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ENJOYING THE UNPLEASANT
An Autoethnography of Bloodborne

Abstract

This thesis expands on existing literature about difficult digital/video games and enjoying hard difficulty via an autoethnography of *Bloodborne* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2015), with the aim to discover what makes difficult games enjoyable. It highlights gaps in current studies of game enjoyment about the enjoyability of difficult games. In critiquing these common game enjoyment concepts, this thesis argues for the need for interdisciplinary approaches to difficult games and draws on theoretical viewpoints from horror scholarship to expand understanding of the topic. Using personal experiences gathered through an autoethnography of playing *Bloodborne* contrasted with relevant literature, this thesis creates a framework for enjoying difficult games and suggests an application for wider unpleasant experiences. The proposed framework presents that enjoyment of difficult games and other unpleasant experiences consists of aspects of the experience, personality characteristics, rewards that may be gained from the experience, and the inherent paradoxical nature of how people experience enjoyment. The framework presents a starting point for understanding the enjoyability of unpleasantness, informed by interdisciplinary knowledge on games and horror, and detailed autoethnographic experience. This thesis also argues for the usefulness of autoethnography when researching games and the need for further research on difficult games overall, including possible expansions on the proposed framework.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

Preface

This thesis was a much longer and more difficult process than I could have anticipated when beginning, largely because of personal troubles coinciding with the work. In hindsight, the difficulties and frustrations I felt during the process are ironic and almost funny now, considering my choice of topic. Here, in the end, I am just as glad at having survived as I am of being finished and happy with what I have produced. There are many people I need to thank for their contributions and guidance, without which this thesis would be much less than it is. I want to thank Tom Apperley for supervising this project, the supervising professors and participants of the master's thesis seminars I attended for their feedback, and Samuel Poirier-Poulin especially for always inspiring and encouraging me. Outside of the university, I want to thank the people who helped me and kept me going through tough times with their support and love – my partner, my parents, and my friends. I could not have finished without your support. Thank you.

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1. Introduction

Difficult games[1] are an extremely popular genre of games despite the strikingly negative emotions and experiences they entail. This is demonstrated especially well by the enduring affection famously difficult FromSoftware titles receive from players (Donnelly, 2021), most recently seen in the favourable reception of the studio's latest game (Winslow, 2022), *Elden Ring* (Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2022). However, within game culture, there is little to no deeper discussion on what exactly makes difficult games enjoyable, especially from anyone who does not already enjoy hard difficulty. Even in existing scholarship on digital games, hard difficulty and difficult games are often ignored, and common views on game enjoyment directly contradict the evident enjoyability of hard difficulty. It is clear that an understanding of why difficult games are enjoyable, and what role difficulty and frustration play in the enjoyment of games, is currently lacking.

The aim of my thesis is to use an autoethnography of *Bloodborne* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2015) to expand on the small amount of academic works that are concerned with what makes difficult games enjoyable. In the autoethnographic process, I am connecting my own experience of playing the game with previous literature on game enjoyment, difficult games, and other useful branches inquiry. Autoethnography offers significant advantages for my aim, as it will facilitate reflexive interrogation personal experiences and existing knowledge, potentially leading to the discovery of new insights. Using autoethnography to discuss difficult games offers a novel perspective, as does my simultaneous presence as a member of game cultures while also being a player who usually dislikes difficult games. This has allowed me to benefit from game culture knowledge while still staying especially alert to the nuances of my experience with *Bloodborne*. As the topic of enjoying games is vast and complicated, I kept my research question simple; I wanted to know what makes the experience of playing *Bloodborne* and by extension, other difficult games, enjoyable?

As I will demonstrate, the answer is found not from a single branch of inquiry, but from a combination of game and horror scholarship. My research makes evident that the enjoyment of unpleasantness is not quite as paradoxical as it seems, and there are key facets that make it possible

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[1] In this thesis, I am using 'games' to refer to digital video and computer games, making no claims about role-playing or board games, unless explicitly stated.

to enjoy unpleasant experiences. To this end, I present a framework for enjoying *Bloodborne*, other difficult games and varied unpleasant experiences that accounts for the subjectivity of experiences and the paradoxical ways people them.

The remainder of this thesis is divided into three sections. I will begin in section two by explaining the method, key concerns, and how I used autoethnography in this thesis. In section three, I will discuss, critique, and combine key concepts and theories from the realm of game research and horror studies, establishing the necessary background. In section four, I will share my experience with *Bloodborne* and combine it with findings from the literature, presenting novel insights and reflections on the topic and method, along with a framework for understanding enjoyment of unpleasantness.

2. Research method

The section chapter for an autoethnography is different and can be more difficult to construct compared to other methods because of the open nature of autoethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2016). I will begin by shortly outlining what autoethnography is, and explaining why it was a suitable choice for my research goals. In chapter 2.1, I will outline the types of autoethnography and autoethnographic writing I utilized and why. Autoethnography, just like any other method, has a variety of ethical and other concerns, which I will discuss in chapter 2.2. Finally, in chapter 2.3, I will explain my approach to using autoethnography, detailing why I chose my topic, how this affected the research, and how I structured the fieldwork and writing process.

Autoethnography is a method where the researcher uses their own personal experiences and critical analysis of them to critique culture (Adams et al., 2015), understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011) and expand understanding of social phenomena, mixing personal musings with more objective data like fieldnotes (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Key features of autoethnography important to my project are the visibility of self in the text, strong reflexivity, engagement with the difference between researcher and subject, vulnerability, and the rejection of finality of findings (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Essential in autoethnography is the culture the researcher is a part of or the cultural identity they have being a core influence in the research (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, I acknowledge my subjective viewpoint which frames and informs this research. Being part of the culture under study grants me access to data that would be harder to gain without member status, and also understanding of 'insider meanings' (Anderson, 2006). Being a part of game culture while also rarely playing or finding enjoyment in difficult games puts me in a novel position that supports my ability to make new insight about difficult games. By taking a personal viewpoint I will also ensure that I am not talking for or over groups I am not a part of. Autoethnography offers me opportunities to draw from my experience and create novel knowledge through the reflexive observation, documentation, and analysis of my own experience. As games can be very personal, intense experiences, including mine in the form of autoethnographic writing is a way to bring authenticity to a theoretical discussion, and allow readers to resonate with my experience and findings.

2.1. Types of autoethnography

Autoethnography most often refers to evocative autoethnography, which connects social sciences to literature as stories that focus on the self in a social context (Ellis, 1997) and places focus on narrating subjective emotional experiences (Anderson, 2006). However, this is not the only form of autoethnography, as there are many forms, approaches, and categories. In my thesis I utilize analytic autoethnography and reflexive autoethnography. Analytic autoethnography (as proposed by Anderson, 2006) positions itself as a form of analytic ethnography with many of the same characteristics as evocative autoethnography, but with a focus on improving theoretical understanding of social phenomena through analytic research. This means that while evocative autoethnography often denies theoretical generalizability, analytic ethnography requires it. This commitment to an analytic agenda is one key difference between evocative and analytic autoethnography, as otherwise they both share the requirements to be a member of the group being written about, focus on analytic reflexivity, and visibility of the researcher's self in the text. The other difference is analytic autoethnography's requirement for dialogue with others beyond the self, as this approach considers the researcher's subjective experience insufficient and requires informants with other perspectives (Anderson, 2006). A key feature of my play experiences was also how I, and my relationship with difficult games, changed as I played. This introduced reflexive ethnography as the other methodological approach I utilized, as reflexive autoethnography focuses on documenting how the researcher changes through their fieldwork (Ellis et al., 2011). Realizing how I changed throughout playing *Bloodborne* and exploring this change was key in uncovering the reasons why I found myself enjoying the difficulty.

Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography is strikingly similar to two types of autoethnographic writing that are presented in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones et al., 2016). These are the Descriptive-realist style of writing, which aims to describe reality as closely as possible with rich details, and the Analytical-interpretive writing style, which engages most with social science academic discourse and literature, using narrative to support analyses and interpretations of the writer (Holman Jones et al., 2016). In my thesis, I, thus used Descriptive-realist and Analytical-interpretive writing to produce a compelling personal account of my experience and to theorize how it challenges, supports, affirms, and critiques previous work on games, enjoyment, and difficulty.

2.2. Ethical and other concerns

Autoethnography has roots in ethnography (Anderson, 2006), and shares many of the same ethical concerns with the rights of the participants and whose voices are heard in the text. While these concerns do not relate to my project as I am the only participant, there are nevertheless ethical questions that must be considered. In autoethnography, all the participants in the text are vulnerable, including the author, making it necessary to anticipate vulnerability (Tolich, 2010). In engaging with the subject matter of a very popular difficult game, I am making myself vulnerable from multiple directions. When confessing that I enjoy casual games and dislike overly difficult games, I am potentially vulnerable to the disregard of my experiences, opinions, and credibility as a game researcher from the wider game-playing public. This is because a hardcore playing style that embraces hard difficulty is still seen in some circles as the only 'real' way to play games (Consalvo & Paul, 2019), best exemplified by the 'git gud' memes (Knowyourmeme, n.d). Because I am not what is still considered to be the stereotypical 'gamer,' I am doubly vulnerable to this, as the opinions of women and minorities on games have been famously and very publicly disregarded and attacked by the likes of Gamergate (Paul, 2018). However, I am not too concerned about my vulnerabilities, because I am publishing this work not for the public, but other students and academics, and the overall game culture seems to be slightly less aggressively hateful in the current time. A relevant ethical concern for this research is also the severe restriction in the scope of the research to university researchers and students (Lapadat, 2017), as well as gamers. Autoethnography cannot offer multiple perspectives as other methodologies can, and this intense focus on fewer people is one of its strengths. However, as an academic discipline, voices and viewpoints brought forth by autoethnography are limited to a small, privileged population. While my position as a gamer with specific preferences can offer new insights, as an able-bodied student of academia and a person with required knowledge and ability to even play games, my viewpoint is still undeniably privileged. I cannot deeply and personally explore and present viewpoints outside my own, but to best acknowledge this this limitation, I aim to bring in other accounts, opinions, and discussions to complete my analysis.

My choice of game also presented important concerns for the data gathering. *Bloodborne* is a notoriously difficult game, which makes different negative emotions and mental fatigue inseparable parts of the game experience. While essential parts of my research, they were also possible concerns for my wellbeing and ability to effectively complete this project. I also could not play 'for fun' without considering the research, taking notes, and staying aware of my experience. While this is a

concern mentioned by Anderson (2006) in talking about pitfalls of analytic autoethnography, I imagine it can be an issue for any avid gamer researching games by playing them. To combat possible negative effects and fatigue, I stayed aware of my mental state and took breaks from playing as I needed. Focusing on a single-player game also had its effect in shaping the way autoethnography is used in my thesis. Usually in autoethnography, there are other people involved besides the researcher, which allows for outside perspectives and voices to affect the work. Thus, while autoethnography is always focused on the researcher and everything is filtered through their lens, the work is still not done in isolation and benefits from dialogue with others. As explained previously, analytic autoethnography as proposed by Anderson (2006) even makes dialogue with others a key component of the method. This was not possible within the scope of my thesis, and perhaps not even fruitful, but this created additional pressure for keen self-reflection as well as exploration of other sources of insight. Other projects on games played alone have shown that good autoethnography is possible when dialogue is had not with other people but between the self, game, and previous literature (Borchard, 2015). I argue that even though I was not in direct dialogue with other players, by using practices of diligent reading and critique with previous literature, other voices were brought into this thesis. However, I acknowledge that additional voices from players who both enjoy and dislike difficult games would have offered valuable insights and deepened my analysis, providing a possible direction for future work.

The nature of truth in autoethnographic projects also presents its own concerns. Autoethnography has a more complex relationship with truth than many other methodologies because of the increased focus on the individual researcher. While this focus is one of the strengths of autoethnography, it also requires careful consideration. Including personal narratives creates problems with truth because of the inherent, inescapable fallibility of memory and differences in personal truth (Tullis et al., 2009), as well as the demands of a compelling narrative for verisimilitude, coherence, and resonance with audiences (Ellis, 2011). In autoethnography, the aim of the text is not to get all the small details of the experience right or to present facts (Ellis, 1997), but to offer the essence of the experience, working with mindful slippage, between what we know and what we write down (Medford, 2006). Thus, autoethnographic work is shaped not only by the demands of scientific literary structure and ethics, as is all academic writing, but also by narrative needs and complications of personal truth. With games this notion of a true experience is even more complicated, as there is no one experience but many, with different choices, stories, and often even endings. As the individual experience is different for everyone, the meanings and feelings created by the game can also be completely different. In From Software games, where the lore and

complete understanding of the story is hidden in item descriptions and requires effort to parse out, the story can be strikingly different for every player, despite an official canon interpretation existing. Even after having read and watched extensively about the story and lore of *Bloodborne*, my own experience and individual disposition changed the story and world into something personal.

2.3. My approach

Autoethnography is methodologically open, with room to improvise and experiment, making not only the outcomes personalized but the process as well (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Beginning with how I came to this topic, *Bloodborne* was the key aspect in everything. *Bloodborne* is an action role-playing horror game exclusive to PS4, produced by From Software, a studio that is known for its difficult and complex games. *Bloodborne* is no exception to this formula, even if it differs in some aspects of gameplay and themes from other famous From Software titles such as *Dark Souls* (From Software/Namco Bandai, 2011) and *Sekiro* (From Software/Activision, 2019). *Bloodborne* was and still is a hugely popular title, earning praise from critics and players alike (Paul, 2018), and still being played and discussed years after its release.

From my previous experiences, I have found that I generally dislike difficult games, preferring easier challenges in my gameplay. However, I found *Bloodborne* to be such a compelling game that even watching others play through it online and reading everything I could on it did not suffice. As I realized that I must play the game myself, I was prompted to question what it was about the game which had me so captivated. I was also intrigued as to why the difficulty which repelled me personally was such a beloved aspect of the game for so many other people. The reason I was drawn to *Bloodborne* is its numerous, well executed horror elements, narrative, and aesthetics. As an avid horror fan, I found these irresistible. The question of why hard difficulty would be so enjoyable was a more difficult problem to solve, and the reason why I chose *Bloodborne* as the topic of my thesis. By playing the game myself, I hoped to not only enjoy the horror, but discover what enjoyment other players found in the difficulty and why. I found this question especially compelling because of the disconnect between what I was reading in game enjoyment research and how players clearly enjoy difficult games like *Bloodborne*. This merging of personal interest and scientific curiosity presented a perfect opportunity to use autoethnography in search of answers.

I structured my use of autoethnography to remain alert to the game experience as a whole, and thoroughly documented my play sessions in the form of a play diary. Because of the topic and research questions I paid close attention to game difficulty, how it manifested, as well as my experiences with and feelings about the difficulty. I also carefully reflected on my motivation for playing – did I want to play, why or why not? What were the reasons and desires behind starting every play session and ending it? By keeping myself open to the whole experience but paying closer attention to these things, I was able to both focus on my research questions, while also not closing myself off from new and unexpected insights and findings.

I conducted my autoethnography by playing *Bloodborne* in sessions with no set length or schedule. This was because of my own gameplay preferences and to allow for introspection, as well as rest between play/research sessions. With no timetable, I could ask myself if I wanted to play on any given day, and then reflect on the answer and how it related to my previous gameplay experiences. This had the potential to offer valuable insights for my reasons and desires for playing. After each play session or during a longer break in the session, I wrote down what I did and experienced in the game and how I felt about it, creating a play diary. Some reflection happened in the diary, as reflection is a continuous process, and it would have been a disservice to limit or erase it from my documentation.

