Warren Steinbrecher

Sean Brennan

IGME 110

September 22, 2019

<div align="center">"The Dark Souls of Research Papers"</div>

Ever since the inception of video games, one of the biggest hurdles for developers has

been properly implementing difficulty. Ultimately, the difficulty of a video game impacts the

player's experience in a big way. If a game is too hard, the player will get frustrated and quit; if

the game is too easy, it will get boring and there will be no incentive to keep playing. Getting

into the difficulty "sweet spot" is challenging, but ultimately extremely rewarding. A game's

difficulty is one of the biggest contributors to its success or failure, as a properly balanced game

can improve player immersion and, by extension, increase its critical and commercial success.

At what point is a video game considered "great"? Ultimately, it comes down to the

game's immersion. Immersion is when a player feels as though they are a part of the game they

are playing, where the division between it and reality are practically broken. This effect is known

as "real world dissociation", in which a player may lose track of time or develop a lack of

awareness of their surroundings (Jennett et al. 3408). The design features of a game combine to

immerse the player in the world; whether it be because of the enthralling story, because of the

addictive gameplay, etc. A game's true goal is to get the player as immersed in the world as

possible; as such, if a game fails in any of the core concepts mentioned previously, the player's

immersion will be greatly impacted. So, how does difficulty affect immersion? I believe that

difficulty is what makes or breaks a game. A game, ideally, should be compatible with the

player's current level of skill so that the player is neither overwhelmed by challenges beyond their capabilities, nor bored by challenges too simple to overcome (Sarkar and Cooper 1). In the end, if a player feels bored or overwhelmed, their immersion will be impacted regardless of what else the game has to offer; so, if a game truly wants to be immersive, it needs to have properly balanced difficulty.

My main inspiration for writing about this topic specifically was my recent completion of the 2011 game *Dark Souls*. As anybody who has played the game will tell you, it is not easy; however, its difficulty is also what has caused it to become a cultural phenomenon. Difficult games are often cited as "the Dark Souls of [genre x]", and the iconic "You Died" death screen has been the subject of countless internet memes. So why, if the game is so relentlessly difficult, is it widely considered one of the greatest action-RPGs of all time and frequently seen at the top of "greatest games of all time" lists (Houghton, *GamesRadar.com*)? The key idea here is balance. The game's difficulty mostly stems from learning the moves and improving as the game continues. The game has been described by Heather Alexandra: "There's a remarkable sense of accomplishment that comes from struggling with an area only to return later and proceed through it with ease. This is bolstered by the game's combat, a slow, hefty form of hacking and slashing where button presses feel like important commitments." (*Kotaku.com*). It never feels like the game's fault when you die; it is almost always the result of player error. This is where I feel the main root of balanced difficulty comes: a game is well balanced when the player feels as though they need to get better instead of believing the game itself needs to be improved. The immersion the players experience from this game has allowed it to be very successful, with two sequels and a remastered edition produced as a result of its dedicated fanbase.

For every game that triumphs with difficulty as Dark Souls does, there is a game where difficulty is its downfall. One such game is the 2015 action-adventure game *Titan Souls*. Generally speaking, Titan Souls has maintained fairly positive reviews since its release, with the game being praised for its simple world, creative design of boss fights, and fluid controls (Tyrrel, *IGN.com*). However, this was met with its fair share of criticism regarding the game's difficulty. The game itself is not too difficult, with bosses being killed in one or two hits from the player's single arrow attack; the main difficulty resides in player death, as one hit kills the player. This can become particularly frustrating for players who repeatedly die and are sent all the way back to a respawn point, often a good distance away. Additionally, boss victories often come out of luck, not skill. As stated by Arthur Gies: "I've died what I estimate to be about 30 times in this particular fight [...] I know what I need to do, where I should theoretically be aiming my single arrow. But that doesn't seem to matter, and here comes death number 31— Except no. Not this time. This time, there's a bright flash of white on the screen, and my opponent is the one who fell. To be honest, I'm not quite sure what happened." (*Polygon.com*). In theory, the game has excellent design and story, and the controls are sound - but the difficulty ruins the experience that the player may have had by making the game overly frustrating and breaking the player's immersion in the process. While the game was initially successful, it has little lasting value - it only has about ten concurrent players per day on Steam at the time of writing, compared to Dark Souls Remastered's one thousand (*SteamCharts.com)*. What could be an excellent game is stunted by unbalanced difficulty.

