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AN INVESTIGATION ON THE PROCEDURAL RHETORIC OF CURATED DIFFICULTY

by

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B.A College of Arts and Humanities, 2020

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring 2023

ABSTRACT

The discussion of difficulty exists as a prominent topic within the realm of play. In terms of accessibility, the difficulty associated with any form of play becomes rather crucial. In video games, difficulty can both enhance the immersion and interactions between a player and the game; however, difficulty can also act as a barrier to entrance and “gatekeep” experiences from individuals with disabilities. Developers utilize difficulty as a tool to deliver different forms of narratives and rhetoric to their audience. The field of Ludic Rhetoric observes and studies how rhetoric can be implemented and facilitated within contexts of play and a case study of how developers utilize difficulty to communicate with audiences.

Understanding the procedural rhetoric involved in fine-tuning difficulty illuminates the relationship between accessibility and authorial intent. Developers fine-tune difficulty through the curation of alternative mechanics, systems, and experiences. Each of these categories represents adjustable vectors game developers utilize to create accessible experiences. Learning how these vectors adjust difficulty can reveal how other forms of rhetoric can accommodate their respective rhetoric to account for audience, while also maintaining authorial intent.

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CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO SOULSBORNE AND CURATED DIFFICULTY

Introduction

As an avid gamer since early childhood, I have become experienced with various forms and genres of games. All forms of genres from “beat ‘em ups,” platformers, actions adventure role-playing (ARPG), horror survival, I had played it and developed proficiency and expertise within. Some games would be narratively driven, while others pride themselves on mechanical complexity. Yet, one aspect I had never encountered within the gaming scene would be a game that relishes in its absurd difficulty. Sure, I had played many games that I found personally challenging, or difficult. But I had never seen any game merit itself upon its unapologetic difficulty. However, this all changed when *Dark Souls* was released.

The *Dark Souls* franchise and the game *Bloodborne*, which are collectively referred to as *Soulsborne*, ask more from the average player than the typical contemporary game entry. The *Soulsborne* series demands a level of perseverance, where to fully experience the entirety of the game’s narrative would require players to persist through failure hundreds of times. Several factors characterize the *Soulsborne* series: deliberate controls requiring precise timing and fine-motor control and above-average difficulty derived from those controls, an ability to constantly re-attempt these difficult moments, and punishing battles that make every moment of progress feel deserved. They are also characterized as having opaque narratives that must be puzzled together by players. “Brutal, but fair” quickly became the phrase used, by the community, to define the expectation for the player experience attached to any *Soulsborne* game. A cursory

glance across an array of reviews of *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls 2*, *Dark Souls 3*, and *Bloodborne* would reveal to any reader a tendency embodied best by Parkin (2011) in his review of the game. He writes:

[Dark Souls] is a game in which you must improve yourself before progress can be won. In that sense, it is as orthodox as the earliest arcade games and yet, in sticking fast to this fundamental, feels like the freshest game of the year. It's a game that asks you to look before you leap, to learn enemy attack patterns before launching your own offensives, to observe. (np)

The idea that is central to such reviews, and indeed to the general reception of *Dark Souls* in games culture is that it requires an intense amount of self-discipline to succeed within any *Soulsborne* title.

Difficult games were plentiful even before the launch of *Dark Souls*, but the release of the game marked a paradigm shift for difficulty in gaming. Historically, difficulty often was used as a component of monetization, where games existed in the form of arcade cabinets (Schmidt 2). In this context, developers would purposefully rely on artificial methods of inflating game difficulty such as using unavoidable damage and unfair objective time limits. The artificial difficulty incentivized players to continuously insert quarter after quarter to overcome and complete the game. As we shifted away from arcade gaming and gaming consoles made their way into family homes, the need to rely on artificial difficulty dissipated.

With the arrival of *Dark Souls*, gamers encountered a whole new experience regarding difficulty in gaming. The game did not rely on difficulty as a means of artificially prolonging engagement but instead associated difficulty with a sense of valor. According to the game's lead

director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, the gratification of winning such a difficult game was a key consideration at its conception. The director emphasized these points in an interview “I personally want my games to be described as satisfying rather than difficult. As a matter of fact, I am aiming at giving players a sense of accomplishment in the use of difficulty.” (Parkin 2). *Dark Souls* set out to implement a form of difficulty that motivates and engages players, rather than frustrating them. Everything in the discourse surrounding the game was oriented around its unforgiving nature and brutal difficulty. The game even uses its difficulty as an advertisement: Its subtitle reads Prepare to Die, referring to the frequent setback punishments that players receive (Juul 3). Death is a core mechanic of *Dark Souls*, and everything from the game’s narrative to set designs and scenarios communicates to the player that death is not only a possibility but an expectation. So, what sets this title apart from other difficult games? The game certainly stands out in how unabashedly it presents its difficulty. At the same time, why does this title receive critical acclaim and fame while other titles are labeled as “cheap” and “artificially difficult?”

With such harsh expectations for players, it is not much of a surprise that critics began to consider whether extreme difficulty should be critiqued rather than applauded. The discourse surrounding the game began to shift toward conversations questioning the game’s accessibility. Critics, such as Waynick asked, “How can less adept skilled players experience the game?” and “would this be a positive experience?” Certainly, getting stuck on a level and being denied progress regardless of the numerous hours invested into the medium can be a frustrating experience bound to sour the player's experience. Additionally, there are no methods of adjusting the difficulty of the game. Parsing through the options and settings menus within the game, none

of the game's menus yield any forms of difficulty adjustment. This choice by the developers was rather shocking considering difficulty modes and sliders were mainstays within the medium. Yet, *Dark Souls* chose not to implement any such features. Considering the unforgiving difficulty and the lack of any tools to adjust to this difficulty, the discourse shifted against *Dark Souls*. "The game is inaccessible," or "The game caters to elitist hardcore gamers" were derogatory remarks levied against the game. In response, the *Git Gud* argument began to take shape.