An important aspect of my experience in *Bloodborne* was my prior knowledge of the game. While I began playing the game for the first time when I started this project, I already had extensive previous knowledge of *Bloodborne*'s world and narrative. This knowledge was most important in compelling me to play the game, but it also had an effect on my actual play experience. My previous knowledge on the game consisted of watching a few playthroughs on Youtube when *Bloodborne* was first published and later, multiple videos explaining the story and lore of the game. I also read the '*Paleblood Hunt*' (Redgrave, 2015), a fan created document detailing the lore of the game, and various online threads and commentaries on the game. My knowledge of *Bloodborne* was mostly related to its story, lore, and world as a space to be traversed, with little to no grasp on the actual gameplay. I learned about the game mechanics, weapons, and enemies by playing, as my previous knowledge was of little aid there. However, knowing the story and lore allowed me to make educated guesses as to how far I had progressed in the game and what I could expect to encounter next, which occasionally helped me to endure challenges and to know what I should do next. My idea of the game world was less accurate than I had expected, but it did sometimes help me traverse the world, anticipate enemy and boss encounters, and contextualize my environment. Despite often finding myself to be wrong in my assumptions, the biggest advantage to my play was

increased confidence and a feeling of safety, which often helped me to keep playing despite my fear and frustration.

A key question when writing about games is deciding what finishing the game means, as there can be difficulty and character choices, replays and periodically added new content that problematize the finished state of a game (Fernández-Vara, 2015). Even though *Bloodborne* lacks many of these, it is still a question I had to consider carefully. *Bloodborne* can be a very long game, especially with a playstyle as diligent as mine – and there were three different possible endings to consider, as well as the time I was able spend playing. *Bloodborne* also has New Game + and extensive additional content in the form of both procedurally generated and fixed dungeons. I decided to play until reaching the first, easiest and arguably happiest ending, not visiting the dungeons or beginning New Game +. This way, I had experienced what can be seen as one version of the full game, even though there were still two possible bosses, the DLC, and many enemies and areas I did not experience.

After finishing the game, I began interpreting the data I had gathered, beginning with the play diary. Autoethnography is a flexible method not only in its data gathering, but interpretation as well, offering opportunities for me to find my own way of interpreting the data. However, an important interpretive step requires paying close attention to reoccurring topics and themes (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Keeping this in mind, I read through my play diary multiple times, each time making new observations and connections as well as looking for relevant insights relating to the topic and research questions. Each time I read through the diary, I was able to gather a clearer network of meanings and repeating themes. Then, I returned to the literature, forming an understanding of the important themes and meanings present. Next, I contrasted these two data sets, looking for connections and similar themes. After doing this, I was able to condense complicated, large experiences and findings into final, key themes. Keeping these themes in mind, I returned once more to my play diary, finding that many of the themes were clearly present in some memorable moments. Using these moments, I wrote out my journey through the game, consisting of evocative experiences that best illustrated the different significant themes. Then, using my journey as a guide, I brought together the findings from my own experiences and the literature, reflecting on the answers they provided and how autoethnography played a part in my discovery of them.

3. Literature review

This literature review covers a wide variety of topics, beginning in chapter 3.1 with difficulty and challenge in games, and the definitions used in this thesis. Next, I will discuss common thoughts about 'correct' difficulty, culminating in challenge-skill balance and problems with the concept. In chapter 3.2, I will move on to first explore hard difficulty and difficult games, defining them through the use of tools presented in chapter 3.1, as well as discussing the positive and negative aspects of hard difficulty. After this, I will also explore abusive games and extreme role-playing games because of their connections to difficult games. In chapter 3.3, I will discuss how and why people generally enjoy games, presenting some common theories, concepts, and their shortcomings, highlighting how general game enjoyment theories are not especially equipped to understanding enjoyment in difficult games. Then, in chapter 3.4, I will explore various theories about the paradoxicality of enjoying unpleasant emotions and experiences, as a way of bridging the gap in theories about enjoying difficult games. This discussion will later be used to develop an interdisciplinary approach to researching the enjoyment of difficult games. In chapter 3.5, I will explore *Bloodborne*'s gameplay and story in order to contextualize my experience and future discussion.

3.1. Difficulty and challenge in games

The next two subchapters serve as an introduction to topics that will be explored and expanded upon throughout this thesis. Beginning with challenge and difficulty as aspects of games and game design in subchapter 3.1.1, I will discuss the role of difficulty and challenge in games, defining how the terms are understood in this thesis. Subchapter 3.1.2 will focus on the place of challenge-skill balance in discussions about game difficulty and outline key issues with the concept.

3.1.1. What makes up game difficulty and challenge?

Challenge and difficulty in games are considered key facets of game design by both researchers and game designers. Without them, a game is not even considered to be a game by some (Juul, 2003).

Challenge is the most frequently examined factor in studies on game enjoyment (Mekler et al., 2014) and thus also a key component in many game theories and frameworks (Aponte et al., 2011b; Desuvire et al., 2004). Challenge and difficulty are seen as key parts of the overall game experience (Bailey & Katchabaw, 2005; Cole et al., 2015; Hwa Hsu et al., 2005; Juul, 2009; Pagulayan et al., 2012; Vorderer et al., 2006) and difficulty scaling is regarded as one of the most fundamental issues in game design (Aponte et al., 2011b; Boutros, 2008). Many scholars consider difficulty and challenge the most important experiences sought in games by players (Cox et al., 2012; Denisova et al., 2017; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005), as well as a crucial factor in enjoyment of games (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Aponte et al., 2011a, 2011b; Klimmt et al., 2009a; Lazzaro, 2004; Malone, 1981a, 1981b; Ryan et al., 2006; Vorderer et al., 2003; Sherry et al., 2006; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005) and positive game experiences overall (Cox et al., 2012). Research in the area of challenge and difficulty specifies the importance of optimal challenge (Denisova et al., 2017) or an adequate level of difficulty (Chanel et al., 2008). However, it is unclear if challenge without success is enjoyable (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Nacke & Lindley, 2008), or if mastery of a challenge is needed for enjoyment to occur (Klimmt et al., 2009a). In discussions of difficulty and challenge there is an overarching concern with finding the 'right' type of difficulty, both in terms of how difficulty is implemented in game design, and how it affects player experience.

While there is a consensus among game studies researchers and game designers that difficulty and challenge are important, they have no common, accepted definition (Aponte et al., 2011a, 2011b; Denisova et al., 2017; Klarkowski et al., 2016; Nacke & Lindley, 2008; Schmierbach et al., 2014). Although they are distinct concepts, 'difficulty' and 'challenge' are also often used interchangeably (Denisova et al., 2017). Typologies attempting to clarify the field have also served to increase the confusion by unintentionally using the different terms as synonyms, such as when defining cognitive challenge (Adams, 2010; Bopp et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2012; Denisova et al., 2017; Schell, 2019), and logical difficulty (Aponte et al., 2011a). Typologies such as these also serve as the main attempts at defining difficulty and challenge, and are most valuable in establishing that there can be many different types of challenges in games. The most comprehensive attempt at defining difficulty has understood it as being composed of challenges, and the overall difficulty of the game resulting from the challenges presented to the player (Aponte et al., 2011a, 2011b), with the difficulty of a challenge being the probability of player failing the challenge (Aponte et al., 2011a). However, challenges in a game have also been seen as being based on different difficulty types (Aponte et al., 2011a). This suggests that the important areas to the difficulty and challenge discussion are difficulty types, challenges, and the 'overall difficulty' of the game. These three

elements are in a relationship illustrated in figure one (below), where the different difficulty types are mapped within the framework of overall difficulty.

Fig. 1: An understanding of the relationship between difficulty and challenge as used in this thesis.

I will use the following definitions for the terms and their relationship to each other. *Difficult* is easy to understand as a descriptor, referring to something that is hard to do, just like the word *challenging*. I define *challenge* as a facet of a game that is a test on a person's abilities, that can be organized under different *challenge types*. For example, a game can ask the player to react fast or to press the correct buttons, and these challenges would belong under a physical challenge type (see figure one). It is also possible for one challenge to belong under multiple challenge types as, for example, facing a hostile player can be a mix of social, cognitive, and physical challenges (see: figure one), as a player must be able to read their opponent, know how to react, and do so well and fast enough. *Difficulty*, then, means a facet of a game that effects how hard the game is to play, made up of the different challenges, challenge types and factors outside the game, such as player skill and the playing environment. The *overall difficulty of a game* is made up of the sum of the different facets. Thus, keeping in line with the large amount of literature that emphasizes the importance of challenge to games, anything and everything in a game is a potential challenge that can make the game more or less difficult.

3.1.2. Challenge-skill balance

Challenge-skill balance is an important facet of game difficulty. In this context, difficulty is often regarded as a design element that should be balanced so that the challenge presented by the game and the player's skill are matched. This balance is variously described as 'just right' (Petralito et al., 2017), not too hard or too easy (Aponte et al., 2011b; Denisova et al., 2017; Juul, 2009; Wilson & Sicart, 2010), or 'easy to learn, hard to master' (Malone, 1981b; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). The idea of challenge-skill balance also has conceptual similarities with Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) and Self-Determination Theory (Przybylski et al., 2010), as both theories argue that a match between challenge and player skill is crucial for game enjoyment. Research further identifies specific factors that contribute to how challenge-skill balance affects the game experience, such as the player's perception of their own skills (Cox et al., 2012), and winning possibly altering perceptions of the overall play session (Petralito et al., 2017). Having an appropriate challenge-skill balance is seen as important in creating feelings of enjoyment (Klarkowski et al., 2016; Schmierbach et al., 2014), increasing immersion (Cox et al., 2012; Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005), reducing frustration and irritation (Poels et al., 2007), shaping positive game experiences overall (Smeddinck et al., 2016), and optimizing game experience (Bailey & Katchabaw, 2005; Qin et al., 2009).

The ideal spot for this balance is yet to be identified. The felt difficulty of a game is a subjective matter, based on the player's skills, individual characteristics (Fernández-Vara, 2015), previous experience with games (Schmierbach et al., 2014), and desired experience (Alexander et al., 2013; Lazzaro, 2004). Player perception of difficulty is also a complex matter (Aponte et al., 2011a), and confuses the data (Schmierbach et al., 2014). Some players find enjoyment in games with such skewed challenge-skill balances that they are unwinnable (Klarkowski et al., 2016). It is then very possible that different people would have different ideal balances. This means that it is very hard to know what exactly a good challenge-skill balance would be for every player. It also seems that there are differing conceptions of what an ideal balance between challenge and skill is, even when not accounting for player differences. This is demonstrated in how it is possible to find pleasure when winning after losing (Juul, 2009), when winning only by a very tight margin (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012), and when winning while being just on the verge of giving up (Lazzaro, 2004). Thus, while challenge-skill balance is important for all games, an 'ideal balance' is a subjective concept, not a specific difficulty curve or amount of challenge.

3.2. Hard difficulty and difficult games

Before continuing the discussion, it is important to define *hard difficulty* and *difficult games*. These concepts will be expanded upon in subchapter 3.2.1, where I will explore the positive and negative effects of hard difficulty, and consider some aspects that effect how difficulty is experienced by players. In subchapter 3.2.2, I will discuss extreme game experiences, placing them into a continuum of difficult games. These subchapters develop and broaden the notion of difficult games specifically, and explore the relationship between difficulty, enjoyment, and player experiences.

One fruitful definition of hard games states that they have a high threshold for success, low tolerance for missing the threshold and harsh punishments for failure (Schmierbach et al., 2014). However, hard games exist in relation to what is thought of as regular amounts of difficulty, which changes with time (Gillen, 2008), making hard difficulty and difficult games a very subjective matter. How difficulty is experienced by the individual player is also highly subjective, as has been shown in subsection 3.1.2. For example, players might evaluate a difficult game as easy because they feel the fault lies with them needing to improve (Aponte et al., 2011a). Thus, trying to confine hard difficulty and games within certain boundaries would inevitably be contradicted by some players and games. There is still undeniably a shared understanding of what constitutes hard difficulty and difficult games, which is used by developers when making games, and by players when evaluating how hard a game is.

As such, I define *hard difficulty/challenge* as an amount of difficulty created by the developers and perceived by players to be higher than what they consider to be 'normal'. This is often exemplified by a higher threshold for succeeding in challenges, with greater likelihood for failure and steep punishments. A *difficult game* is usually characterized by harder challenges, much failure, harsh punishments, steep skill demands and increased need for tolerating frustration.

3.2.1. Effects of hard difficulty and how it is experienced

Hard difficulty has negative and positive aspects for games, designers and players which are important to consider. The topic is nuanced, and there is no final answer on whether a higher-than-average difficulty is 'good' or 'bad'. I will start with the negative, move on to the positive and then present some considerations that affect how the difficulty is experienced by the player.

Hard difficulty is often portrayed in the literature as being a negative influence on the enjoyment of a game (Gilleade & Dix, 2004; Klimmt et al., 2009a; Schmierbach et al., 2014). It is associated with lower feelings of competence (Klarkowski et al., 2016; Schmierbach et al., 2014), autonomy and relatedness, as well as increased negative and decreased positive emotions (Klarkowski et al., 2016). When hard difficulty disrupts the challenge-skill balance, players may feel anxiety (Chanel et al., 2008; Cox et al., 2012; Petralito et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2009), frustration (Alexander et al., 2013; Hunicke, 2005; Poels et al., 2007), irritation, anger, disappointment (Poels et al., 2007), and can be discouraged from playing (Cox et al., 2012). Challenging the player at their maximum capacity for a long period of time can also cause physical and mental fatigue (Qin et al., 2009). However, hard difficulty may still be preferable to too little challenge and boredom (Klarkowski et al., 2016). Anger and frustration created by hard difficulty can bind a player to a game (Juul, 2013). Hard difficulty can be a precarious thing, as the more we have invested into a challenge, the bigger the sense of loss when we fail, and the greater the feeling of triumph when we win (Juul, 2013). Thus, whether hard difficulty is experienced as bad or good could very much depend on whether we are losing or winning.

In addition to individually unpleasant effects of enduring hard difficulty, there are also wider adverse effects that stem from games' preoccupation with demonstrations of skill that position victors as better than others. Hard difficulty is associated with meritocratic systems in gaming cultures that are inherently exclusionary and unequal (Paul, 2018), which is well demonstrated in the vitriol and dismissal received by casual games and players (Chess, 2017; Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Casual games and players are placed in opposition to 'real' games and players (Chess, 2017, 2021; Juul, 2012), excluding from game culture anyone who does not fit the stereotype of a gamer. Meritocratic ideals are especially prevalent in difficult games, as playing on a harder difficulty offers credibility (Paul, 2018), feelings of superiority (DeJean, 2002), and 'bragging rights' (Adams, 2008). Difficult games can thus be further exclusionary because of the steep skill demands, and a culture that argues against easier difficulty options (Kunzelman, 2016), and prompts that anyone struggling should just 'git gud' or 'learn to play' (Knowyourmeme, n.d; Paul, 2018). This leads to many potential players being excluded from game culture and discouraged from playing games.

