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Difficulty in Video Games

Throughout time games have been utilized for a great variety of purposes: relaxing leisure, competitive activity, intellectual exercise, and many other sources of enjoyment. The element of difficulty has existed in various degrees throughout all of those game styles, usually found through the skill of an opponent, but lately many games have been designed to have a digital opponent to provide that difficulty. With access to more information than ever before, people have gotten the chance to witness lives and worlds that they can never physically enjoy, and this has led to a considerable market for games that can provide at least a fraction of such an experience. People often seek out the ability to immerse themselves through narrative, simulated companionship or a game that provides a sense of purpose. A sense of purpose is established when a person can consider it their duty to overcome a presented obstacle, and the most skilled and experienced of players will tend to aim for bigger and more challenging obstacles over time. This desire for challenge or productivity can be further increased by the sentiment held by many individuals in society that gaming is a waste of time. To counteract that instilled mentality, the desire to accomplish something and progress becomes a priority in the minds of many, pushing them to seek personal accomplishment through difficulty during their leisure time. There are many games that use difficulty well, and many whose use is… controversial, to say the least. This essay will focus mostly on Dark Souls, Hollow Knight, Celeste, Pogostuck, and Don't Starve

The series of games most infamous for its difficulty is the Dark Souls series, as well as all other games made by those developers. Dark Souls I and III, and the way that they differ will be the main focus of this discussion. The primary difference between these two games is that the first focuses on level design and open world exploration, while the third focuses on quality boss fights. The difficulty of Dark Souls I comes primarily from difficult level design, and also from encountering difficult bosses too early, although this could go in reverse, resulting in a player fighting a boss too late and completely steamrolling it. Dark Souls III solves this issue by making the game considerably more linear, ensuring that players encounter bosses at a stage where they will be equipped to defeat them in a reasonable amount of time, but not so high level as to beat them easily. This trade off resulted in some of the best designed bosses of all time but made exploration considerably less interesting in Dark Souls III. The bosses themselves really gives off the feeling that the player is at a heavy disadvantage, resulting from them being faster, more durable, and having much larger and more devasting attacks. The bosses often feel unfair at first, but that only makes it even more satisfying to defeat an opponent that at one point felt impossible. The grandiose scale of boss fights as a result of their design and epic soundtracks

further increases that feeling of power and accomplishment from defeating the titans of Dark Souls.

Hollow Knight on the other hand, found a reasonably simple solution to the open world difficulty problem that ensures no boss will be too easy or too hard. In Hollow Knight the player's damage primarily comes from their nail melee attack which they can upgrade several times throughout the game. Many of the bosses and even several enemies have their HP scale to the players level of nail, to make sure that no fight will be too long or too short. Even with the health scaling, a higher level nail will still kill a boss faster, ensuring that the player is always rewarded for making an upgrade. The most difficult bosses in the game do not scale with the players nail, however, which is an excellent incentive for the player to be thorough and seek out as many upgrades as they can. The fantastic thing about Hollow Knight is the immense difference in difficulty between the easiest and the hardest bosses. It makes the game accessible to new players, while providing an always increasing challenge to those who are dedicated. There is a huge sense of satisfaction when you easily beat a boss on a second playthrough that you struggled with the first time. It's that sense of self improvement and mastery that really makes Hollow Knight an amazing game.

Diverging from combat games, we have the well acclaimed platformer Celeste, known for its sleek mechanics and high difficulty. Although my experience and passion for this game is considerably less than the other games mentioned here, I have spent time with many who hold this game dear to their hearts and have poured their heart and soul into mastering it. Similar to Hollow Knight, Celeste has a wide range in difficulty, nearly every level challenging the player more than the last, forcing them to commit themselves to improvement and overcome each difficult room, no matter how many deaths it takes. The platforming engine of celeste is also highly complex and allows for a wide range of movements that are not explicitly explained by the game which allow the player to skip certain areas, or complete rooms in more efficient ways. All of these mechanics are available to the player immediately, so it becomes a matter of knowledge, discovery, or experimentation that gives players the advantage associated with these hidden techniques. Entire custom levels have been created by the community to showcase these mechanics, and that's one part of celeste that really shines. The culture of the game beyond the game itself is highly diverse, and rich with creativity, and incredible difficulty for those who seek it. The narrative of Celeste is also a very important part of the journey from start to finish, the entire game being a sort of metaphor for overcoming the anxiety and self esteem issues of the main character. Because of all these elements, Celeste has become an experience that has a profoundly deep meaning to countless people who, through overcoming the demanding challenges of this game, may have found the strength or passion to overcome problems in their real lives.