Git Gud, a slang rendering of *get good*, refers to getting better at a task or skill, is used especially among video gamers online. This phrase soon became the representative statement used to wave away any critiques of the *Soulsborne* series. At any mention of a lack of accessibility features, many would simply respond with "Git Gud." As noted, *git gud* is especially used by the online video-game community. In this space, according to *Urban Dictionary*, the phrase often insults a new player to varying degrees of offense. At one end of the spectrum, *git gud* can be playfully used by an experienced gamer after they beat a new player. This use is a form of "smack talk," à la *eat my dust*, and implies the novice needs to take the time to *get good* at the game. This more good-natured *git gud* may also be used in video-game journalism and forum commentary about some aspect of a game or gaming culture.

On the other end of the spectrum, the *git gud* mentality has been criticized as ableist. As professional video game reviewer, Holly Green wrote in *Paste* in 2017, for instance, gamers with disabilities cannot always achieve the same level of play as abled gamers. Essentially, the discourse split into two perspectives where those willing to invest time and energy into the game will be rewarded through the game's narrative and systems and those who fail to do so need to just Git Gud. While on the other hand, the game lacked any formal or official forms of

accommodation or accessibility features and the absence of these common features was a point of valid criticism against the game series.

The split in the discourse results in conflict between accessibility and artistic intent, which presents the following questions: How far should artistic intent be compromised in the pursuit of accessibility? Are there any means to navigate the split between artistic intent and accessibility? Youtuber, Ratatoskr, encapsulates these questions and the surrounding discourse in his YouTube series, *Discussions on Difficulty*¹. The discourse surrounding the balance between difficulty and accessibility, within the *Soulsborne* series, presents a case study for rhetorical approaches on navigating authorial intent and accessibility. In the case of the *Soulsborne* series, authorial intent manifests itself through the systems and mechanics programmed through the game's code. Utilizing a form of procedural rhetorical analysis, I explore how the series orients itself between the implementation of its mechanics and the presentation of its difficulty. Essentially, procedural rhetoric centers on examining how software code and programming communicates and carries messaging. Using this idea, I aim to dissect the game's mechanic and discourse surrounding the series in order to discover the following: the efficacy of *Elden Ring*'s non-traditional accessibility features and the associated effects of curated difficulty.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKyKGuGU4bw&list=PLpA4k6CHpTS27jIR5X5rH5KHY05w4-mD->

Literature Review

The current scholarship in the field of ludic rhetoric has a split-focus approach to discourse. One prominent perspective within the discourse orients its inquiries and studies around the pedagogical application of games to hold engagement and interaction within education. While this aspect of ludic rhetoric exists prominently throughout the academic discourse, it does not relate directly to my interest and the inquiry I plan to conduct. Instead, the portion of the discourse which focuses on play and how play can act as a form of rhetoric in itself holds my interest. When considering what sources to use to situate my current study, I considered scholarship to fall within three main categories: interactions between gamers and the modality of games, interactions between accessibility and games, and interactions within the *Soulsborne* series.

To find some form of orientation in how to approach a study on one of the most divisive discourses in gaming history, I found myself beginning my search by establishing a theoretical foundation.

Ian Bogost examines the way video games mount arguments and influence players. Bogost analyzes rhetoric's unique function in software in general and video games in particular. The field of media studies already analyzes visual rhetoric, the art of using imagery and visual representation persuasively. Bogost argues that video games, thanks to their basic representational mode of procedurality (rule-based representations and interactions), open a new domain for persuasion; they realize a new form of rhetoric. Bogost describes how "videogames have a unique persuasive power" in that "videogames can also disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change"

(ix). Bogost calls this new form “procedural rhetoric,” a type of rhetoric tied to the core affordances of computers: running processes and executing rule-based symbolic manipulation. For example, take a simple game of *Marco Polo*. According to the rules of this game, a selected player will be blindfolded and then spun a length of time proportional to the selected player’s age. A procedural rhetorical analysis would conclude that this rule, or mechanic, supports concepts of equity. The older players will be more proficient at searching out and discovering other players, thus the rules attempt to account for this to establish a form of equity. Essentially, procedural rhetoric centers on dissecting how a game’s rules are oriented and executed and what forms of implications they may have. In the case of my selected artifact, I will be observing the rules and mechanic of *Elden Ring* and how they relate towards ideas of accessibility. He argues further that video games have a unique persuasive power that goes beyond other forms of computational persuasion. Not only can video games support existing social and cultural positions, but they can also disrupt and change those positions, leading to potentially significant long-term social change.

Bogost’s procedural rhetoric forms the basis for my examination of accessibility within gaming. My observations considered how the systems, rules, and mechanics of *Elden Ring* function to situate and accommodate players within the game world. Rules that create the foundational interaction in the title can create both accessible and inaccessible experiences. Specific mechanics, such as low health values and limited resources, may restrict and prohibit players from progression. Yet, mechanics like summoning provide forms of assistance to offset and assist players in progression. My main focus within my study will be to examine how all of

Elden Ring's mechanics and rules interact together and whether they create an accessible experience.