There is also a possibility for positive things to be found in otherwise negative experiences. Struggles and frustrations because of a high difficulty can make success or a victory feel more meaningful, deep, and satisfying (Allison et al., 2015; Lazzaro, 2004, 2008; Petralito et al., 2017), creating significant positive feelings (Bopp et al., 2018; Poels et al., 2007). The significant effort

required can make the result more pleasurable (DeJean, 2002). The uncertainty created by challenge can also be motivating (Aponte et al., 2011a). Learning is an important facet of enjoying games (Boutros, 2008; Koster, 2013), and difficult games contain considerable amounts learning experiences (Allison et al., 2015; Flynn-Jones, 2015; Juul, 2009, 2013; Petralito et al., 2017), as a high difficulty can lead to more challenges to learn from. Failure is a necessary component of all games that is especially present in difficult games. The possibility of failure can make game experiences deeper, winning feel satisfying, and be an overall positive contribution to the game (Juul, 2009, 2013). However, for failure to be seen as a positive part of the game, it needs to be meaningful (Allison et al., 2015; Flynn-Jones, 2015), in that players feel responsible for their failings (Allison et al., 2015; Boutros, 2008; Juul, 2009, 2013). Another possibility for the enjoyability of negative difficulty experiences is the thrill of possible danger (Allison et al., 2015), likely more present in games where the challenge and stakes are higher.

Overall, difficult games are not necessarily less enjoyable than easy games (Petralito et al., 2017), as frustration and other negative emotions do not automatically make the overall game experience a negative one (Allison et al., 2015; Bopp et al., 2018; Klarkowski et al., 2016; Mekler et al., 2014, Petralito et al., 2017, van den Hoogen et al., 2012). Negative emotions like frustration may even be essential for the game experience as a whole to work (Poels et al., 2007). The positive experience of playing can also in some cases be directly created by negative experiences (Allison et al., 2015; Juul, 2013). When acknowledging that negative and positive emotions can exist simultaneously and contribute to each other, negative emotions can be understood as a vital part of most game experiences. The negative and positive effects of hard difficulty complement each other, creating more intense and enjoyable game experiences.

It is also important to consider difficulty in games from the perspective of the player, as there are individual differences that make some players more likely to appreciate hard difficulty (Juul, 2013; Petralito et al., 2017). In some games, it is believed that the difficulty is what makes them fun (Fernández-Vara, 2015), but I argue that it also takes a certain type of player to enjoy the difficulty. Challenge-oriented players derive satisfaction from difficult challenges (Gilleade & Dix, 2004), and some may choose a hard challenge for the feelings of accomplishment that follow a victory (Boutros, 2008). Enjoying challenges is then an aspect that increases the likelihood of someone having a positive experience with a difficult game. Different personality types are also a likely component in affecting hard difficulty enjoyment, as they would affect how much someone would enjoy challenge and how they would respond to frustration (Klimmt, 2003). Previous experiences may increase the players capacity to enjoy hard difficulty, as without a certain prerequisite level of

skill, responding to that challenge would be impossible. Furthermore, previous success in similarly hard games may also contribute to a players' confidence that they can endure the struggles and frustration of the game without getting discouraged. This ties into aspects that effect the subjective experience of the difficulty of any given game, such as previous experience with similar games and skill level (Denisova et al., 2017). Another consideration is the existence of individual difficulty management strategies. Knowing how to alleviate frustration, or where to look for advice when stuck are examples of strategies that can make a hard game easier to play, available differently to players based on their ability to manage emotions and access to game culture resources. Switching between mindsets, or what the player is looking to gain from the game, can also be a way to manage challenges that have become too steep (Lazzaro, 2008).

3.2.2. Extreme examples

Games that are deliberately punishing, unfair and even abusive by design illustrate key elements about difficult games and difficulty. According to Wilson & Sicart (2010), abusive games refer to games so outrageously difficult or otherwise unpleasant to play that they do not test player skill as much as they do patience and willingness to keep playing even when the game is clearly hostile to the player. This deliberate hostility to the player and their desires and enjoyment is key in abusive games, in what is said to be an attempt to create dialogue between the player and designer. The end goal is to make the designer visible to the player in ways that conventional games do not. Examples of these types of games as mentioned by Wilson & Sicart are *Desert Bus* and *Takeshi no Chousenjou* (Wilson & Sicart, 2010). However, I argue that abusive games are an extreme variation of difficult games, positioned at the very end of a continuum of difficulty in games. This is because even abusive games rely on a balance, not between challenge and skill but more perhaps frustration and curiosity, which is present in difficult games as well to a much lesser extent. Abusive games also want the player to enjoy the game, at least to an extent that they keep playing. When accounting for individual player factors, it is quite possible for someone to consider a game abusive when someone else would experience it as not even difficult, or for someone to play an abusive game as just a difficult one. The developer intent of making the designer visible instead of the game via abusive game design is thus not always realized, with how subjective game experiences are.

I also want to briefly mention extreme role-playing games, which can also be seen as examples of abusive games (Wilson & Sicart, 2010). These games deliberately create situations and play

experiences that are unpleasant, such as evoking feelings of disgust, fear, and anxiety. Examples of these types of role-playing games as discussed by Montola (2010) are *Gang Rape* and *The Journey*. Games like this show that fun is not the only enjoyable and desirable emotion to be gained from roleplaying. In a manner similar to difficult games, learning can be common facet of the experience, and the existence of negative emotions does not automatically make the overall experience a negative one (Montola, 2010). While the unpleasantness does not stem from mechanical difficulty, as frustration does in difficult games, I argue that extreme role-playing exists as another example of a kind of difficult game. Both intend to cause some unpleasant feelings in order to unlock an overall positive experience. Extreme role-playing games thus also work to blur the line between difficult and abusive games, as it is once again up the individual player's discretion whether the experience was abusive or simply difficult, despite developer intent.

Sometimes players also create their own, extreme challenges and experiences from games that are already difficult. In Bloodborne and other games like it, players do this through dressing up their character in specific, often not the most optimal ways or coming up with their own challenges to beat within the game, such as speedruns with different rules (Newman, 2008). This is an interesting way some players control the difficulty after achieving mastery, by introducing new self-made or community invented challenges, as not even the harder New Game + is enough for some. Often these extreme challenges are shared with others to demonstrate 'gaming capital' (Consalvo, 2007), skill, and superiority to others (Paul, 2018), in the form of streams and Youtube videos.

3.3. Enjoying games

Enjoyment of games, while acknowledged as key in player experience and games overall (Boyle et al., 2012; Fang et al., 2010; Fang & Zhao, 2010; Mekler et al., 2014; Sherry, 2004; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Vorderer et al., 2006; Vorderer et al., 2004), is still not properly understood (Fang et al., 2010; Mekler et al., 2014; Nacke & Drachen, 2011; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Vorderer et al., 2004). The topic has been examined using multiple approaches (Mekler et al., 2014; Nacke & Lindley, 2008; Tamborini et al., 2010; Wyeth et al., 2012) and definitions (Peng et al., 2012). Largely, the research either examines players or game design, and in this thesis I will focus on theories that centre player enjoyment. Each part of games and game experiences affects player enjoyment in different ways that are dependent on the different components of design of the game (Quick et al., 2012, Vorderer et al., 2004), common human reactions to motivation and enjoyment

(Quick et al., 2012), as well as subjective things such as game preference, personality (Birk et al., 2015; Boyle et al., 2012; Fang & Zhao, 2010; Johnson & Gardner, 2010; Quick et al., 2012; Vorderer et al., 2004), gender (Birk et al., 2015; Boyle et al., 2012; Fang & Zhao, 2010; Quick et al., 2012; Vorderer et al., 2004), age (Boyle et al., 2012), willingness to suspension of disbelief (Vorderer et al., 2004) and self-esteem (Birk et al., 2015), along with likely many more not mentioned here.

I will begin in subchapter 3.3.1 with exploring psychological theories originating outside the realm of games scholarship. These theories have been applied to explaining the enjoyment of games in useful but often incomplete ways. The theories also further demonstrate how difficult games are often neglected when discussing motivations and reasons to play and enjoy games. Then, in subchapter 3.1.2, I will move on to discuss some theories from within game scholarship, before ending on some important concepts that relate to enjoyment of games. This chapter will also show how despite the attention that difficult games, especially ones by FromSoftware, receive in game culture, there is not yet much empirical research on why players enjoy difficult games (Petralito et al., 2017). These subchapters will finalize the discussion on game enjoyment and current theories on why games are enjoyable, presenting the need for a broader set of theories which will be explored in chapter 3.4.

3.3.1. Psychological theories

Effectance Motivation Theory by White (1959) and Self-efficacy Theory by Bandura (1977) are important and related theories about player motivation. *Efficacy* is a key concept that the theories introduce. It means causing change in the environment, while *self-efficacy* means the expectation of mastery through this manipulation of the environment. When applied to games, the theories indicate that without efficacy and a reasonable number of self-efficacy experiences, enjoyment cannot be achieved (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). While the concepts of efficacy and self-efficacy are present in many theories and discussions about games, their relation to motivation and as reasons to play are not as often discussed, leaving several important questions open, such as the amount of time self-efficacy should be experienced in. Klimmt and Hartmann (2006) also suggest that previous efficacy and self-efficacy experiences play a part in deciding to play certain games or games at all. Games feature a cyclic process of mastery, where previous experiences with games form efficacy beliefs that make someone more likely to play games, perform well in them, experience mastery and thus feel more confident in their abilities in relation to future games as well. This cycle can be

connected to the meritocratic ideals of games (Paul, 2018), as mastery of games and self-efficacy experiences require demonstrations of skill, which over time transform into this cycle of mastery. The cycle in turn can shut out others who do not hold self-efficacy expectations about games (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). This is especially salient in the case of difficult games, which often have steeper demands before a player can feel a sense of self-efficacy, making the cycle of mastery even more unattainable than in regular games, shutting out more people.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and the related sub-theory, the Cognitive Evaluation Theory by Ryan and Deci (1985), are theories about human motivation. They argue that for an activity to be intrinsically motivating and fun, three psychological factors of competence, personal autonomy and social relatedness must be met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many researchers have demonstrated that SDT can be used to explain the appeal of games (Birk et al., 2015; Tamborini et al., 2010; Peng et al., 2012; Przybylski et al., 2010, 2009; Ryan et al., 2006; Schmierbach et al., 2014) even though the method has also received some criticism for being too narrow to thoroughly explain reasons for play motivation and enjoyment (Boyle et al., 2012; Tamborini et al., 2010). There is evidence that uncertainty about winning, and the suspense created can sometimes be preferable to feeling competent (Abuhamdeh et al., 2015; Malone, 1981), which further questions the universal applicability of SDT. Flow theory by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has also been used to explain player enjoyment of games (Fernández-Vara, 2015; Schmierbach et al., 2014; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Weibel & Wissmath, 2012). In this theory, *flow* refers to a spot in an activity, between anxiety and boredom, where it is at its most pleasurable and done for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). However, the Flow theory only seems to be concerned only with optimal, intense experiences (Cox et al., 2012; Jennett et al., 2008; Qin et al., 2009; Takatalo et al., 2010), and is thus unable to explain enjoyment of experiences outside of this zone (Apter, 2005; Fernández-Vara, 2015; Mekler et al., 2014). It is also likely that some people more easily experience Flow (Engeser & Rheinberg, 2008), which further limits the broad applicability of the theory. As such, Flow is clearly not able to account for all positive game experiences and emotions (Lazzaro, 2008).

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) argues that people are aware actors that consciously use different media in myriad ways to satisfy their needs, which is why people enjoy media (Boyle et al., 2012; Sherry et al., 2006). This theory recognizes a wider range of needs that games meet than SDT does (Boyle et al., 2012), such as arousal, fantasy, and diversion (Sherry et al., 2006). Furthermore, challenge in video games has been discussed using Uses and Gratifications Theory as well. People enjoy games as a way to challenge themselves to perform at a higher level of skill, or for personal accomplishment (Sherry et al., 2006). In this respect Uses and Gratifications

Theory recognizes the importance of challenge for games in a manner similar to SDT, where being able to match a challenge offers players a feeling of competency. Uses and Gratifications Theory has also been connected to Flow Theory, in that choice of media use could be dependent of which best allow its users to achieve flow (Sherry, 2004). Lastly, the notion that people consciously choose media to consume based on their needs can be connected to the idea from Effectance Motivation Theory and Self-efficacy Theory that people choose games to play based on their previous self-efficacy experiences with games.

3.3.2. Games, players, and concepts

The field of player taxonomies and typologies is extensive. It is helpful for my thesis because it demonstrates the existence and importance of individual factors for game enjoyment. While player types are not the only aspects that affect player enjoyment, as was discussed in chapter 3.3, they are an important part of it. A player is usually not just one type but can be many, and the types that fit a player can change with time, game, and context (Mekler et al., 2014). Player types can also be an important aspect of engaging with a game analytically, as knowing one's own player type(s) can help expose bias held about games (Fernández-Vara, 2015), and interrogate why we like some games and dislike others.

The Four Fun Keys Theory by Lazzaro (2004) explains game enjoyment on a larger scale than previously discussed theories. Lazzaro argues that there are four fun 'keys', that correspond to different types of fun and enjoyment that can be experienced in games. Thus, people play games not necessarily for the game itself, but the experience it creates and the sometimes very physical emotions it unlocks. The first of these keys is *hard fun*, which is enjoyment derived from challenges, testing skills, feeling accomplishment, achieving mastery and the loop from frustration to personal triumph and relief. The second is *easy fun*, where immersion, exploring a new world and curiosity create enjoyment. The third is *altered states*, which covers how the game makes players feel as they move between mental states. The last is the *people factor*, where the game is less important and more of a mechanism for social interaction. People move between the play styles, looking for different kinds of fun throughout the play experience. People also look for different emotions, with some preferring relaxation and others enjoying what Lazzaro calls *fiero*, the change from frustration to personal triumph (Lazzaro, 2004).

Of Lazzaro's fun keys, *hard fun* is the most relevant to difficult games, and it is also what most people think of when talking about game design. *Hard fun* also expands on the Flow Theory, suggesting that it is not enough to just be 'in the zone,' but pleasure is derived from experiencing a variety of emotions, often dramatically fluctuating between boredom and frustration. As such, challenge-skill balance is also important in *hard fun*, and an important aspect of this balance is that to experience *fiero*, the player must be frustrated enough to be just on the verge of quitting (Lazzaro, 2008). This concept further demonstrates how varied challenge-skill balance is, as the balance for *hard fun* attempting to create *fiero* would be very different to the balance needed in *easy fun*. It seems that enjoying difficult games could be seen as an example of extremely *hard fun*. Crucially, if a game is only about *hard fun* with no curiosity, exploration or surprise from *easy fun*, players lose interest (Lazzaro, 2008). This aspect can explain why *Bloodborne* and other FromSoftware titles are so beloved, since they provide not only very *hard fun*, but are steeped in mystery, ambiguity, and exploration, which creates *easy fun*.

Lastly, there are some concepts present in many of the theories that I want to highlight because of their compatibility with each other and paradox theories that will be explored in the next chapter. Control is an important facet of games and thus player enjoyment, referring to the player's ability to exercise control over the game (Qin et al., 2009), manipulate the game (Calvillo-Gámez et al., 2015), and impact the game world (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005). Without the player being able to exercise at least some form of control over the game, there is no interaction and thus, no game. It is then no surprise that control is seen as an important facet of games (Hwa Hsu et al., 2005; Koster, 2013; Limperos et al., 2011; Poels et al., 2007; Schell, 2019; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Vorderer et al., 2006), and also a factor in game enjoyment (Mekler at al., 2014; Przybylski et al., 2009; Tamborini et al., 2010; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). In fact, both being in control and struggling to gain control can be equally pleasurable experiences (Klimmt et al., 2007; van den Hoogen et al., 2012). Control is also a key facet in multiple game enjoyment theories, such as Self-efficacy Theory, as being able to manipulate the game environment is a precursor to self-efficacy experiences (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). SDT features control as well, as a sense of control can be likened to feelings of competence as understood by SDT (Limperos et al., 2011). Control over one's actions is also an important component in Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Connected to control, mastery is also considered to be a key concept in games by many. Mastery has been considered as the end goal (Denisova et al., 2017) and source of fun in games (Koster, 2013), as well as overall important for game enjoyment (Klimmt et al., 2009a; Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005; Vorderer et al., 2004). A reasonable amount of mastery

experiences has even been argued to be a precondition for game enjoyment to occur (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006). Mastery, just as control, is also connected to previously discussed theories, being a significant part of *hard fun* in the Four Fun Keys Theory (Lazzaro, 2004), a part of self-efficacy experiences in the Self-efficacy Theory (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), and also connected to competence within SDT (Przybylski et al., 2010).