Pogostuck is certainly a hot topic for many individuals, due to it being a rage game first and foremost, and secondarily a platformer. The primary difficulty stems from the somewhat awkward and difficult to control movements of the player character, coupled with a map design

that is heavily based upon the player losing a lot of progress when they fail a jump. This feeling of losing progress due to janky game mechanics that seem beyond the player's control is what makes many people despise this game. However, for those who actually spend the time to master the game's mechanics, it can be surprisingly fun. Pogostuck was inspired by the game Getting Over It, which was a game built around the idea of being accepting of failure and lost progress and reaching a goal despite continuous setbacks. I believe that Pogostuck improves upon this game, providing a better movement system, as well as interesting multiplayer mechanics. First of all, the one key difference between the movement systems of these two games is that Pogostuck actually gives the player a chance to recover lost progress after falling. Doing so requires calm focus and precisions but is a very rewarding feeling. A sense of mastery is also something that can be found in this game as you complete the same jumps over and over, you become able to breeze through them in a way that is satisfying and fun, compared to your original fearful and tense experience with each area. In a way, the ability to lose progress is what gives that progress value in the first place; reaching a new high score and feeling awesome, then losing it all the next second. The mind remembers that positive feeling, and knows that if it got there once, it can do it again, so you keep pushing higher and higher up the mountain until you finally reach the top and conquer this challenge, putting an accomplishment under your belt that you can carry with you forever. This game is truly not for everyone and is best played with a friend who you can share your accomplishments or failures with.

Although I've played hundreds of hours of Don't Starve Together, I can't help but feel that it has some major design flaws in terms of difficulty. There is absolutely no tutorial for the game, so new players are thrown into this harsh and cruel world with no direction at all. There are many items, enemies, and mechanics that are "noob traps" greatly punishing those who lack knowledge of the game. Despite these issues, the game is still greatly popular, and I believe this is due to some players actually desiring a game that is a harsh as this one, enjoying the challenge that ignorance provides, and taking pride in overcoming that ignorance on their own. I once heard from a skilled player that the fun of the game actually decreases as you become better at it, and I can agree to an extent. The feeling of mystery and fear upon entering a new area fades pretty quickly when you check the wiki beforehand to know what you're doing. Although to a considerable extent, checking the wiki is a necessity to even understand many of the game dynamics in the first place. There are many bosses that require a strange set of conditions to fight that a new player would be very unlikely to find on their own. Despite how cruel the game can be to ignorant players, one thing that stands out are the multitude of solutions that exist for every problem. Let's take a common invasion event called a hound attack for instance. There are several ways to deal with these periodic attacks, including but not limited to: Tooth traps, hiding in the caves, luring the hounds to stronger creature to kill them, using raw power, leaving the game and coming back, or befriending your own horde of minions to fight them for you. And that's just one of many problems that the player can overcome in many ways, trial and error or random chance being powerful teachers in many circumstances. There is also a difficulty issue with the bosses where they don't scale their difficulty to number

of players, resulting in them often being too easy, or incredibly difficulty for a solo player. This challenge is appreciated in many cases but poses an issue for casual players who struggle finding friends to play with.

One thing that the first four games have in common is that movement is very fast, requiring constant attention and good reflexes. Although this is not a necessary component of difficulty, it is one that challenges our physical motions in a way that many games cannot. Purely puzzle based or turn based games can be an excellent form of difficulty as well, perhaps for a day where we don't want to feel time pressured and would just like some calming intellectual exercises. Some bad examples of difficulty can be found in several bosses from the previous games that gain most of their difficulty from being difficult to hit or forcing the player to spend a lot of time waiting for an opening. Markoth, a boss from Hollow Knight, is one who is almost universally hated for forcing players to play much more patiently than they normally do in a fast paced game. The Curse Rotted Greatwood is a boss from Dark Souls III that is disliked for only being vulnerable in certain weak spots that are usually not reachable, as well as having a ton of minions that pester the player throughout the fight

All of this is to say each person is different and will have different interests at different times, but one thing that consistently rings true throughout all these games is that the player is consistently forced out of their comfort zone in order to improve. Some games do this at different times than others, Hollow Knight and Celeste starting out easy, and slowly building to some of the hardest challenges in all of gaming, while Dark Souls and Don't Starve throw you right into it, facing difficult challenges without much time to prepare for them. One way or another these games make the player want to improve, and that is crucial. Ensuring that players can reasonably overcome challenges in a reasonable amount of time is also critical for a positive experience. The amount of time needed to defeat a boss or clear a challenge should increase as a game progresses, meaning that boss stats shouldn't just scale to the player's weapon, but to the player's skill as well. An additional component is that a boss's strength or difficulty should also somewhat scale with their importance in the story and/or how cool they look. It can be very irritating when a weak looking mini boss gives you more trouble than the final boss of the area. Every poorly designed boss or mechanic will usually have it's fans but giving options to work around particular challenges in a way that suits a player, but is still challenging, should be the highest priority.

People turning to games to fill the gap in their lives is nothing new, and neither is seeking a challenge in those activities, but as player vs enemy games have become integrated, we have learned quite a bit about human nature and learning. I believe that studying the carefully designed difficulty of games like these could give good insight into improving our learning systems.