Whereas Bogost informs how I approached my study from a procedural rhetorical analysis, a portion of my discourse analysis required parsing into theory of games and play. Many discourses surrounding the game's implementation of difficulty often led to conversations discussing integral experiences in *Elden Ring's* identity as a game. For these conversations, John Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* provided my study context in how I approached the analysis of the existential, or metaphysical, considerations in a game's identity. This differs from Bogost's considerations of games by shifting focus from the effects of rules on messaging, to considering how rules of a game define its own identity. For example, a procedural consideration of *Elden Ring's* difficulty may reveal that the limited health pools create a restricted experience. However, if the author's goal was to create a more welcoming experience, then the procedural perspective would recommend changing the rule limiting player health. Huizinga's perspective may give credence to an argument that an alteration to the rules associated with player health may constitute a separate and different game in of itself. Huizinga's work traces the method by which various cultures create notions of play and define and categorize play into games. Huizinga's theory surrounding games and play provided me insight into how to navigate conversations regarding instances where players felt the inclusion of accessibility features may compromise the identity or experience of *Elden Ring*.

After establishing a theoretical foundation, I began parsing through critical receptions of the *Soulsborne* series' latest title, *Elden Ring*. I considered coming to understand how critical discourse approached discussing the series' brand of difficulty and how critics consider how difficulty influences the game's reception in an evaluative sense.

Game critics have come to acknowledge the ongoing debate between difficulty level and “intended experience” relating to the series, yet even game critics find themselves divided by the discourse. One journalist, Shamus Young, who writes for *Escapist* magazine attempts to organize difficulty into four major categories to better define the ongoing discourse. Young defines the four foundational aspects of difficulty in the series as deriving from “skill ceiling, strictness, punishment, and teaching style” (Young 2). The categories prove to be an efficient method to define how participants evaluate and interact with difficulty in gaming. Young’s outline of difficulty provides a manner of discussing the difficulty regarding specific measurable and observable traits rather than leaving difficulty as an arbitrary term with no functional criteria.

Furthermore, Young’s criteria for discussing difficulty were adopted in multiple articles throughout *Soulsborne* critical discourse. Matthew Byrd, a writer for *Den of Geek*, considered how *Elden Ring* strays from series tradition in providing a somewhat more approachable entry. Byrd discusses the latest title in the series utilizing the criteria established by Young, where Byrd interviews the developer of the title discussing aspects such as strictness, punishment, and teaching styles within *Elden Ring*. Byrd describes how “Miyazaki uses the word freedom to emphasize the ways that *Elden Ring* affords you more options than ever in comparison to other *Soulsborne* games,” where scenarios can be approached from multiple direction which require varying levels of intensity regarding strictness and offer more opportunities for players to learn

to use the environment surrounding them (Byrd 3). *Elden Ring* stands unique in how it acts as the first entry in the series to exist fully as an “Open World” title. In this case, Open-World refers to a genre of game which emphasizes non-linear world design. In open-world games, players are allowed to progress through the game in any order. Players are allowed to progress the game’s objectives in any sequence, rather than follow a linear and structured set of objectives. Within the open-world genre, players are afforded more agency through the genre’s emphasis on non-linear design. Byrd opens the door towards considering how this newly afforded freedom affects difficulty within the title according to Young’s criteria, which I plan to elaborate upon through the data gathered within my artifact analysis.

At this point in my search, I have seen how critics have defined methods to evaluate difficulty in the series and how genre and the associated moves may shift the experienced difficulty. Yet, Waynick’s article was the first to offer a prescription according to its critique against the game’s difficulty. The article posits that the *Soulsborne* games should consider implementing an “easy mode.” In emphasizing difficulty, the series has created a barrier to entry, which has denied many players of various skill levels and status a series filled with extensive lore and atmospheric worlds. Waynick acknowledges how many hardcore *Soulsborne* communities oppose the inclusion of an easy mode as a means of preserving the series integrity. Waynick argues that the series stands to gain much more than what will be lost through the inclusion of multiple difficulty modes. In providing an easy mode, the series will accommodate a wider audience and further its reach. The inclusion of an easy mode offers both a social and economic benefit. These benefits, in Waynick’s opinion, should be valued over any perceived intrinsic identity associated with difficulty. The article does not entirely override the value

derived through overcoming the adversity tied to the *Soulsborne* series. Instead, aims to contest the notion that satisfaction gained through beating the game's difficulty exists as a zero-sum game. Rather, satisfaction is completely subjective. Essentially, those who would engage in an easy mode would not necessarily be deprived of overcoming adversity because though the game may be too easy for some individuals, for others it offers the perfect level of challenge. A game with more options offers more opportunities for players to fine-tune their personal experience with the game. Waynick views from this perspective that the choice whether the game should include some form of an easy mode should be a simple one.

While Waynick advocates that the *Soulsborne* series should implement difficulty options. Tack argues that the decision cannot be as simple as it may appear. Tack rejects any "one-dimensional" representations of the processes included in implementing difficulty options into gaming. Tack describes that a multitude of factors must be considered when balancing and designing an easy mode for any title, let alone a title as reliant upon its difficulty as the *Soulsborne* series. It may appear as an obvious choice to implement multiple difficulties within a game when it is presented as a rhetorical choice with no potential downsides. Tack contests this common presentation of the process by explaining how the implementation of difficulty modifiers would inevitably lead to a "severely diminished experience" (1). The choice to forgo a difficulty slider does not exist as a means to gatekeep, but rather a conscious choice that acts as a foundational pillar for the thematic motifs of the series. The game's direction exists wholly behind the goal of forcing the player to overcome adversity and challenge. Without challenge, the games become a shell of themselves and lose the centerpiece of their identity. Yet, what struck me in reading Tack's response to Waynick, he claims that the lack of a difficulty slider

exists not as a method to punish players for their lack of skill. Instead, the lack of difficulty options function to empower the player. He writes “[the inclusion of an easy mode] would be the seductive option to simply bypass something giving the player a problem... I know I’d be tempted, and cheat myself out of the nucleus of what makes Fromsoft games truly magical” (Tack 3). This sentiment of having the developers expect more from the audience engaging with it fascinates me. Typically, balancing authorial intent and audience expectations exists as almost a delicate dance, a balance must be reached where the rhetor and the audience meet halfway. Yet, here within the *Soulsborne* series, we have a form of procedural rhetoric that refuses to yield in its authorial intent and demands the audience to meet it where it stands. Can this be an effective means of presenting a message? The game series has surely resonated with a vast majority who share the views established in Tack’s article.