Suspense, stemming from the uncertainty of the player not knowing if they will succeed in a challenge, is also a significant facet of player enjoyment and games. The greatest reason for the importance of suspense is that for any activity to be challenging, the outcome must be uncertain (Klimmt et al., 2007; Malone, 1981a, 1981b). Thus, challenge, challenge-skill balance, and everything done in service of challenge is a function of creating suspense, of making the outcome unclear and thus the game interesting to play. Suspense is clearly a feature that contributes to both engagement (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Boyle et al., 2012; Klimmt et al., 2009b), and enjoyment in games (Abuhamdeh et al., 2015; Klimmt et al., 2009b). The cycle between suspense and relief has also been theorized to be key factor in game enjoyment in itself (Klimmt, 2003). Uncertainty of outcomes can also serve as a pleasurable contrast to the successes (Petralito et al., 2017), and the unpredictability of a situation can be exciting (Allison et al., 2015) and enjoyable for players (Hunicke, 2005). Suspense can also sometimes be preferable to feeling competent (Abuhamdeh et al., 2015; Malone, 1981). Suspense is connected to other previously discussed theories, as the cycle of suspense and relief is a facet of *hard fun* in the Four Fun Keys Theory (Lazzaro, 2008).

The topic of player experience and game enjoyment is multifaceted and complex (Fang et al., 2010; Vorderer et al., 2004). The field is also very fragmented, as studies have mostly focused on a single dimension of the game experience at a time (Poels et al., 2007), even if many acknowledge the existence of various theories and approaches. The lack of clear, common definitions and understanding of different terms also brings its own difficulties to the discussion. This chapter has demonstrated that there are shared concepts that are widely thought to be important for games, even though they only present small pieces of the wider field of game enjoyment. While many of the important concepts can be applied to difficult games, they do not completely explain why people enjoy difficult games. Also discussed in this chapter, the theories that aim to create a wider framework of game enjoyment, while having the possibility for a more comprehensive understanding, often fall short. The only exception is the Four Fun Keys theory, as it takes into account a wider range of player desires. Many other theories only cover a section of the wide range of game enjoyment possibilities, and enjoyment of difficult games is not directly addressed, even

though hard games are an undeniably pleasurable and popular form of games. Because of this shortcoming of game theories, it was necessary to cast a wider net for theories and answers, which I will do in the next chapter.

3.4. The Paradox

While the previous chapter focused on introducing theories that explore why and how players gain enjoyment out of playing, difficult games do not fit in with existing game enjoyment theories. Difficult games can be undeniably unpleasant from time to time, yet are still enjoyable precisely because of their difficulty. They bring the player into unpleasant, stressful, frustrating, and even frightening situations. So why does anyone still enjoy playing such unpleasant games? Is it despite the unpleasant aspects, or is there something else at stake? Theories that focus on general enjoyment are not very well equipped to answer these questions, despite some of them acknowledging the possibility of enjoyment stemming from negative emotions (Vorderer et al., 2004; Lazzaro, 2004, 2008). This chapter examines theories about the *paradox of enjoying the unpleasant*, as they can help answer these questions and provide useful frameworks for thinking about the pleasure found in difficult games. The most notable paradoxes to be discussed are concerned with enjoying unpleasant emotions and experiences are the *paradox of tragedy*, *paradox of painful art,* and *paradox of horror*, both the subjects of significant attention from philosophers and scholars (Andersen et al., 2020; Juul, 2013; Lin et al., 2018, Smuts, 2007), although I will also discuss some theories from the realm of games that are concerned with similar questions. All these paradoxes ask fundamentally the same question, why do people seek out unpleasant emotions in certain situations when they often avoid them in real life? Thus, they draw attention to and interrogate how the ways that people find enjoyment can often be paradoxical by nature. I will refer to these theories more broadly as *paradox theories*, but often discuss them as branches of horror scholarship, as most have originated from studying enjoyment of horror movies. I will begin by discussing the different paradox theories in the first three subchapters, beginning with theories arguing that unpleasantness is converted into something pleasant in subchapter 3.4.1. Subchapter 3.4.2 is much longer, featuring many theories that argue that unpleasantness is compensated for by something positive. In subchapter 3.4.3, I will discuss theories that take a different approach to the paradox. Last in this section, I will use subchapter 3.4.4 to note some critical concepts shared by the previously discussed theories.

3.4.1. Conversion theories

Conversion Theory argues that that whatever painful emotions we feel from art experiences is converted into pleasure through some unspecified, more prominent emotion, and that the experience is pleasurable in retrospect, the pain thus forgotten (Smuts, 2007). A well-known theory from the field of horror, the Excitation-Transfer Theory by Dolf Zillmann (1971) can be seen as a form of conversion theory. Zillmann proposes that people enjoy horror because negative emotion felt during viewing can become positive and amplify after a satisfying conclusion to the experience, but a negative conclusion should not offer this conversion of negative emotions to enjoyment (Hoffner & Levine, 2005). This theory can also be seen as an example of a suspense – relief loop (Klimmt, 2003). However, this theory does not account for enjoyment of media that has unhappy endings (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Lin et al., 2018), or that enjoyment is not felt only at the conclusion of the experience, but throughout. These gaps open the Excitation-Transfer Theory up for significant criticism, as horror movies often have unhappy endings, and enjoyment certainly is present through the whole experience, not just at the end. However, an interesting addition discussed by Lin et al. (2018) that addresses this gap in the theory is the concept of Horror self-efficacy, a belief in one's ability to endure and face the challenges presented in horror media. The fulfilment of this specific self-efficacy throughout the experience would then function as the positive outcome instead of the conclusion of the game or movie, which would then turn negative emotions into positive ones, even during unhappy endings (Lin et al., 2018).

3.4.2. Compensatory theories

A significant number of theories argue that pain felt from art is compensated by something else pleasurable, which makes the experience worthwhile. These theories include the Intellectual Curiosity Theory by Carroll (1990), which argues that we are compensated for fear by the cognitive pleasure derived from satiating our curiosity about the monster in a horror film. Carroll's argument is contested, as if this was true, rewatching horror movies would be less common. Lovecraft has also attempted to explain enjoyment of horror, but only covering his own niche of cosmic horror. According to him, the mix of fear and awe evoked by cosmic horror is compelling because it responds to a primordial human intuition about the world (Carroll, 1990). This confirmation of

intuitions could be seen as a compensation for the unpleasantness of fear. However, it not able to explain all fear felt from different types of horror. Flynn-Jones (2015) uses Freud's notion of 'death drive' to discuss how through repetition of an unpleasant one can feel agency, and in the end, mastery. Thus, one repeats unpleasant activities to be compensated by pleasurable feelings of agency and mastery. This cycle is also an inherent part of games through the loop of dying, respawning, and trying again, which can be understood as restored agency, repetition of challenges and eventual mastery over them. As such, failure is simultaneously frustrating and rewarding as understood through the death drive, a mixing of pleasure and displeasure. Mastery without failure is not pleasurable or even possible, as failure is what enables learning (Flynn-Jones, 2015). This theory can also be connected to the Control Theory, as agency can be seen as a form of attempting to gain and hold control, and this control makes the unpleasant activity less so.

Benign Masochism Theory by Rozin et al. (2013) proposes that initially negative but safe bodily experiences can be felt as pleasurable through a 'mind over body'- experience, as it becomes clear that the body was fooled into interpreting the experience as threatening when it is not. Hedonic reversals are an example of this as (usually) innately negative experiences that contain positive emotions simultaneously with negative ones. Examples of these include sadness, fear, pain, and physical exhaustion after activity (Rozin et al., 2013). A further exploration of this theory connects it to Evolutionary Threat Simulation Hypothesis, according to which safe threat situations are felt as pleasurable because of the opportunity they present to prepare for real world threats. As such, horror is pleasurable because it allows one to identify, push and master one's limits, as well as test the ability to cope with fear and scary situations (Clasen, 2017; Clasen & Johnson, 2020). Within both theories, painful emotions are compensated for by either the pleasurable experience of mind-over-body or the pleasurable opportunity to prepare for threats. The inclusion of felt threat opens this theory up for criticism, as it is hard to see how sadness would be physically threatening. Perhaps the inclusion of emotional and mental threat could help bridge this gap with, for example, sadness at a sad movie being first experienced as personal sadness, and the reversal happening when the brain realizes that it felt for someone else and thus not as harrowing.

A theory that does not accept or deny the existence of unpleasant emotions, but bypasses them completely, argues simply that fear in response to horror can be experienced as a positive emotion, leaving open whether the experience is also painful (Bantinaki, 2012). However, as unpleasant emotions are an inherent part of the experiences discussed, this theory can be seen as a compensatory theory. A key aspect of this theory is the assumption that for something to be experienced as a positive thing, there must be some positive outcomes associated with it. As horror

that is experienced safely can have many benefits, such as thrills, learning and self-efficacy experiences through testing and mastering one's limits, it can thus be argued that fear can be a positive emotion (Bantinaki, 2012). I would further argue that the thrill caused by horror can be enough to make horror into a positive experience and fear into a positive emotion, without even needing the other possible positive aspects. Physiological arousal has already been theorized to be connected to enjoyment of horror (Andersen et al., 2020), and what is the sensation of thrill other than a very arousing experience? There is also evidence that people who have more sensation-seeking traits are more likely to enjoy horror (Clasen & Johnson, 2020; Martin, 2019; Rozin et al., 2013), which further demonstrates the connection between horror and thrill as a high arousal state.

There is a significant critique on all the theories that believe that pain is compensated for by something pleasant. These theories are unable to establish how much of the positive emotion or outcome would be needed to make the negative emotion worthwhile. Thus, if these theories would be true, it would also follow that audiences would return to only genres of art that they have had sufficiently pleasurable experiences with, which has not been proven (Smuts, 2007). A theory that bypasses this critique by reframing compensated pleasure as something else is the *paradox of failure* by Juul. The question posed by the *paradox of failure* is similar to the questions of the other paradoxes - we generally avoid failure and find it unpleasant, even painful, so why do we seek out and enjoy games, where we will experience failure? Juul (2013) reframes the paradox as a balance between two contradictory feelings, felt at the same time but on different time frames. These are the short-term desire to avoid failure and the long-term desire to engage in an experience that sometimes includes failure. Thus, it would explain that we tolerate failure and the painful emotions it evokes because it is necessary for the overall experience we desire, and by tolerating failure, we are compensated for by the activity of playing. However, this theory supposes that failure would always be unpleasant, painful, and avoidable, tolerable only because it is necessary. I argue that this is not true, as spectacular failure also discussed by Juul (2013) is a type of failure that can be more entertaining than painful and may be sought out voluntarily.

3.4.3. Theories with different views on pleasure

There are many theories that approach the paradox from different directions. The Rich Experience Theory (Smuts, 2007) argues that people do not always seek pleasure in all experiences, and thus reframes the question of the paradox. The theory proposes that people seek out painful art

experiences because it is a safe, 'cheap' way to experience intense emotions, as the emotions can be felt without needing to experience real life unpleasantness that often goes with the emotions. For example, one can feel sad without actually losing anyone close to them, and scared without being in actual danger. According to the theory, painful experiences are often more intense than pleasurable ones, which makes them desirable (Smuts, 2007). However, the theory does not explain why intense experiences would be more desirable than less intense ones, which makes it incomplete. Intense experiences and strong emotions can be overwhelming, painful, dangerous, and certainly not universally desired. While intensity is not considered to be as universally and intrinsically undesirable and unpleasant as pain is, it is not simply desirable and pleasant either. Thus, the paradox remains, if weakened. There are many theories that do not even claim to explain enjoyment of the paradox more extensively but are able to provide partial answers, also discussed by Smuts (2007). The Control Theory argues that unpleasantness never reaches any significant level because in media experiences, we are in control of the experience and this control lessens the pain. While this theory does explain why pain would be more tolerable in media than in real life and is thus partially useable, it fails to explain why we would want to endure any pain at all. Another useful partial theory is one that suggests that we seek out painful media to be made aware of our capacity to endure such pain (Smuts, 2007).

According to Gaut (1993), people can enjoy being scared, disgusted and an array of other unpleasant and painful emotions, because while certain experiences and emotions are commonly thought of as unpleasant, they are not inherently so. This leaves room for some people to enjoy these unpleasant things, even while the most common response of not enjoying them conceptualizes them as generally unpleasant (Gaut 1993). This view on unpleasantness acknowledges pain but argues that it is not strictly necessary for it to be compensated by anything to be desirable and pleasurable. However, it is unclear how many people need to conceive of something as unpleasant for it to be thought of as commonly so, and thus how rare this enjoying of the unpleasant should be. While this theory can then explain more intense experiences such as extreme sports and haunted houses, the wide popularity of horror movies and sad music call the larger applicability of this theory into question. It also does not even attempt to explain why someone would enjoy unpleasant emotions, only asserts that it is possible. This does make it highly compatible with the other theories, but as it does not attempt to explain the reason for the enjoyment of unpleasantness further, this theory is most useful just as a beginning point for further theorizing.

Lastly, there is the Reversal Theory by Smith and Apter (1975), which has small section that attempts to answer as to why people engage in unpleasant and even undesirable activities. As their

theory is an expansive framework of the human experience, I will elaborate only on this relevant section, which is the paratelic, or playful, state of mind. Two key concepts to the Reversal Theory present in the paratelic state are arousal and protective frame. Arousal means the degree to which someone is emotionally involved in something, and it is understood that both high and low arousal can be felt as pleasant. High arousal in dangerous situations can initially be felt as anxiety, which through mastery becomes excitement. As for the protective frame, it means the felt psychological encapsulation that allows and individual to feel safe while partaking in dangerous activities. Thus, the combination of high-arousal activities and the protective frame can explain why people do risky and even dangerous activities – it is because of the safe excitement. Feelings felt within these parameters are called parapathic emotions within the Reversal Theory (Apter, 2005). This theory can also explain why people enjoy unpleasant media and painful emotions: in a playful state, which is often the case when experiencing media, and being in a protective frame, one can find pleasure in painful experiences despite the unpleasant and painful emotions present.

3.4.4. Concepts and conclusions

Next, I want to point out key concepts from the literature that play a part in enjoying horror and other unpleasant things, starting with the role that safety plays in enjoyment of horror. Experiencing the negative emotions in a safe context that one feels in control of is an important facet of enjoying negative experiences, and one that is thus mentioned often even outside of theories (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Bantinaki, 2012; Clasen et al., 2019; Kawin, 2012; Lin et al., 2018; Menninghaus et al., 2017; Pinedo, 1997; Perron, 2019). From the theories discussed previously, the concept of safety has a crucial role in Control Theory (Smuts, 2007), Reversal Theory (Apter, 2005), Benign Masochism Theory (Rozin et al., 2013), Evolutionary Threat Simulation Hypothesis (Clasen, 2017; Clasen & Johnson, 2020), and Rich Experience Theory (Smuts, 2005), as they all acknowledge the importance of a safe state where one is in control of the situation. As with game enjoyment theories, many scholars refer to mastery experiences, as well as testing and pushing limits, as important facets in making horror enjoyable (Bantinaki, 2012; Clasen & Johnson, 2020; Lin et al., 2018; Perron, 2019). This view is also present in the death drive (Flynn-Jones, 2015). The co-occurrence of negative and positive emotions is also seen as a significant factor in enjoyment of unpleasant emotions and experiences (Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Bantinaki, 2012; Menninghaus et al., 2017), present also in the Benign Masochism Theory (Rozin et al., 2013), death drive (Flynn-Jones, 2015),

and arguably even in Juul's theory on failure, through the simultaneous existence of emotionally negative failure and the positive overall chance to play (2013).