Evidently, it can be very difficult for a developer to properly balance a game's difficulty. One innovation in recent years that attempts to combat this issue is the implementation of a

dynamic difficulty curve. A dynamic difficulty curve would automatically change certain game parameters in real time to keep in line with the player, so the difficulty is never too easy or too difficult. In other words, the difficulty gets adjusted based on player skill - the better they are, the harder it gets and the worse they are, the easier it gets. Dynamic difficulty "promise[s] to reduce the burden placed on players and avoid breaking [immersion] [...] but also bear[s] the potential to influence a large amount of finegrained variables." (Smeddinck and Mandryk, 5595). So, while allowing the game to be more immersive, one caveat would be its complexity of proper implementation. In addition to this, dynamic difficulty has been shown to affect self-confidence surrounding games; a dynamic curve could make a player feel overconfident, as they expect to succeed in future segments of the game (Constant and Levieux). In personal experience, I have also found that dynamic difficulty can make a player feel inferior when the game gets easier; it feels as if you are not playing the game as it is intended to be played. Forcing a player to play with an easier difficulty can be discouraging, and often the choice of difficulty is better because players can challenge themselves. Whether this is the way of the future or just a short-lived concept is impossible to say, but it is an interesting attempt to bypass development troubles.

Difficulty is what separates fun and rewarding experiences from boring or frustrating ones. Being able to balance that difficulty will ultimately make or break a game, and should be taken into high consideration during development. After all, in the words of Reggie Fils-Aimé, ex-President and COO of Nintendo of America: "If it's not fun, why bother?"

References

Alexandra, H. (2018, May 29). Dark Souls Remastered: The Kotaku review. Retrieved

    September 11, 2019, from kotaku.com website:

    https://kotaku.com/dark-souls-remastered-the-kotaku-review-1826393252

Shows a positive review of Dark Souls, praising the difficulty curve

Constant, T., & Levieux, G. (2019). Dynamic difficulty adjustment impact on players'

    confidence. *CHI '19*, (463). https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300693

Discusses the impact dynamic difficulty has on player confidence

Gies, A. (2015, April 13). Titan Souls review: The loop. Retrieved September 11, 2019, from

    polygon.com website:

    https://www.polygon.com/2015/4/13/8398611/titan-souls-review-PC-PS4

Gives negative feedback on Titan Souls, particularly on the frustrating difficulty

Houghton, D. (2015, March 6). Top 100: Why Dark Souls is simply the greatest game of all

    time. Retrieved September 11, 2019, from gamesradar.com website:

    https://www.gamesradar.com/why-dark-souls-simply-greatest-game-all-time/

Shows an example of Dark Souls being considered the greatest game of all time

Jennett, C., Cox, A. L., & Cairns, P. (2009). Investigating computer game immersion and the

      component real world dissociation. *CHI EA*, 3407-3412.

      https://doi.org/10.1145/1520340.1520494

Describes immersion and real world dissociation with video games.

Sarkar, A., & Cooper, S. (2019). Transforming game difficulty curves using function

      composition. *CHI '19*, (551). https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300781

Talks about the code behind dynamic difficulty and the functional composition behind it

Smeddinck, J. D., Mandryk, R. L., Birk, M. V., Gerling, K. M., & Malaka, R. (2016). How to

      Present Game Difficulty Choices?: Exploring the Impact on Player Experience. *CHI '16*,

      5595-5607. https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858574

Discusses recent developments in dynamic difficulty.

Steam Charts. steamcharts.com/. Accessed 22 Sept. 2019.

 Shows player statistics for the mentioned games Dark Souls and Titan Souls.

Tyyrrel, B. (2015, April 13). Titan Souls review. Retrieved September 11, 2019, from ign.com

      website: https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/04/13/titan-souls-review

Shows a positive review of Titan Souls, particularly the story and design