Observing critical reception gave me a sense of how non-academic discourse oriented itself around the topic of difficulty in gaming and how it affects the reception of a game. At this point, I decided to look into the academic discourse surrounding games as a whole. What did the field of writing and rhetoric have to say about games and play and have they considered how difficulty within games and play intersects with accessibility?

The initial study that introduced me to the ongoing discourse surrounding the *Soulsborne* series in a rhetorical sense was a study conducted by Tom Nuenen’s study, “Playing the Panopticon: Procedural Surveillance in Dark Souls.” Nuenen uses procedural rhetoric, discourse analysis, and ethnographic research play to study what he describes as “post-Panoptical gameplay mechanics of both continuous surveillance and playful exhibitionism and a hybrid gameplay experience of both subjectivation and empowerment” (3) within the videogame, *Dark*

Souls. Building upon his work, I will focus on the procedural rhetoric associated with difficulty and its relationship to accessibility. His study fascinated me in both how he approached the study and the topic matter. Where Nuenen focuses on the aspects of asynchronous gameplay and surveillance in how it creates a form of panoptical experience, I turned my attention towards the procedural rhetoric of difficulty within a “*soulsborne*” game. The relevance of Nuenen’s study to mine becomes apparent when considering I aim to use a similar analytical lens of dissecting procedural rhetoric and that I will be analyzing an artifact created by the same team of developers as the one featured in Nuenen’s article. Nuenen describes how “players are offered a number of procedural methods and moral archetypes to normalize and empower them” (5). My study focused on how procedural methods can empower players in the context of difficulty. Can difficulty empower players as well? Can the procedural rhetorical choices made within a game’s design be utilized to create a natural sense of accessibility, even within the reputable and unforgiving difficult *Soulsborne* series? Whereas Nuenen prioritizes procedurality through the game’s systems of asynchronistic mechanics, my study focuses on procedurality of difficulty. In both cases, we are utilizing a framework of procedural rhetoric to dissect and analyze how the game’s mechanics create specific experiences and messaging. A framework of procedural rhetoric will analyze how the software’s rules situate the audience within a certain mindset or perspective. Nuenen’s work demonstrates that *Dark Souls* uses its rules and systems to communicate to players that they are always under surveillance. In the same vein, I observe how the rules in the later title, *Elden Ring*, prime the player to approach the game’s difficulty. Overall, this citation gave me an idea of how to structure a study oriented toward the analysis of a videogame and provides meaningful observations and insights toward my own future inquiry.

I still found myself struck by Tack's sentiment on how difficulty can function to empower players. I searched for any academic discourse centering upon this concept. Building on the idea of empowering players' experience while interacting with the medium, Moore conducts a study on concept learning in gaming along with the limitations associated with different game formats. In their article, Moore discusses different orders of conceptualization of difficulty. One of these concepts includes the idea of "Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (DDA)," where the game has been designed to react to "the level of conceptualization achieved by the player to create an experience that is continually engaging" (2). DDA functions as an integral component within arcade games dictating the flow and challenge during play and has been seen and implemented within numerous console titles as well. DDA aims to ensure players engage and immerse within the game by entering a "Flow state." Flow is a "peak experience" or an experience that is associated with being completely and comprehensively involved and in an activity (Csíkszentmihályi 3). Flow entails a dramatic lowering of inhibition and self-consciousness. In other words, it is a desirable state that is central to the entertainment value of arcade-style games. Flow is commonly recognized as the element that is pleasant and even addicting from such an experience. In regard to the *Soulsborne* series, the game utilizes similar design principles to drive player engagement. Observing how the *Soulsborne* games, specifically *Elden Ring*, implements DDA and how players interact and engage with these systems will provide a contextual basis for further discourse analysis regarding conversation surrounding the title's difficulty and level of accessibility.

Moore's study provides clarity towards designing difficulty to drive player engagement, but understanding the design behind how difficulty can be tuned and presented within games

does not properly present the entire essence behind player engagement. Player engagement exists through influencing factors present both internally and externally. What factors contribute towards player engagement on an external level? To answer this question, I look towards the work done by Heljakka and Kingsley.

Heljakka's work also contributes to this understanding of stratifications in how the level of expertise affects and influences players' tolerance for difficulty. Her study "aims to present, analyze, and discuss the attitudes of the three groups of adults—theorists, hobbyists and 'everyday players'—toward play(ful) behavior and activities in relation to character toys" (2). Specifically, Heljakka desires to understand the nuanced difference between a hobbying and playing. Her inquiry can be simply stated as: why do some consider figurines and action figures as either a collectible, or a toy? This inquiry represents how play can reflect identity. In relation to my study, I hope to use Heljakka's observations about play and how it represents identity to commentate upon how perceived difficulty in play represents commitment and level of accessibility. In the case of the *Soulsborne* series, do aspects of elitism and attachment towards the unyielding difficulty render some form of accomplished status or identity? Are games with a perceived stratification of commitment accessible? Perhaps a similar form of phenomenon Heljakka observes in studying forms of self-identification in play may be associated with people's attachment to difficulty in gaming. However, from Kingsley's perspective, observing player engagement as tied to the level of involvement cannot be considered on its own and begs socioeconomic considerations. For example, Kingsley refers to a game of soccer where one team is equipped with high quality equipment while the other team must play without any guards or proper footwear. In this case, could we consider the game to be fair? Though the rules have not