While the most prominent theories about enjoying the unpleasant have been mostly preoccupied with tragedy, horror, and art overall, Apter's (2005) more overarching framework demonstrates that the same mechanisms that explain enjoyment of horror can also explain other unpleasant activities and experiences. While Apter used risky behaviour and dangerous activities as examples (2005), tattooing is another example of an enjoyable, yet unpleasant experience, which I am using to demonstrate shared factors in experiences like this. Tattooing is a useful example because it prominently features the key concepts of safety and control, as the experience is always voluntary and able to be stopped at any time. Within reasons that make tattooing appealing, outside of the obvious visual aspects, pushing limits and mastery are key (Atik & Yıldırım, 2014; Bell, 1999; Buss & Hodges, 2017; Ferreira, 2014; Johnson, 2007; Serup et al., 2015), as is pride at having endured the pain (Buss & Hodges, 2017; Ferreira, 2014). In getting tattooed, both negative and positive emotions are present in a very physical way, as the pain and endorphins are both crucial parts of the experience. While physical exhaustion and activity was also mentioned before as an example of pleasant unpleasant experiences (Rozin et al., 2013), I could not find any literature focusing on this aspect of sports. I however argue that many sports, such as running or going to the gym, are also fitting examples, as there also the activity is often felt as safe or at least voluntarily undertaken, positive and negative feelings are co-present in a very similar way as in tattooing, and key emotions one can feel are pushing limits, mastery and pride at succeeding.

To summarize, there are facets of unpleasant pleasant experiences that are shared by different theories. Key common points of these experiences include a frame of mind where one feels safe or in control of the experience, feelings of mastery over the activity or themselves, and the simultaneous occurrence of negative and positive emotions. Lastly, the same key points can be argued to apply to even the most intense experiences, such as extreme sports, some forms of dark tourism, extreme body modification experiences and extreme haunted houses. I argue that the intensity of unpleasantness in the experience does not change the fundamental facets that make it pleasurable to some, but likely does reduce the amount of people who find pleasure in these extreme examples.

3.5. Bloodborne

Having briefly introduced *Bloodborne* as difficult, enduringly popular horror game in chapter 2.3, I will now expand on the gameplay, story, and world of the game. In subchapter 3.5.1, I will discuss the most relevant design elements of *Bloodborne* in order to give a rough idea about the gameplay experience. Next, in subchapter 3.5.2, I will explore the story and world, discussing *Bloodborne* as a perfect example of both gothic storytelling and Lovecraftian horror. This chapter will set the stage for my journey and start to draw the reader into the brutal and beautiful world of *Bloodborne.*

3.5.1. Design of Bloodborne

The gameplay of *Bloodborne* is aggressive and fast. Key to survival is staying light and fast on your feet, attacking quick, dodging enemy advances instead of blocking attacks and using guns to parry and inflict visceral attacks on staggered enemies. Lost health can be regained with a quick enough counterassault and weapons can be changed mid-attack into new forms. Being alert is the difference between survival and defeat on the narrow streets, vast courtyards, winding forests and nightmare landscapes of Yharnam. Dead enemies offer their blood which is used to heal, level up and buy gear and weapons in the Hunter's dream, a safe haven from the madness of the city. Exploration opens up new areas, enemies, and advantages for the keen observer, with the end goal being to survive the night, discover the reason for the plague of beasts and perhaps even end the cycle of horrors. The difficulty level of *Bloodborne* is steep and punishing, offering no way to make the game balance more accessible, with just one difficulty mode, scarce safe areas, harsh skill requirements and little reprieve from mobs of aggressive enemies. Every victory is earned with blood and countless deaths, and every mistake is punished harshly. The hard difficulty and world of the game are tied closely together, the difficulty increasing the fear invoked by the world, and the world growing ever more monstrous as the game progresses and difficulty increases. *Bloodborne* demands a lot from players, and while offering many options for how to play, is extremely inflexible in some of these demands. It is not enough to know the world, enemies, and weapons, but one needs to be skilled in using the controller to survive. While the game is not too hard to get the hang of at first for someone with game experience, there are important mechanics, such as insight, that can remain a mystery to the player for a long time. Knowledge like this affects the player more the further they progress, as knowing what different facets of the game mean and how to best strategize are key in survival.

The world of Yharnam consists of the sprawling, maze-like city streets, cathedrals and churches, forest paths, college halls and twisting planes of nightmares. Horror permeates the whole game, from environments, atmosphere, and enemy design to themes and story. The visual and sound design work perfectly together to create an oppressive, unsettling and thoroughly horrifying atmosphere. The soundscape of the game creates chills of both fear and awe, with breath-taking boss music, dark ambiance and screams that echo thorough the city, making the player question their desire to go on. Yharnam is a visually striking place, with every area evoking its own kind of horror, from winding streets where enemies lurk in foggy corners, to a dark, shadowy forest and the incomprehensible planes of nightmares. Every aspect of the game seems thought out and calculated to strengthen and further the narrative. The narrative and gameplay of *Bloodborne* meld together seamlessly, the horrifying story and fear-inducing difficulty complimenting each other. It can at points become indiscernible whether a feeling of fear is coming from navigating the tense, foggy and blood-soaked streets itself, or from dread over the next awaiting enemy encounter with some unknown horror.

3.5.2. The (horror) story

The story of *Bloodborne* is mysterious, horrifying, tragic, complex, and not forthcoming to a player unwilling to dig deep for answers. It unfolds as follows; In the past, where Yharnam now stands, there was another civilization that discovered the existence godlike Old Ones, another form of beings above our understanding. These people partook of the Old Ones healing blood, and slowly, because of it, succumbed to a strange beastly plague, their civilization dying and in the end, forgotten. The only thing left behind were vast catacombs, from which the College of Byrgenwerth discovered the blood and Old Ones once again. While some realized the dangers that lie in the consumption of the blood, not all believed in the warnings. Some left to found the Healing Church, not knowing what horrors they would invite back into the world by doing so. Administering the blood healed the illnesses of all who would imbibe in it and brought prosperity to the city for a time. However, slowly at first, the beastly plague returned, people previously healed by the blood now turning into beasts. This prompted the birth of the Hunters, professional killers who would keep the streets clean of beasts and eventually dispose of anyone even suspected of starting to turn beastly. But no matter how many beasts the Hunters killed, the plague only worsened, starting to claim even their own kind as the beastly blood coursed through everyone's veins. All the while in

secret, branches of the Church performed horrible experiments and rituals, trying to reach the Old Ones, while the city was ravaged the plague brought by them.

This is when the player character arrives in Yharnam, a stranger from a far-away land in search of a cure for a mysterious illness. They are made a Hunter and instructed to kill some beasts, thrust into the chaos of the streets. The night the Hunt is on, the city has been swept by a plague of terrible, wolf-like beasts, and the few residents that are still human cower in their homes, burning incense to keep the beasts away. The alleys and streets are stalked by beasts and citizens hunting them, becoming ever harder to tell apart when the Hunt grows longer. As the evening passes into night and the stranger, now a Hunter, advances through the city killing anything standing in their way, a madness descends on Yharnam and a blood moon rises. Everyone not yet turned into beasts by the plague meet unfortunate ends and the beasts give way to celestial horrors and eldritch beings. Old secrets are exposed and the true horror of the situation dawns, insight granting sight of beings not seen by those still sane. Killing their way through horrible abominations and beings beyond comprehension, after ending the nightmare, the Hunter may make a choice – awake in the morning unaware of the horrors, begin the Hunt again as an observer and a guide to new hunters or – break the cycle and ascend to Godhood.

As can be seen from this description, *Bloodborne* has taken some very clear inspiration from the classics of gothic horror. The foggy streets, grand cathedrals, abandoned castles and dark forests offer a tour of the gothic horror genre, with the enemies, atmosphere and story only strengthening this connection. The story starts out as a classic gothic horror tale of werewolves and vampires, only to later reveal cosmic horrors beyond our comprehension, in the same vein as the works of Lovecraft (Langmead, 2017). This connection to horror is truly present in not only the story, but a key part of the gameplay as well, exemplified by the ideas of the (Ludic) sublime as discussed by Vella (2015). The sublime is a feeling, experienced when an object exceeds the perception and faculties of an observer, causing feelings of terror and awe. Interestingly, the works of Lovecraft can be understood as a manifestation of more troubling sense of sublime. Games can also induce the sublime and can be argued to be especially effective in doing so. This is because a game can be played in many ways and its processes are hidden to the player, making it impossible to ever perceive it completely, thus never removing the possibility for the sublime. Out of games, *Bloodborne* presents an even more apt example of this, as both its story and mechanics resist knowing and mastery to a degree not many other games do (Vella, 2015). *Bloodborne* is also an excellent example of difficulty being an important part of a game's narrative (Qin et al., 2009). Drawing these threads together, the obscure lore, unexplained game mechanics, dreadful

atmosphere, difficult gameplay, and mysterious story all meld seamlessly together. This makes *Bloodborne* an excellent example of a transcendent horror game, where the steep difficulty is a key part of the whole. *Bloodborne* is a demonstration of gothic horror, cosmic awe and Ludic sublime coming together, a confirmation of our deepest intuitions about the word as a place full of horrors beyond our understanding made real (Carroll, 1990).

4. Enjoying Bloodborne

This thesis started with a question; why anyone would enjoy difficult games, and what is it that makes them enjoyable? Before presenting my answer, I will share key parts of my experience with *Bloodborne,* using these moments to ground discussion on the literature. As I draw together what I have learned and experienced, I showcase how seamlessly my experiences fit with existing conceptions and theories. This will be done in chapter 4.1, with subchapter 4.1.1 focusing on fear and frustration, subchapter 4.1.2 on the tools that helped me survive, and subchapter 4.1.3 on the rewards that I gained from playing *Bloodborne.* In subchapter 4.2.1, I will explore some last key connections, before presenting my theory for enjoying *Bloodborne* and other difficult games in subchapter 4.2.2. Lastly, I will reflect on the ways autoethnography affected this project, and consider future directions in chapter 4.3.

4.1. Playing Bloodborne

In these chapters, I will reflect on what I have experienced and learned. Here, I draw connections between what was previously discussed in the literature review and my own journey through *Bloodborne*, developing my own theory for enjoying difficult games. First, in subchapter 4.1.1, I will share the two most horrible challengers I met in *Bloodborne*, and then in subchapter 4.1.2, the tools that helped me fight them. In subchapter 4.1.3, I share pleasurable things I found and won during my play. As I discuss these insights, I begin by sharing moments from my experience with *Bloodborne*, then reflecting on the literature that resonates with my experience. The moments I share will serve to ground and preface discussions about the literature, further demonstrating the connections I am making. Throughout these subchapters, I will present feelings, discoveries, changes, and reasons why someone might enjoy difficult games like I enjoyed *Bloodborne.* Each of

them played a key part in finding myself to be enjoying my time in Yharnam, and in formulating my theory for enjoying difficult games and more.

4.1.1. Fear and frustration

Fear - I am frozen in place, halfway between two floors on a curving stair coming up from underground. It is dark, and from everywhere around me echoes a ceaseless chanting. My breathing is shallow, as if the air itself was too heavy to breathe. Before me is a large room, lit beneath through a floor littered with evenly spaced gaps and holes. I cannot see the ceiling, but I can see the curve of the stairs into the next level above me, where I know an unlit lantern waits to take me away from here. I can also see a robed, horrible shape coming down the stairs opposite me. I wait for it to see me, ready to fly down the stairs in a desperate attempt to escape its crushing grip. It passes by, not noticing me but before I can feel relief, it stops. Another robed figure, tall, gangly and pale, has met it on the unstable flooring. They stand there, as if in deep discussion while I stare from my low place, tension building in my muscles and head. They are too close. Surely, if I take even a step, if I dare attempt the second set of stairs, they will hear and come up behind me, trap me on the landing just a breath away from safety, and snuff the last shaking breath out of me. I stand still, frozen like I have already died and become a handsome statue. How much time passes, I cannot recall. Each second stretches into what feels like a timeless void. I am waiting for something, for the figures to move, for myself to move, for someone unseen to sneak behind me, for anything. I am trapped, more by my own fear than the creatures before me.

The first thing I feel in Bloodborne is fear. This emotion follows me through the game, always at my heels, ready jump out and overwhelm me at the slightest evidence of something new, unexpected, and threatening. It is with me before every boss fight, at every new enemy and area, by every dark corner and turn of the path. It clogs my throat, seizes my chest within what feels like an iron band and makes me breathe small, shallow gulps of air as I stand frozen in a hundred different places. It makes me walk slow, swivel my head like an owl, make note of every small detail. The fear is a push and pull between wanting to go back or venture forward which locks me in place for minutes at a time, my thoughts racing, my sweaty hand gripping the controller, my body shaking. The fear is exhilarating, horrible and sweet at the same time. I invite it within me, walk just before it, get swallowed whole by it. It colours the entire world and makes it more intense, more horrid, more beautiful. It makes me rush to safety, it makes me go slow, it stops me dead. But every time, I master it, master myself and venture on to horrible new vistas of experience.

I expected and welcomed fear when playing *Bloodborne* and was not disappointed. I have played many horror games, but none have made me feel as unsettled and fearful as *Bloodborne* did. This is because of how seamlessly *Bloodborne* blends its narrative, world and playing experience together, creating fear and uncertainty on all fronts. Often, I could not distinguish if the fear I felt came from the enemies I dreaded or the overall atmosphere and ambiance of the setting. Lovecraft's assertion that the mix of fear and awe evoked by cosmic horror is compelling because it responds to a primordial human intuition about the world (Carroll, 1990), is demonstrated in *Bloodborne* and explains the appeal of the game's story and aesthetics. While this does not explain the enjoyment of *Bloodborne*'s difficulty and the unpleasant frustration that is very present in the game, there is a further connection between *Bloodborne* and Lovecraft. Seeing *Bloodborne* as an example of Ludic sublime, a never-ending sense of awe created uniquely by games (Vella, 2015), I argue that as a game, *Bloodborne* is a perfect example of Lovecraftian ideas of sublime terror and awe.

Fear also led me closer to the answers I sought. Through viewing *Bloodborne* as a difficult horror game, and realizing the gaps in game enjoyment theories about difficult games, I was able to see how well *paradox theories* resonated with my experience of fear and also frustration. I discovered that while many of the game enjoyment theories had problems when applied to horror, as discussed in chapter 3.4, they could be used to explain the enjoyability of frustration.

