that resilience to their own lives and why the addition of an easy mode or a cheat menu would keep it from being able to achieve that effect. In summary, absurdist Albert Camus would write three sentences that would summarize the effects *Dark Souls* has on the player a full 57 years before it would be released. "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger - something better, pushing right back". Praise the sun.