been altered, the material conditions associated with the play have. In response, Kingsley's explores the meaning and experiences of sport for young people living with lower incomes. Kingsley aims to "contribute [to] empirical understanding by outlining the ways in which material conditions and family circumstances shaped young peoples' experiences differently" (3). In doing so, Kingsley's study challenges the idea that sport is a level playing field and challenges the notion that sport is a worthwhile pursuit for all young people. Kingsley's observations surrounding "level-playing fields" within play disrupted and altered by conditions outside of the game itself will prove indispensable to my study on difficulty within play.

At this point, I shifted my focus towards scholarship examining the intersections between accessibility and gaming. In a traditional sense, Anderson and Schrier conduct a discourse analysis on over sixty articles from various game journalists in relation to gaming and disability. The inquiry reveals themes that describe how game journalism reflects and constitutes an understanding of disability and accessibility in gaming. Anderson and Schrier's study paint a detailed image of the ongoing perceptions of disability and accessibility within gaming culture. This article informs and provides a contextual backdrop to my study. Anderson and Schrier identify "Two current paradigms—one legal and the other design-focused—in supporting accessibility in games" (2). My study will be directed at how *Elden Ring* embodies the design-based paradigm, specifically the ability to adapt to players' varying abilities" (Anderson and Schrier 2). A major component that has often influenced discourse relating to the *Soulsborne* series has been its critical reception. Gaming Journalism outlets have often been associated with the push for accessibility and accommodation within the series. Often, these outlets criticize the

game's unapproachable difficulty. Using Anderson and Schrier's study, I can contextualize any findings in relation to the ongoing discourse and perception surrounding accessibility in gaming.

While Anderson and Schrier approach accessibility in gaming from a traditional perspective, other authors are interested in different influences and effects of play in relation to accessibility and attempt to record and study each influence in their own unique manner. Heljakka and Anderson and Schrier focus on a narrow and niche inquiry centered around classification and prevailing attitudes surrounding play. Cairns et al presents a macroscopic review of accessibility in the design of gaming. The review acts as an initial vocabulary based on a content analysis of existing guidelines to support the design of accessible games. Based on the review, Cairns et al. propose developing a vocabulary and language of game accessibility that is no longer about whether someone can perceive or operate an interactive technology, but instead whether they can have the experience they desire. They propose the structure for such a vocabulary and show it needs to distinguish between access to controls, access to the challenges of the game, and access to the entirety of the player's experience. Where the previous studies pose questions surrounding the perception of accessibility in gaming, Cairns et al. "argue[s] that these categories of options provide a way to talk about the different aspects of accessibility that could act as different lenses to be incorporated into the game design process" (3). They question the integrity and philosophy behind the game design as a whole. Having a dedicated vocabulary and language about game accessibility will be crucial in any hope of holding a nuanced conversation on the relationship between accessibility and difficulty.

Keogh's study focuses on the embodied engagement between the playing body and the videogame. The study questions how design of games and respective accessories consider the

human body. Essentially, Keogh investigates how players utilize their senses to experience and interact with video games. Keogh details the implementation of various sensory details and features within gaming. This study can provide a sort of background to the inclusion of accessibility in gaming as Keogh describes features implemented in games to accommodate individuals with disabilities within gaming spaces. His analysis and observations regarding the external and internal design features of games relating to inclusion and immersion are invaluable for my study of how difficulty accommodates accessibility. Understanding how the *Soulsborne* game interacts with players through its multiple interfaces will be critical in understanding how the game immerses players into its world and systems, including its difficulty. Does the game's difficulty interface with player immersion? Does it function as a critical component of this player-game interface?

The academic discourse surrounding accessibility and play centers around how we ought to study accessibility in gaming. Whether through the creation of accessibility-oriented design language, identifying paradigms in approach towards accessibility, or even considerations of how extrinsic factors affect a player's engagement with play and its relation to accessibility. Yet, the conversation falters to consider developers' aim to implement immersive means of accessibility. Can aspects of procedural design be utilized in implementing substitutes for traditional approaches in accessibility? Using *Elden Ring* and the discourse surrounding the game's difficulty as a case study, I will investigate how curated difficulty and in-game systems interact with accessibility. Bogost's *Persuasive Games* provides a theoretically informed approach to the problem.

In closing, numerous studies into applications of play in relation to accessibility have been conducted. Taking note of Young's criteria, I decided to orient any notes, or critiques, on difficulty within my artifact analysis according to the defined criteria. Studies by Anderson and Schrier, Cairns et al., and Kingsley mold academic discourse in how gaming and its related discourses interact with accessibility. Moore establishes how difficulty drives player engagement, while Heljakka inversely studies how the player's level of involvement influences how they perceive and engage with difficulty within play. My study specifies how immersive game design interface with accessibility using Bogost and Huizinga to define a theoretical basis for my analysis of the topic.

Research Questions

For this inquiry, I have a few main guiding questions I wish to answer:

1. How does difficulty manifest within the title, *Elden Ring*?
2. How do these different forms of difficulty interact with both the player and how they engage in the game's systems?
3. How do alterations to a game's rules or perceived difficulty alter a player's experience of the game?