Frustration - I slump to the ground, my foe walking away from my evaporating body as I clench my teeth and sit up straighter. I wait, seething, and break into a run as soon as the world forms around me again. I rush through the same path I have passed enough times to have lost count. At a point where the path meets another, just before an open gate, I stop and watch as a creature in a nightgown, head like that of a giant fly, shambles away. Looking at its retreating back, I feel a bubbling hatred simmering just under my temporary calm. The creature is innocent in this, but what awaits me behind the gate, inside a great old building, is not. I walk to the doorway and breathe deep. My whole body is tense and my mind is filled with fragments of confused, reeling thoughts. Strategies, movements and counters are all suppressed by a noxious cloud of frustration and hatred that seems to course just under my skin. My movements are jerky and ungraceful, I feel furious and hopeless at the same time. I walk up a curving stair, readying myself, spewing insults in my mind when I spot the object of my burning hatred. A hunter dressed in white, their eyes covered, approaches the stairs from the second floor. They spot me and the fight begins again, as it has untold times already. My attempts to defeat them have all bled together into a mass of close escapes, bold counters, tantalizing near victories and defeats that become more frustrating with each missed attack, each used item, each death. My jaw is clenched so tight I can feel the strain no

matter how much I focus on dodging and delivering blows. I feel restless, like my skin is on too tight and I am no longer a person but an amalgamation of seething hatred and putrid frustration. One mistake too many, one attack dodged too late and I am once again overcome by death. I am lost in a sea of hopelessness which lodges deep inside my chest and rushes out through my veins as unbearable, seething frustration.

Frustration is another of my companions through the game, rearing its ugly head when I die one time too many, always when I least expect it. It is hopelessness and fury mixed together, it makes my whole body tense and causes me to make even more fatal mistakes. As the frustration builds, I try to fight it, to keep calm and to stay in control, to think clearly and advance slowly. When it has started, it dominates my play and my mind, becoming harder and harder to break free from as I keep throwing myself against enemies and being punished for it. It is a hateful feeling, making my body feel alien and hostile to even myself. But, when I regain control, sometimes catching myself right before plunging into the hole of frustration, sometimes clawing out after myriad losses, the relief is bigger than anything I felt before. It washes over me, cleansing me of the toxins I have let build up inside me, releasing the tension I kept in my body, freeing my mind from the tunnel vision that slowly formed over my eyes. It is not only the adrenaline of combat that lifts me up from this lowest low, but being free from the challenge that taunted me and most importantly, emerging victorious over it. My desire to continue restored, my confidence in my abilities returning and my sight again clear to look ahead, I am filled with vigour to go on.

By using conversion theory (Smuts, 2007) to explain the enjoyment of frustration in difficult games, I can identify the previously unnamed emotion that would turn unpleasantness into pleasure as *fiero*, the intense feeling of triumph felt when succeeding in a frustrating challenge (Lazzaro, 2004, 2008). This application is further strengthened by evidence that previous frustration can intensify the pleasurable feelings felt after a victory (Allison et al., 2015; Lazzaro, 2004, 2008; Petralito et al., 2017; Poels et al., 2007). Even the overall perception of the whole play session can be altered after a victory (Petralito et al., 2017), making it possible for the player to forget frustrations in light of the positive emotions caused by winning. This was a common occurrence within my own play experience and something I came to expect as a reward for persevering when I wanted to quit – the seething, almost unbearable frustration turning to a euphoric high of victory. Zillmann's Excitation-Transfer Theory, as a form of conversion theory, also follows this reasoning and is thus stronger when applied to frustration instead of fear. The theory of Horror Self-efficacy (Lin et al., 2018) is also useful when thinking about difficult games, as self-efficacy experiences overall are very important to the enjoyment of games (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Trepte &

Reinecke, 2011), and within Horror Self-efficacy Theory, enduring horror creates a pleasurable experience of self-efficacy. Applying these theories to frustration, difficult games could be experienced as enjoyable when the feelings of frustration caused by excessive challenge turns positive and becomes amplified after feelings of self-efficacy have been experienced, which happens not only when finishing the game, but after every possible victory. In difficult horror games, like *Bloodborne*, this enjoyment can be twofold, stemming both from game skill self-efficacy and horror self-efficacy. In my experience, especially in the beginning of the game, when my confidence was at its lowest and thus, my need for confidence-building self-efficacy experiences was at its highest (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006), every vanquished enemy and step taken was, in itself, a small victory. As I progressed and gained confidence, I experienced and needed these bursts of pleasure less, but valued them even more as a reward for defeating especially hard enemies or bosses.

Difficult games and enduring frustration can have many notably positive outcomes (as detailed in subchapter 3.2.1.), which makes compensatory theories also very relevant for difficult games. Not only fear, but frustration could be pleasurably compensated for by the satisfying of curiosity (Carroll, 1990), the experience of agency and eventual mastery (Flynn-Jones, 2015), and the ability to play games that include frustration (Juul, 2013). Even the theory on Benign Masochism (Rozin et al., 2013), if reframed as an interplay between threat and safety, or thrill and relief, instead of an actual feeling of threat that is false, can be useful for thinking about difficult games. The critique towards these theories presented in subchapter 3.4.2 still applies to difficult games, as it is unclear what amount of mastery or satisfied curiosity would compensate for frustration enough for players to keep playing. While this critique might make compensatory unable to be applied on a larger scale, I recognize that the theories did present reasons that tempted me to play. Of the theories discussed, curiosity was an especially relevant reason why I chose to play *Bloodborne,* and frustration was the price I had to pay to experience the game, with the desire for mastery coming much later. While I experienced frustration as a negative emotion and an unpleasant part of the game experience, I consider it possible that not all players would. This is because many people would consider fear to be an extremely unpleasant emotion, but I, along with other horror fans, find enjoyment and pleasure in experiencing fear in certain situations. I certainly enjoyed every moment of fear in *Bloodborne*. Thus frustration, just as fear and other unpleasant emotions, can be argued to not be inherently negative, which makes it possible for some to find these emotions enjoyable, while still allowing for the majority to consider them as undesirable (Gaut, 1993). This is as applicable to difficult games as it is to horror, as difficult games are certainly not enjoyed by

everyone. A key addition to this are the numerous positive effects of playing difficult games that were discussed in subchapter 3.2.1, as these connect frustration to Bantinaki's (2012) theory that similarly argues that fear is not an inherently negative emotion because of the positive outcomes created by it. Understanding frustration as perhaps unpleasant but not inherently so is a crucial step in developing a theory that explains why some find frustration enjoyable. Frustration in difficult games could also be especially easy to experience as pleasurable, as games are often experienced in a playful, safe state of mind that has been argued to be needed to find unpleasant emotions pleasurable (Apter, 2005). Frustration can also be understood as a positive through the Rich Experience Theory (Smuts, 2007), as frustration is certainly an intense experience, and many would consider games a safe place to experience it.

4.1.2. The tools I used to thrive

There are many aspects present in both horror and difficult games that make enjoyment possible. These aspects consist of both facets of the experience and personality characteristics of the individual. Possible aspects of the experience were discussed in subchapter 3.4.4 in relation to *paradox theories*, and these include facets of both the experience itself and the environment it is experienced in. For example, when beginning to play *Bloodborne*, I had almost no prior experience with using a PlayStation controller, which made it significantly harder to feel in control of any situation in the game. Often when facing a new or tough enemy, I would panic and forget the controls, since I was not yet familiar enough with them to be able to use them fluidly. Only after gaining enough muscle memory was I able to feel in control in different situations, and start to enjoy myself. The significance of individual factors such as personality was discussed in relation to both games and *paradox theories* in chapter 3.3, and subchapters 3.4.2 and 3.4.3. All these individual factors affect how likely or able someone is to enjoy unpleasant experiences, and also change how someone is affected by aspects the environment and the experience. For example, my tendency to experience emotions strongly made me especially susceptible to frustration, and also unable to fully diminish the sting of failure by distancing myself from the game, as discussed by Juul (2013).

Control – Hearing a faint tinkling of a sinister bell seizes my heart with fear. I know what it means, another mad dash through the rooftops, evading yet more bloody enemies, frantically searching for a maiden clad in red, ringing her infernal bell. I cannot stop to take a breath or assess what I am up against, I cannot even stop to properly look around. Almost as soon as I have brought down the last

of my would-be-killers from a group, the first one rises up again, called by the bell to forever take up arms against me until I can find the one who rings it and silence her. I feel mad, frantic, out of control, dashing around desperately like a mere beast. There is no strategy, no artful dispatching of enemies in a careful dance, no thought other than to find her, kill her. The veil of humanity feels thinner than ever. Until I can kill the maiden in red, I am like one of the very monsters I hunt, mindless and in a blind panic. When her bell finally clatters to the ground, I find my reason, my self again and turn to face the enemies that follow me. I am in control of the world, of myself again, for a brief moment before I continue on and another bell begins to chime. Without control, I am nothing more than a fearful creature, afraid of everything and unable to think clearly. I need the calm grip of control around myself and the world to see ahead and feel safe, to feel able to continue on. My lapses to uncontrolled action and fear remind be that without control, I would be reduced to nothing.

Control was an essential aspect of my play experience and important in making it enjoyable. Feeling in control of the enemies, area, and myself was not only essential to me, it is also recognized as crucial in both game enjoyment theories and *paradox theories*. As discussed in subchapter 3.4.4, control is regarded as crucial for the enjoyment of horror and tattooing as it evokes feelings of safety about the experience. Control in some form, or the continued experience of control in the form of mastery and competence, is a part of almost all game enjoyment theories discussed ins subchapter 3.3.2, and an overall integral part of games. Being able to control the game is a precursor to any game experience and feeling in control is a needed step in gaining competence, mastery and other positive outcomes from the game. However, the interplay between being in control and struggling to gain control is also an enjoyable part of games, as encapsulated by Lazzaro's (2004, 2008) notion of *fiero* and the concept of suspense, discussed in subchapter 3.3.2. Within horror though, the struggle for control so important in games could be a negative aspect, as it could create too strong feelings of threat.

Curiosity – The sky is dark and fills the forest around me with strange shadows that come to life in the light of my lantern and some scattered bonfires. Down the path and after a welcome respite in front of an old house, I continue to a bridge. It reaches over a huge chasm, the railings old and covered in spiderwebs that shine in the meagre light. Ahead, I see the retreating back of a wolf who used to be a man, still wearing their old coat. Killing them, I creep forward, barely restraining my desire to run forward and see what is hidden inside this forest. I cannot wait to find out what this new place has in store for me. What terrible sights lay under trees and down winding paths, what enemies wait ready to claim my life, what surprises will chill my blood and make me horrified? I am

tired, and my muscles are aching but I cannot stop to rest for even a moment, a burning curiosity driving me forward without respite. No matter how exhausted I am, I must see what horrors this forest is hiding or I will not be able to sleep come night. I will find no rest until my curiosity is quenched.

Curiosity not only made me play *Bloodborne* in the first place, but often kept me playing when I would otherwise have quit, making Carroll's Intellectual Curiosity Theory (1990) a compelling explanation as to why I enjoyed *Bloodborne* enough to play it through. The theory is useful for explaining curiosity as a motivation for playing games, because games can never be as fully known as films, retaining the mystery necessary for curiosity. *Bloodborne* offers not only steep challenges and tests of skill, but an intriguing, beautiful world to explore and mysteries to discover. This versatility, recognized as important by Lazzaro in creating compelling games (2004), is a key part in *Bloodborne*'s enduring popularity. As a curious person, the depth of the world was why I endured the tests on my skill presented by *Bloodborne.* As a compelling example of Ludic sublime (Vella, 2015), *Bloodborne* is also an example of an especially attractive game for curious people and ones looking for a challenge. Curiosity can also be seen as an important product of suspense and outcome uncertainty, both important for game enjoyment as discussed in subchapter 3.3.2.

Wanting to push myself – The shrieks of madwomen have finally stopped, the streets and misshapen houses finally silent from their chants and screams. Hiding in a doorway, I follow two big shapes with my gaze. Clad in black capes and polished armour, holding huge axes, they patrol the crossing before me in endless circles. Finally, I gather myself and dash to a gate, open it with a lever, run down a sloping path away from the danger – and stop. I am flush with victory over every other foe I have encountered, their bodies now littering the streets, houses and rooftops of this little hamlet. Emboldened by this, tempted by the challenge presented by the two guards, I creep back to the gate. Why not try, I find myself thinking. I have done well so far, and the heads of these two hulking creatures present a tantalizing prize to be won. Why not push on, why not push myself? The siren call of a challenge matching my growing confidence is too great to resist, and I find myself stepping on the path of one of the huge axemen. My senses sharpen and I grip my weapon tighter, pushing past the fear, pushing myself to win once more, pushing myself to become stronger than before. Without this desire to go a bit further, do a little better, try a tad harder, I would not find the thrill of victory nearly as often as I do.

The affinity one has towards pushing and challenging themselves affects how likely they are to seek out challenges. In my play experience, I recognized that often the only thing that kept me playing

after experiencing a significant number of failures and frustration was my desire to push myself further. When considering what makes one want to push themselves, the desire to discover one's capacity to endure pain (Smuts, 2007), is a compelling possibility, also echoed in literature about tattooing, discussed in subchapter 3.4.4. The reason I was able to push myself and discover how much I could endure and achieve was the net of safety around the experience. Safety, also discussed in subchapter 3.4.4, is recognized as a crucial aspect of many *paradox theories*. It is also inherently present in games. The player is always safe, even if the situations within games might feel threatening, and can either stop playing or gain courage from remembering that the game is not real. For me, *Bloodborne* was a safe place to test myself, my boundaries, and abilities. With no-one to judge me for failing but myself, and shielded by the knowledge that failure in the game would be only temporary (Juul, 2013), I was able to discover new things about myself. Even when frustration followed me though the screen, it only served to push me to try again.

Confidence – A huge arm hits the ground just before me, raising up dust and making the earth shake. I lunge forward, quickly as I can, to gracefully slice with my weapon at the oblong, porous head now drooping within my reach. After a few seconds, as if awakening from a brief daze, the many-limbed, wiry monstrosity leaps back and we regard each other from the opposite sides of a great arena. As the creature begins another assault, I keep back, waiting calmly for another opportunity like the previous one to present itself. A slight nervous prickle fights for control within me, wanting to attack now, to get this over and done with fast. But I know I must wait, that eventually, if I wait long enough, the creature now jumping after me will make another mistake which I can take advantage of. I wait, and watch, confident that I can beat my enemy if I just stay patient. I will be the one to emerge victorious here, there is no doubt in my mind. I possess the skills and knowledge needed to fell this enemy, and I will kill it just like I have so many equally terrifying creatures before it. It is just a matter of staying sharp and patient, and then victory will come to me.

In my experience playing *Bloodborne,* enduring challenges and frustration allowed me to gain confidence and learn a kind of mind-over-body control. To succeed, I could not just follow my instincts, I had to learn to stay calm and observe the enemies, and to control my emotions and reactions. This tension between mechanical and emotional challenge, where just as important as knowing how to play is being able to control emotional reactions, was a crucial part of *Bloodborne* for me. At times, achieving the necessary mind-over body control and being able to deal with frustration was harder than the actual difficulty of performing actions in the game. Finding a balance between my mind and body was similar to finding a balance between the often strikingly different emotions I felt at the same time. The co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions is an

aspect of enjoyment of both horror and difficult games, as demonstrated in subchapter 3.4.4. This could either be because positive emotions are created by the negative emotions, or because they simply exist simultaneously as a part of the experience. In my experience with *Bloodborne*, I found both be true. During challenging enemy encounters, I often felt simultaneously confident and nervous, calm and excited, frustrated and elated. Experiencing such different emotions at the same time, and because of each other, was always thrilling and made the game more exciting and challenging to play.