The first question may seem simple at first glance, but it can be a rather difficult question to tackle. The difficulty exists as a subjective experience, yet I still believe there are consistent strategies and tactics developers implement to create a sense of challenge. I want to know what pain points, or hurdles, developers place in the path of the player and dissect the nature of how these design and procedural tendencies create challenges. Using a framework of procedural

rhetoric to analyze how the rules and mechanics creates challenges yields interesting data on whether some design tactics in gaming could be perceived to be restrictive and reveal further information on the relationship between difficulty and player experience. The second question will home in on the importance of difficulty to the user experience. By understanding how players interact with difficulty, regarding the interaction between difficulty and writing in games, I can better understand how important difficulty can be to the experience and messaging associated with the game. The final question will reveal if there is a meaningful difference between how players engage in gaming regarding difficulty. Understanding if individuals approach difficulty as an categorical factor will reveal a lot about how designers should approach difficult design within their games. Understanding whether players place importance on the game's difficulty, or if they regard difficulty as inseparable towards a game's identity will provide insight in how we should orient games from a procedural sense. These questions will allow me to orient and design a study that will produce pertinent data to my topic of interest. I am very curious about how people actually experience difficulty in gaming and how that alters their experience with the form of media. Through answering these questions, I hope to gain a better grasp on the breaking point where difficulty goes from engaging and promoting immersion and engagement, to overwhelming and frustrating.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Generalized Research Methods

For my inquiry, I decided that the best approach to collecting data would be a dual-pronged approach utilizing a mixed-method approach. First, I would implement an artifact analysis of a single game. Artifact analysis felt appropriate to gain first-hand experience regarding the mechanics and rules present within the game. From experiencing the game, an artifact analysis allowed me to gain insight on the specific manner in how the different rules and mechanics interacted with one another. The title selected provided an effective case study to dissect procedural rhetoric associated with difficulty. I utilized a form of artifact analysis similar to that employed by Sci in her inquiry surrounding the *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*. I engaged with the artifact by playing through the game while recording any notable uses of visual rhetoric and effective dialogue, which revealed any hints or clues towards game progression. Noting any instance where visual rhetoric intertwined felt important as the two work together to aid player through certain encounters. For example, the games cooperate multiplayer system is designated by a bright white insignia that appears on the floor. How this insignia appears to players would constitute forms of visual rhetoric, while its programmed function would be procedural in nature. I also noted any instances of difficult encounters within the game. Upon completing the game, I revised all notes, and I then paired my notes and experiences of playing with collected comments from various online discourses. To supplement the artifact analysis, I also plan to do a form of discourse analysis. During my discourse analysis, I would have to collect data from the following sources:

1. Collection of posted YouTube videos discussing the topic of difficulty within *Elden Ring*
2. Compilation of submitted comments from discussion forums, such as Twitter and Reddit, surrounding the artifact.

For the Tweets, I utilized the hashtag feature to collect relevant tweets using relevant hashtags. I used a combination of the following hashtags in tandem to view what results are yielded: #EldenRing, #Difficult, #GitGud, #Accessibility, #EasyMode. For the submission post on Reddit, I collected submissions posted within the range of February 2022 to August 2022. I have selected this time window because a majority of games hit their peak popularity and engagement within a 6-month window. Additionally, I collected posts from the following subreddits: r/FromSoftware, r/truегaming, r/accessiblegaming, r/EldenRing. These subreddits and hashtags have been selected because of their relation to the topic of research. I have added more generalized hashtags and subreddits to avoid making my search parameters too specific resulting in the loss of relevant data. I hope the more generalized search entries will also be able to catch any results my more specific search parameters would have otherwise missed. I will be recording all results of the searches and conducting a discourse analysis on what the search has yielded to understand how the community of players interacts with the topics of difficulty and accessibility.

On Artifact Analysis Methods

Let me now be more specific on the considerations in approaching the artifact analysis conducted on the game, *Elden Ring*.

I conducted a playthrough of the title through the months of August and September in 2022. The playthrough of the artifact occurred six months after the initial release of the title.

Several my questions dealt with how developers instanced encounters within the game to create difficulty, the intersection of RPG mechanics in the perceived difficulties of these curated difficulties, and what these encounters demanded from players in order to succeed.

Before beginning the playthrough, I created some expectations of a sort of “normative” experience. In this instance, normative equates to avoidance of any modular controllers, or other modded accessories, designed to give players an advantage or edge in gameplay. Instead, I relied solely on a standard Dualsense controller provided with the game console. I also considered whether to utilize multiple playthroughs of the game. I also conducted the playthrough on a standard PlayStation 5 using the performance mode, which sacrifices visual fidelity for a stable framerate (60FPS). I aimed for as much of a standardized experience as possible, where I would only use the most consistent platform and peripherals available. I wished to emulate the most standard environment and experience.

After situating the platform and peripherals which would be used to conduct the playthrough, I was met with another difficult set of decisions: How many times should I playthrough the selected artifact? Should I use data from a blind playthrough or an experienced one? Depending on which playthrough was selected for study, the data collected would represent different experienced difficulties. I was not sure whether I wanted to focus on difficulty from a blind perspective, where I play the game with no prior knowledge of the game’s challenges. Or, I would play through the game with the foresight and experience of what challenges are in the game. I was concerned that using a experienced playthrough may have the potential of confounding variables. How was I to differentiate difficulty that arises from curated encounters and mechanics or difficulty that arises from lack of knowledge? I concluded that both factors are

important aspects of the design of curated difficulties. At times, game developers take advantage of the fact that players will lack the knowledge of enemy and item placements as a tool in fine-tuning difficulty. Thus, I decided to complete two playthroughs. The first playthrough would establish data on the blind experience. The second playthrough would utilize optimized strategies and techniques to generate sets of notes for comparative analysis. In order to complete these playthroughs, I played the game three times a week. Each session lasted around 2.5-3 hours. The first blind playthrough took me approximately sixty hours to reach completion, while the second playthrough lasted only around thirty-five. The comparison between playthroughs one and two allows me to comment on how difficulty changes dependent on strategy and foreknowledge.