Stubbornness – Snow crunches under my feet as I run again through a courtyard filled with statues. It is cold even inside, where the lift lets me out into an abandoned library filled with echoing sobs of long dead ladies. I rush past them and climb my way to the floor above, where I ascend even higher to the precarious rooftops. The route has become so familiar at this point that I no pay no mind to the sheer drops that loom underneath me, just one misstep away. I step into the fog once more and challenge the watcher of the throne room with grim determination. I have lost too many times to find enjoyment or hope in the battle anymore, but still I run through the castle to meet my foe again and again. I will die a hundred times to emerge victorious just once. My stubbornness freezes me over just like the old man before me has been frozen by years of cold and snow. He will give up before I do, and he needs to die only once. Stubbornness is my weapon just the same as the ones I hold in my hands. It makes me unable to give up and abandon the fight, to leave forever or even until the next day. Thanks to it, when I finally rest for the day, it is with the glow of victory keeping me warm from the cold.

How stubborn someone is also significantly affects their likelihood of giving up in the face of challenges. I argue that stubbornness and wanting to challenge oneself are especially important personality characteristics for enjoying difficult games. For me, if not for these personality characteristics, I would have given up long before discovering how enjoyable *Bloodborne* could be. The reasons one has for engaging in activities significantly affects how that activity is experienced and enjoyed, as following the Uses and Gratifications Theory discussed in subchapter 3.3.1. For me, I primarily use games to relax and explore different worlds. This is why I was surprised to find myself enjoying *Bloodborne*, as difficult games like it are usually enjoyed for the challenges they present and mastery experiences to be gained for succeeding. However, as *Bloodborne* does have a rich world that is interesting to explore in line with Lazzaro's (2004) *easy fun*, I found myself eased into even enjoying the *hard fun* and challenges. Despite struggling in the beginning and considering giving up, I found myself unable to resist trying to best just one more enemy, peeking behind one more corner, or opening just one last door. The mix of burning curiosity and stubbornness in the

face of challenges above my skill level kept me playing until I discovered that I could match the challenges and enjoy doing so.

4.1.3. Rewards to be gained

There are many things one can gain by enduring harsh difficulty, such as the pleasurable thrill of danger (Allison et al., 2015), and deeper, more meaningful experiences (Allison et al., 2015; Lazzaro, 2004, 2008; Petralito et al., 2017), as discussed previously in subchapter 3.2.1. While there are problematic aspects to difficult games, I cannot deny how rewarding *Bloodborne* was, and how these rewards made the game more enjoyable and enticed me to keep playing.

Competence, mastery – Creeping down a grand staircase, the chandelier that once lit up the room now a ruined heap at the foot of the last step, I hear a sound that fills me with dread and a primal panic. A wet, squelching footsteps echo from somewhere in the darkness where my lantern cannot reach. My mind instantly flashes to previous encounters with the source of the disgusting noise, all of them more horrible and shameful than I can bear. Mad dashes towards pale, inhumane shapes, my limbs stiff with panic. Failed dodges and being caught in a strange ring of smoke. Getting what feels like my brain sucked clean, left dazed and stupid, waiting for death as I die again and again. Finally besting them with underhanded methods, throwing fire and daggers at their backs until they die. But this time, when I brave the darkness, shuddering at the bitter memories, the creature seems smaller, slower, and less terrifying. It shoots its smoke trap at me and the panic I was expecting does not come. Instead, I watch and dodge easily, stopping to observe the thing that used to haunt my worst nightmares. These horrid things have not changed, their movements just as fast as before, their attacks just as unpredictable. But I have changed and grown, able to respond to their threat now with calm precision. I make short work of the tentacle-faced creature, the fight feeling like a well-rehearsed dance, smooth and easy. As its garbled whispers are silenced forever, I realize that the change has been so slow, so gradual that I have missed it completely. Without even looking, by slowly advancing and challenging myself, I have stumbled upon mastery over myself and the world. There is no longer any threat that I cannot face, no enemy that will haunt my nightmares as a spectre of fear and failure.

The role of difficulty in increasing the feelings of mastery and competence associated with playing difficult games is an enduring theme in the literature, discussed in subchapters 3.3.2 and 4.1.2. Mastery is important in different *paradox theories* and tattooing as a source of pleasure, but

especially in the death drive (Flynn-Jones, 2015), as discussed in subchapters 3.4.2 and 3.4.4. Experiences of mastery and competence were crucial in making my experience with *Bloodborne* enjoyable, especially when serving as contrasts for frustration, as frustration can make victories more satisfying, deeper, and meaningful (Allison et al., 2015; Lazzaro, 2004, 2008; Petralito et al., 2017). Being able to slowly master the game and to feel in control of it allowed me to feel confident and proud of my accomplishments in the world of *Bloodborne*. Mastery, as a self-efficacy experience allowed me to gain positive experiences with hard difficulty and significant amounts of failure, which over time led me to find enjoyment in new types of play.

Thrill – The thrill of the hunt is said to be intoxicating, just like the blood. I do not partake in the blood, not in reality, but the thrill is more than enough by itself. I am awash in adrenaline when in danger, and when victorious endorphin courses through my veins. Always present are the fear that excites and terrifies, the trepidation that turns to mad joy over victory, the excitement over horrible new discoveries and the boldness when attempting a new challenge perhaps a touch too hard for me. The tragic fates and a story headed to a sombre conclusion do not change the thrill I feel every time I step into Yharnam, the thrill that is just as inherently a part of the world as fear is. The very physical markers of my experience become a fond memory of a scary, horrible, thrilling experience.

Many games are thrilling, and difficult games can be especially so. The adrenaline rush and very bodily feelings of excitement, fear and even anger can be very compelling, and were certainly the most memorable parts of my play experience. This is not surprising, as emotions are extremely important in games, and can be very intense and physical (Lazzaro, 2004). Such thrills are echoed by the Rich Experience Theory, where intensity is seen as desirable even over pleasure (Smuts, 2007), and discussed by Apter as the significance of high arousal as pleasurable in certain situations (2005). Often after an especially intense moment in the game, I found myself in the grips of it long after, shaking with adrenaline and still wrapped up in the thrills of the experience. My hands shook on the controller, making it harder to control my character, my heart beat so fast I could feel I thundering through my chest, and I could barely stand up with my shaking legs.

Relief – There is a time and a place for challenge, for clever strategies, for appreciation of the graceful flow of combat. This is as far from that place as can get, as I take another futile plunge towards the towering monstrosity before me and then dodge away frantically, not quite managing to avoid a fireball that graces me and clips off a chunk of my health. More are coming and I retreat as far as I can, until the creature ceases its attacks and turns back. It so very long, too long to even properly behold, and looks so strange I cannot make out even a distant resemblance to anything

familiar. Its many-limbed body is sliced in half by a vertical mouth with small, sharp teeth, and its neck goes on and on until it droops back down and produces a white flower. Glowing tendrils erupt from its neck and the mouth spits out devastating fireballs when I dare to venture too close. Against all odds and to even my own surprise, after many failed attempts and losses of courage, I dodge its projectiles and dare to get in close enough to get a turn in attacking. When it finally dies in a white burst, relief washes over me. Every shred of tension I held in my body, every fearful, panicked thought floats away with the monster. Surviving and killing the horrid creature makes every tense, spine-chilling, panicked, and tense moment worth it. I stand in place for a while, enjoying this moment of relieved, hard-earned peace.

When playing *Bloodborne*, the intensity of the experience was simultaneously pleasurable and almost unbearable at times. Often, I had to take breaks during my play simply because the thrill became too much, changing from exciting and pleasurable to almost painful. Thus, it is not only thrill but relief that is important in difficult games. The relief gained after a hard-won victory is present as a significant part of *hard fun* (Lazzaro, 2004, 2008), in the Benign Masochism Theory through the tension of threat and relief of realizing the body was fooled (Rozin et al., 2013), and as a part of a suspense-relief loop in games (Klimmt, 2003). The loop of thrill and relief is present in horror movies through the narrative structure, and in games through the narrative, flow of the gameplay and self-regulation of the player. This relief took two forms in my experience, either as a self-imposed break or one achieved by defeating an enemy or clearing an area, both allowing for a moments respite from the adrenaline and excitement.

Learning – When first stepping down to the abandoned graveyard, eyes trained on the misshapen heap in the centre of it, I am already afraid what of what is to come. When the heap comes to life, bony limbs attaching together to form a gangly beast with black fur and a horrible face to behold, my fear seems to know no bounds. But when the fight begins, the beast leaping around almost too fast to react, calling electricity down to strengthen its swipes, never ceasing movement even for a second, I stay vigilant. Observing every move it makes, dodging its furious claws, staying calm despite the chaos, I start to see a way to victory. Even when dying, the beast tearing me to shreds, I start to see its weaknesses, its patterns and ever clearer, its eventual defeat. Every wrong move and every death teaches me something new or reinforces a lesson not yet quite learned, until I have learned all I need to. I stay on it, refusing to back down from its advances and don't give it a moments respite to call electricity to its aid. The strategy learned through carefulness, calm observation, trial and error is what guides me to victory and what I take with me when I leave the graveyard. No other enemy will be quite like this frantic beast, but the things I have learned will

serve me in future all the same, whether it is knowing how to react when an impossibly fast enemy charges me, or knowing that I can handle myself no matter what comes at me.

Learning is another significant reward of enduring hard difficulty, as discussed in subchapter 3.2.1. Learning is key to the Intellectual Curiosity Theory by Carroll (1990), the theory that we enjoy pain to discover out ability to endure it (Smuts, 2007), and Batinaki's theory about positive effects of horror (2012). Thus, a potential for learning seems to be crucial for horror and difficult games. It was also present during my play, as the experience of learning the layout of an area or figuring out how to counter an enemy were extremely satisfying every time. Through learning and memorizing the game, I also achieved familiarity with it. By learning and knowing the areas and challenges, I gained increased confidence and a sense of mastery over the game, which allowed me to start feeling at home in the world of *Bloodborne*. Walking through an area that once terrified and challenged me, feeling a sense of belonging and calm was a feeling that felt even more profound than in other games, as it was a reward earned through hard struggles.

Pride – The end is at hand, I can feel it. The fight seems to take on a fever pitch as my opponent once again shrouds itself in dark mist. I hold my breath, waiting, ready to dodge when an apparition of my enemy lunges at me from the darkness, blades slicing at me, layered skirts flowing around them. I dodge and keep running until I see my real foe, sidestepping another blind lunge from the dark. The lullaby that has accompanied our fight has kept me on edge this whole time, and now I the fear building. I carve into the shape clad in black cloth and shining baubles, dry dust puffing into my face. I fear making a mistake, being taken off guard, being surprised by something sinister. Instead, after one last futile attempt by the twin of the creature guarding a nightmare, the mist dissipates. I see the clearing once again, and after a quick gasp of air, attack again. The swinging, slicing blades cannot touch me as I slip behind the governess, dealing the last hits of the fight to their back, ending it all. Their many hands droop, blades dropping from the formerly tight grip, as light bursts out from inside them and they disappear in a shower of black feathers. And yet, I do not trust in the victory. A faint crying still echoes around me, and I slowly walk through the high plaza, waiting for a trap to close upon me. Slowly, the cry fades to silence and I finally believe that the fight is over. Pride slowly fills my veins, like something warm spreading through me to reach all the places frozen by doubt. The last fight has been won, the nightmare is over and my journey is at its end. Despite the pitfalls, mistakes, desperation and through every challenge, I have come through to the end. The sunrise awaits me and I will bask in its warmth, proud of what I have faced, endured, and conquered.

Finding myself not only surviving, but thriving in the world of *Bloodborne* was a hugely impactful experience for me, and I took great pride in being able to match the challenges presented to me by the game. Previous self-efficacy experiences may affect what games one chooses to play to experience different things, as discussed in subchapter 3.3.1. As for myself, with no previous self-efficacy experiences with significantly challenging games, I thought that *Bloodborne's* challenges would be too difficult for me, and was surprised to discover that I could match them, and enjoyed doing so. The reason I had previously dismissed *Bloodborne* to be not for me is connected to the negative effects of difficult games discussed in subchapter 3.2.1, and especially to how people like me are often excluded from the group of people who play 'real' and difficult games like *Bloodborne*. Despite being passionate about games, the discussion and attitudes about 'real' gamers affected my relationship to difficult games and how I viewed myself as a player. By being stubborn, curious, and proud of my achievements, I was able to break through the attitudes that I had allowed to limit me, and discover that *Bloodborne* and perhaps other games like it are certainly for me.

4.2. Finding answers

Arriving here, I believe I have found an answer to the question I began with, as well as a basis for a larger theory about enjoying unpleasant experiences that draws from many different fields of inquiry. Before presenting my answer to the question of enjoying difficult games, in subchapter 4.2.1, I will discuss findings that establish the similarities between horror research and game enjoyment theories. Finally, I will present my theory about enjoying *Bloodborne* and other difficult games in subchapter 4.2.2, and outline potential wider applications for the theory.

4.2.1. Horror and play intertwined

The last connections between *paradox theories*, game enjoyment and difficult games are the starting point for the theory I developed. Further cementing the parallels between enjoying horror and difficult games, and demonstrating how well theories on horror and game enjoyment complement each other, a recent study on participants of a haunted house found that people considered their experience to be a form of play (Andersen et al., 2020). By seeing the experience of horror as a voluntary, playful experience, the connections between negative emotions evoked by games and horror are strengthened. As a further connection, the concept of challenge-skill balance, discussed

in subchapter 3.1.2, is also present in horror, as a 'just right' spot for curiosity and fear. In the realm of horror, it is suggested that there are individual ideal spots for feeling curiosity and fear (Andersen et al., 2020), perhaps being just below a level which cannot be tolerated (Rozin et al., 2013). This is very similar to the idea of an ideal challenge-skill balance. Connecting these two ideas, it could be possible that the ideal challenge-skill balance for everyone would be one where the difficulty is just below intolerable. Further connecting this to game enjoyment theories, this spot for difficulty could allow for a maximum amount of pleasurable mastery experiences, or the highest amount of suspense. I suggest that all these different studies and theories from both game enjoyment and horror studies are talking about a same position on the difficulty curve, but through different disciplinary languages. The issue with challenge-skill balance is then twofold; first, different disciplines use different language and methods to find this spot, making it challenging to compare results and share understandings. The second issues arises from the subjective nature of difficulty experiences, which makes it impossible for a challenge-skill balance that suits everyone to exist. It is likely that a vast array of individual aspects affect one's perception of and experience with a challenge-skill curve, but that certain, easier curves are more likely to be enjoyed by more people. This would explain why casual games, with often easier skill curves, can be enjoyed by almost all players, while difficult games, with much steeper skill curves, are enjoyed by much fewer. Bringing together strikingly similar concepts from these separate fields of study, I have shown that games and horror are enjoyed in very similar ways. This discovery was key in developing the following framework.