Finally, *Elden Ring* offers players agency in how they interact with the game. Players are offered numerous choices in how they approach the game's challenge. From choice of weaponry to choice of character archetype, every player's journey through the *Lands Between*, the world in *Elden Ring*, results in a different player experience. As a consequence of the sheer variability of player experience, I was lost in how to emulate a normative experience for data collection. I considered what weapons I should use, or what character archetype should I play as. The default starting builds fall under three main categories: physical, magical, and hybrid. Upon launching the game, the player encounters a selection of character classes for the player to choose from. According to the PlayStation network trophy list, the most popular starting classes are the "Samurai," "Astrologer," and "Confessor." Amongst these starting classes, Samurai exists as the only pure physical class. I decided to follow suit with what the discourse considers the "true" way to play a *Soulsborne* game by committing to a full physical/melee build for the first playthrough.

On Discourse Analysis

The second half of the study implements a discourse analysis where I utilized a web scraper to pull comments related to the topic of my inquiry. The basic approach of pulling related Reddit comments and Twitter threads followed the process listed below:

1. Set up API access: For each platform, I needed to set up API access and obtain the necessary authentication keys to access the data. The specific instructions for each platform can be found in their respective documentation. To get the authentication information I needed to create a Reddit app by navigating to [this page](#) and clicking “create app” or create another app.”

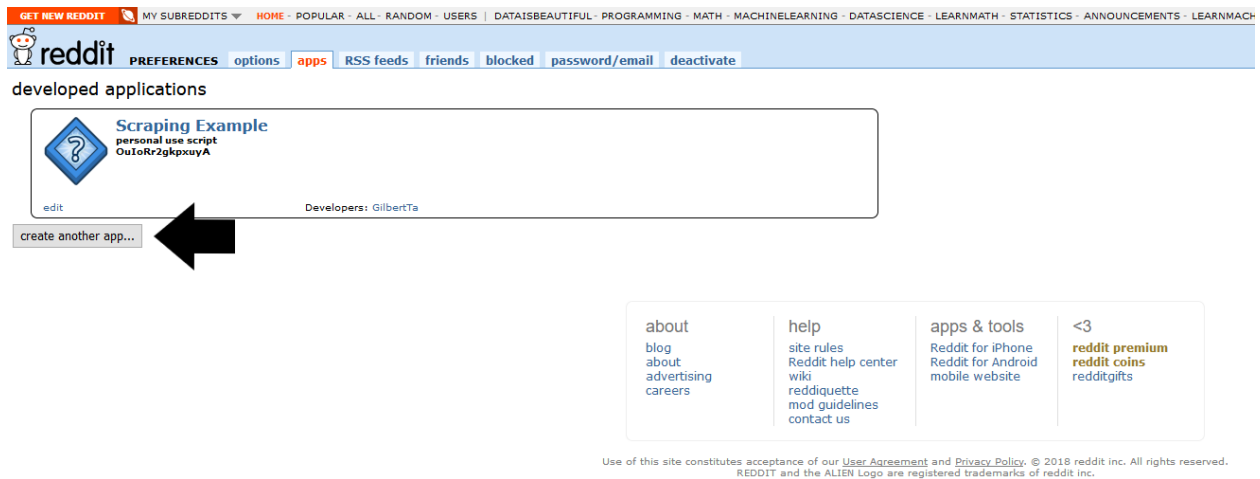


Figure 1: Reddit Application Prompt

2. This will open a form where you need to fill in a name, description, and redirect URI.

create application

Please [read the API usage guidelines](#) before creating your application. After creating, you will be required to [register](#) for production API use.

name

☐ web app A web based application

☐ installed app An app intended for installation, such as on a mobile phone

☒ script Script for personal use. Will only have access to the developers accounts

description

about url

redirect uri

Figure 2:Create new Reddit Application Prompt

3. Create a Praw.Reddit instance: After Filling in the required information, I clicked on “create app.” This prompted a new application with the new Praw.Reddit instance.
4. Define search parameters: Once API access has been established, I could define the search parameters for the topic you want to collect data on. This involved defining search terms, hashtags, or subreddits that are relevant to the topic.
5. Store the data: Once the data has been extracted, I stored the output data based on my search parameters within One Drive.

After establishing a means of collecting Reddit comments based on search parameters, I considered which search terms to use to produce the most productive information for the study. I decided to use search terms related to the integral aspects of the study. I determined the integral terms to be a combination of game mechanics related to difficulty adjustment and macro terms regarding difficulty and accessibility. Data scraping for Twitter followed a near identical process.

However, the application and respective API access can be found at this [site](#) instead. The Table below hosts all my search parameter inputs.

Table 1: Input Search Parameters

Accessibility In Elden Ring	Accommodation in Elden Ring	Need for Difficulty Adjustment
Adjustable Difficulty	True Souls Experience	The Difficulty Argument
Elden Ring too hard	Git Gud	Accessible Game Design
Elden Ring Easy Mode	Easy Mode Debate	Elden Ring Challenges
Summoning	Journalist Difficulty	Elden Ring Accommodation rating
Modded Easy mode	Elden Ring Tutorials	Cave of Knowledge

CHAPTER 3: A JORNEY THROUGH THE LANDS BETWEEN

A Journey's Start: Settings, Options, and Tutorials

Options and Settings

Before beginning my journey through the Lands Between, I took note of what settings and options were available to the player. Settings and options often situate the player toward the form of experience the game intends to offer. Elden Ring settings present a rather simplistic suite of options. Within the options menu, the settings are divided into five main sections: Game, Camera, Network, Audio, and Controller options. The settings implement modality in a rather limited fashion in which only a few options are accompanied by imagery or visuals, to convey the effect the option toggles have upon the game. The only options which included accompanying visuals were related to graphical settings. Options adjusting the brightness of the game would be paired with an image for reference. However, other features which may benefit from a paired image, such as “centered lock-on” or “offset lock-on,” lacked any accompanying images.