4.2.2. What makes Bloodborne enjoyable

Bringing all these theories, concepts, and thoughts together highlights the significant similarities between difficult games and horror. I have demonstrated and discussed in the previous subchapters of this section that many of the *paradox theories* can be compellingly applied to difficult games, and that game enjoyment theories share many crucial concepts with *paradox theories*. While all these theories can only explain parts of the complex player experience of *Bloodborne*, by bringing them together I was able to understand why I enjoyed *Bloodborne*, and form a framework for enjoying difficult games. This framework (see figure two) consists of three layers of the experience, which all affect each other, and the inherent paradoxical nature of humans, through which the enjoyment of difficult games is filtered.
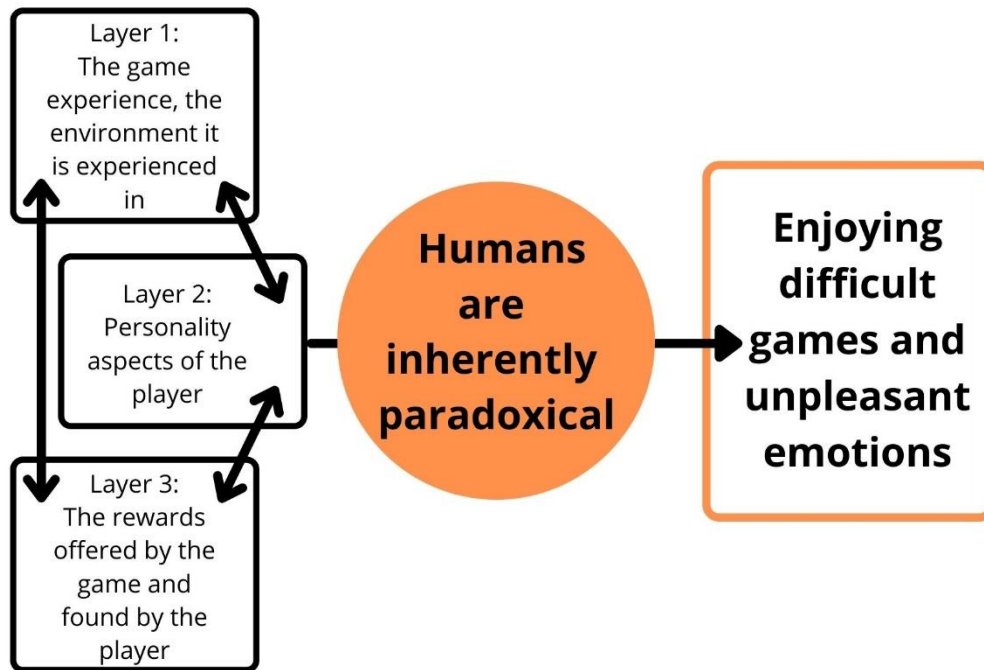
Fig. 2: A framework for the enjoyment of Bloodborne and other difficult games

The three layers affect each other and the enjoyment that can be achieved, making the experience highly subjective. These layers are:

1. the experience/game itself and the environment it creates and is enjoyed in,
2. personality aspects, and
3. rewards.

The first layer creates allowances that make it possible to enjoy an experience. There are many parts of this, including the game itself, how it is designed and what environment it is played in. For example, is the game designed to easily give feelings of control and mastery, does the game offer multiple types of fun, and is the environment it is played in distracting, making it harder to focus and feel in control? In my experience with *Bloodborne*, I ensured that the environment was as pleasant as possible as an effort to offset the harsh design of the game. I eliminated distractions so I could focus and made myself comfortable, often preparing a cup of coffee as a kind of solace for the inevitable loading screens after my frequent deaths. This was especially important in the beginning, as I had not yet accustomed to the level of difficulty and thus needed both increased focus to learn the game and some form of comfort to keep from becoming frustrated too fast. While *Bloodborne* is certainly a game where overcoming challenges is a significant aspect of the enjoyment, it is not the only one, as the world and story of *Bloodborne* are well crafted, deep, and profoundly interesting. For me, well before I found enjoyment in facing difficult challenges,

exploring the world and story was a key aspect that kept me playing. I had to know what would be behind every corner, what abominations waited me in the next area, and how I could carve out a space for myself within all the horror. If *Bloodborne* had been all challenge and no intrigue, I would have likely not even began playing, much less persisted.

The second layer effects how the player is affected by and interacts with the experience, environment, and the rewards. This is reliant on individual personality characteristics, past experiences, and attitude. For example, someone who loves challenges, with extensive positive experiences with difficult games, would find a challenging game with less-than ideal playing environment more easily enjoyable. When playing *Bloodborne,* my personality and attitude compensated for my lack of experience with difficult games and the uncertainty this created. I am extremely stubborn, and especially since I was playing *Bloodborne* as a project, my threshold for giving up was very high. Often, even though I felt hopeless and frustrated, I could only clench my teeth and try until I succeeded. This characteristic is likely very important for being able to enjoy *Bloodborne* and games like it, as trying to beat a hard boss has been described as beating your head against a brick wall until it breaks. It was certainly how I felt many times. By not giving up, I also discovered that I do like challenges, despite thinking for quite a long time that I did not, which made *Bloodborne* much more pleasant to play after the realization. This turned *Bloodborne* from an unpleasant struggle for progress into an intriguing challenge, where losses were less horrid humiliations and more learning opportunities.

The third layer is rewards, which means both the rewards the game is designed to give out, and the individual rewards one can gain. For example, learning is a very common reward that many games intentionally provide, but previous experience with games can affect how proud one feels of their accomplishments in the game. While there are rewards that games intentionally provide, there are also rewards that are unique for every player. Achieving mastery is likely a compelling reward for most in *Bloodborne*, as it is hard fought and earned. For me, my personal position and past experiences made it especially so, as experiencing mastery allowed me to reclaim a lost part of my identity and feel proud of my abilities in a way that I had not in a long time. The feelings of achievement after every victory were also especially pronounced for me, as I was completely new to difficult games of this calibre, and my struggles in the beginning were always fresh on my mind. Having now played *Elden Ring*, I recognize that I take my successes much more for granted. I expect a degree of skill from myself from the very start, and the feeling of being woefully out of my depth is not as fresh anymore.

The last aspect of my framework directly follows from the *paradox theories*, as the amount of different theories on the topic and the discussed criticisms (see chapter 3.4.) shows that despite many partially useful explanations, the overall paradoxical nature of how people find enjoyment in unpleasant emotions and experiences is still unexplained. I believe that the fault lies in the theories trying to either search for far too complex explanations or in ignoring the issue of human paradoxicality altogether. I suggest that emotions and experiences that are generally thought of as negative and unpleasant can be pleasurable, desirable, and thus positive at the same time, because it is simply an aspect of being human. Being contradictory, experiencing opposite emotions at the same time and doing things that through sound logic should not be done is an inherent part of human nature. This is proven by history, fiction, and the popularity of difficult games. Playing *Bloodborne* brought this to sharp focus for me, as I could not find any explanation as to why so often, when burning up with frustration and hating the emotion, I was still thoroughly enjoying myself. Lost in the moment and emotions when playing, I was certainly not motivated by curiosity, waiting for to experience self-efficacy or feeling especially positive – but I was still enjoying myself. While the other *paradox theories* did not offer satisfying answers, I realized that by taking the theory of unpleasantness not being *inherently* undesirable, as indicated by Gaut (1993) further, I could see human existence in itself as paradoxical. All enjoyment of difficult games and the unpleasant emotions created is affected by this inherent paradoxicality. I acknowledge that this explanation, too, is incomplete as it does not answer *why* this paradox is possible, only states that it exists as something inherently human. Understanding the paradox as inherently human makes it possible to start looking deeper for answers, and to see the previous theories as offering possible aspects that affect the paradox.

In my framework, I understand the enjoyment of *Bloodborne* as a complex web of game features, personality aspects and rewards, always affected by the inherent paradoxical nature of humans. This makes the enjoyment of difficult games into a complex, highly subjective matter. The way the three layers interact with each other and effect enjoyment are different for every player and change with circumstances. For example, while my curious personality made the *easy fun* aspects of *Bloodborne* especially compelling, allowing me to ease my way into the challenges, this aspect is not as necessary anymore for me to enjoy a challenging game. It is also likely that while all humans have the capability to enjoy paradoxical emotions, the amount of enjoyment found in experiencing them would differ based on individual and situational factors. I recognize that this framework is very surface level so far, and should be expanded upon for greater usefulness and practical applications.

Future projects could create a taxonomy of game features and rewards that affect difficulty, or study which personality aspects affect enjoyment of difficult games and why.

Lastly, I suggest that this framework can be applied to varied types of unpleasant experiences outside of difficult games, ranging from challenging exercise to haunted houses, tattooing, abusive games, extreme role-playing and beyond. The applicability of key concepts from the three layers of the framework was already discussed in subchapter 3.2.2 in relation to extreme role-playing and in relation to tattooing in subchapter 3.4.4. Drawing from my own experiences of being tattooed, feeling in control and safe during the experience, environmental aspects such as the physical space and my own body, my personality, and the rewards are all parts of what makes tattooing appealing despite the undeniably unpleasant aspects. The rush and feeling of pride after besting a tough boss and having endured a long tattooing session are strikingly similar, as is the way I want to push myself to sit for a little longer in the chair, getting tattooed or figuring out a hard challenge in *Bloodborne*. Wanting to be in pain for hours and voluntarily enduring the tedious healing process is also certainly paradoxical, but no less desirable and even enjoyable. This application, too, would require future research into different unpleasant yet enjoyable experiences to validate its useability for varied experiences, as it is not within the scope of this thesis to do so outside of suggesting that this wider application exists. It could also be beneficial to study how the aspects, rewards, and personality characteristics that effect enjoyment of unpleasantness differ based on the experience.

4.3. On the methodology

The findings and the framework presented in the previous subchapters would not have been possible without using autoethnography as my method, as I would not have been as sensitive to my emotions and experiences, and important realizations would have been lost. Without following my experience, I would not have realized how useful *paradox theories* can be in explaining difficult games, and how much the different theories complement each other. Recognizing the similarities between my emotions and the ones discussed in theories was key in creating my proposed framework. Experiencing the frustration and unpleasantness personally and being able to use this was key in developing a more comprehensive theory. It is completely different to theorize about impactful experiences and emotions and to actually experience them. I also argue that by giving me the room and opportunity to draw the reader into the moments that were most impactful and demonstrative of the experience, I can both evoke echoes of my emotions in the reader for a more

fulfilling reading experience, and better validate the theories discussed in the relevant literature. It is one thing to claim that feelings of being in control are important for the enjoyment of unpleasant experiences and another entirely to share the anxiety and dread that is present when that control is lost. This is why, when sharing my experiences, I chose to blur the line between the game and myself, writing about the experience as it felt and as I remember it emotionally instead of grounding it in the physical realities of the controller, tv and my physical self. It was my intent that the literature together with evocative writing create a more compelling theory for enjoyment of unpleasantness.

An intriguing connection between autoethnography and *Bloodborne* is the tension within the concept of truth. Autoethnography has a unique relationship with truth, needing to find a balance between a pursuit for objective truth and the fact that all knowledge is subjective. This same relationship is present in *Bloodborne*, since in games the play experience has no one truth but many, and in *Bloodborne*, as with many games with many endings and quests, there is no objective truth of the story. Thus, just as my account as an autoethnography, my experience with *Bloodborne* is a subjective truth. Another key consideration I kept in mind throughout this project was the position of *Bloodborne* as an extremely meritocratic game, as discussed in subchapter 3.2.1. As meritocracy has a way of conscripting the successful into defending it (Paul, 2018), I consciously kept alert about my thoughts regarding the difficulty of *Bloodborne*. Many who enjoy *Bloodborne* and games like it end up defending the difficulty in a way that if I allowed to happen to myself, would have rendered me unable to critically examine my experience.

The prior knowledge I had of *Bloodborne* shaped my play experience in significant ways. The knowledge not only drove me to play the game in the beginning through curiosity, but also kept me playing through the feelings of safety, control, and confidence it afforded. Despite remembering things wrong many times, knowing how the world worked, how the narrative would unfold and having seen many of the environments beforehand made me feel less uncertain and afraid of the unknown. This made it easier to keep playing when otherwise, fear and frustration would have caused me to stop. While feelings of safety, control and confidence were also directly created by the aspects of the game and my playing environment, my previous knowledge did effect how often and when I felt them. The use of autoethnography helped me to stay aware of these instances and thus recognize the value they had for both my play and analysis.

My position as a player who before this thesis, did not particularly enjoy difficult games, affected the project in unforeseeable ways. By being new to the experience of such hard, intimidating

difficulty, I was able to stay aware of the experience and interrogate my responses in a way that would have been harder had I been desensitised to hard difficulty. By fighting through the initial repulsion and despair, the positive feelings and experiences evoked by *Bloodborne* were clearer and more impactful. I was constantly aware of the small changes within myself that slowly morphed the experience of playing *Bloodborne* from dread and negativity to something I looked forward to each day. Because I was actively watching myself change, every aspect of the game and myself that contributed to this was clear, and their significance was reflected in the literature. Being new to the experience was a key component in being able to find the answers I did. What I did not expect was the personal significance of playing *Bloodborne*. Not only surviving but thriving in *Bloodborne*, combined with reading about the still enduring toxicity in game culture discussed in subchapter 3.2.1 was hugely impactful. It made me realize how I had allowed myself to be mentally pushed out of game culture, and how I had internalized the message that because of who I am, I was not a 'real' gamer. The reflectiveness afforded by autoethnography and the experience I had with *Bloodborne* made me see the ways I had reacted to feeling othered and excluded from gaming, and ultimately allowed me to break free and rediscover parts of myself that I had lost.

As stated in the method section, the weakness of autoethnography is the same as its strength. While the ability to focus on my experience was what lead me to the discoveries presented before, these results are not generalizable, even when supported by other literature and theories. Games are very individual experiences, with factors such as capabilities, attitude, personality, play style and difficulty management strategies changing the experience. It then very likely that there are relevant, useful discoveries that were not a part of my experience and were thus left out of the array of reasons for enjoyment of *Bloodborne* that I have presented. No one method alone can create a complete picture of a phenomena, and thus one project such as this is only doing part of the work. As difficult games have not so far received as much attention as their popularity would warrant, I argue that using different methods to study a variety of difficult games would be a valuable line of inquiry. Ways to expand and validate this project could be doing surveys and interviews with players about their experiences with difficult games, or conducting a study on what the first-time experience of playing a difficult game is like for other players. I also argue that autoethnography presents novel advantages to the study of games, as the benefits of the method for this project were significant. Thus, I suggest that further autoethnographies by a diverse range of scholars would benefit many different lines of inquiry among games research.

5. Conclusion

Demonstrating a gap in current game enjoyment theories about difficult games and presenting the need for interdisciplinary knowledge, the aim of this thesis has been to begin bridging this gap between theory and player experience. I endeavoured to do this by answering the question of what makes difficult games enjoyable, by using an autoethnography of Bloodborne. I have shared my experience with Bloodborne as a way to ground the discussion about relevant literature, and to present concrete examples of the concepts discussed. As the answer to the question of enjoying Bloodborne, I have presented an interdisciplinary framework that conceptualizes enjoyment of (difficult) games as resulting from a subjective combination of various game facets, player personality aspects, rewards offered by the game and the inherent paradoxicality of humans. I suggest that the proposed framework can be used to examine the enjoyment of difficult games and also other unpleasant experiences. This thesis has also presented an example of the usefulness of autoethnography in the study of games, as a way of acquiring novel insights and understanding impactful experiences.

The scope of this thesis and choice of methodology limits the results that could be discovered to the experiences and research findings of just one student. This also leaves the proposed framework incomplete, and presents a need for future research. The framework could be expanded upon by creating a taxonomy of aspects and personality characteristics that affect enjoyment of unpleasant experiences. As difficult games are under researched compared to their influence in game culture, I also suggest further research on difficult games using a multitude of methods, such as surveys, interviews, and studies on first time players of difficult games and their experiences. Autoethnography as a method also presents useful opportunities for game researchers, which is why I argue that more students and scholars should consider using autoethnography to interrogate games, game culture, and themselves in relation to both.

This project ended up being a hugely personal, impactful, and taxing undertaking, to an extent I had not anticipated. What made this all worthwhile are the answers I found to my starting question, the experiences I had while playing and researching, and how autoethnography allowed me to include all these into my thesis. I argue that this thesis presents novel discussion about difficult games, enjoying unpleasantness, and the use of autoethnography in the study of games. I also hope that the experiences I have shared resonate with readers who have also felt pulled into difficult, punishing,

and unpleasant worlds, found themselves unable to leave and discovered both enjoyment and new aspects of themselves within.

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