Game options offer players the ability to customize a few different aspects of gameplay. There are options such as adjusting the level of controller vibration. Controller vibration exists as an immersive feature where certain actions will cause the controller to vibrate. Actions like riding your horse, or taking damage, will result in unique vibration patterns. Two of the options relate to how the camera “lock-on” functions, which acts as a core mechanic for the game’s combat. Players can toggle Auto Lock-on for new targets when the current one dies and Auto

Target an enemy when they are nearby. Players can choose whether the “lock-on” feature functions by holding the assigned button, or by pressing the assigned button to toggle the feature on and off. Additionally, the ability to auto-target, a feature that automatically centers the camera on the nearest enemy, can also be activated through the game options. “Manual Attack aiming” gives players the ability to aim their own melee strikes independent of the camera lock-on system. Activating this option causes the player character to always attack in the direction of the enemy that the camera centers on. These three options comprise the entirety of any game influencing settings related to accessibility. Notably, the options lack any form of difficulty slider or adjustment. The game also pales in comparison to other contemporary titles in the number and quality of accessibility features offered to players.

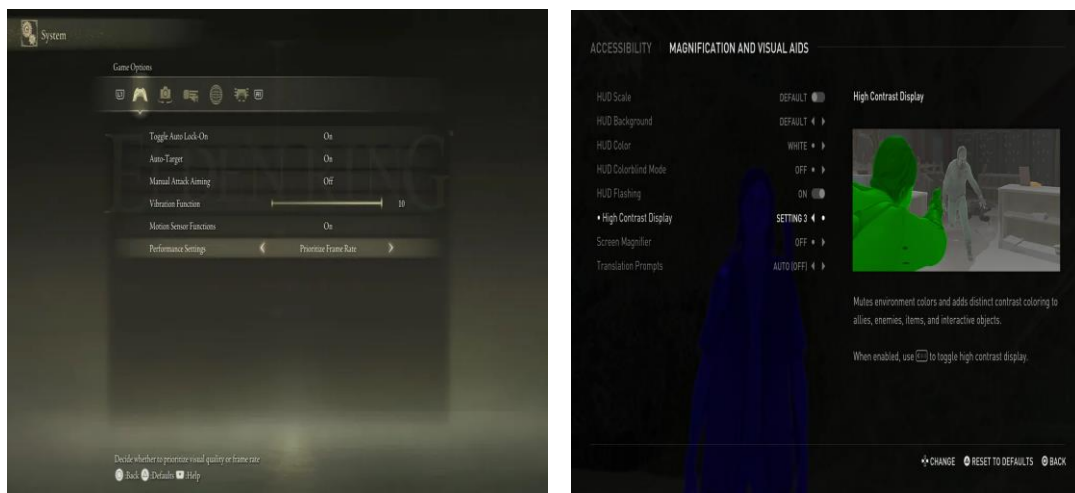


Figure 3: Comparative Screenshot of Accessibility Options

The figure above presents a comparison between *Elden Ring*’s game options and another contemporary title, *The Last of Us 2*. Not only does *Elden Ring* fall short in the forms of accessibility options it presents to players, but also in how it represents these options to players. In the figure above, *The Last of Us* image on the right presents an accompanying image for the

selected option. The option in this example is “high contrast imaging,” which shades the game in high contrast colors (green and grey) to allow players to view the game more easily. Options like “Manual attack aiming” fail to convey to players how the setting influences or changes the gameplay. Within my playthrough of the game, I could not grasp what the function of this option was without conducting a brief period of trial and error. I had to discover how the settings changed the game, while other contemporary titles utilize short video clips to demonstrate to players how the game will be affected by the respective option.

Outside of game options, there are some features geared towards curated difficulty within other settings menus. The controller options provide players with the ability to customize and set their key bindings. This creates flexibility for player preference. Some players prefer their attack button to exist on the face of the controller, while others may prefer the triggers. Players with impairments may have stronger index fingers resulting in a preference for trigger inputs, while those with better thumb control will lean towards the face button inputs. By allowing players to alter the controls to their preference, this creates a more welcoming and accessible experience for all players. Furthermore, this feature functions with most different controllers. However, it does have a limitation in that it does not accommodate for unique controller inputs from some modular controllers. For example, some modular controllers include dial inputs, but *Elden Ring* will only accept button inputs. I did not expect to find out that not only is *Elden Ring* incredibly flexible, it also has almost completely remappable controls. This feature is not just relegated to the PC version. Based on my research, it appears players can remap almost all of *Elden Ring*’s controls, no matter what hardware you are on. The remappable controls and the wide amount of flexibility work towards making this experience accessible for some gamers with fine-motor

impairments. In fact, well-known voices in the movement like Grant Stoner are praising this game, not because it breaks new ground, but because it shows how From Software is trying to create a more accessible game. That is something that should be praised. Along with the “ability to select and customize key bindings, players can view a map of controls during play. This clearly displays the mappings of actions to buttons/keys/mouse/keyboard without having to leave the game” (“Elden Ring Accessibility Report” Par. 3). Other options include a category I designate as “Assistance with Controls” where the game offers options that can automatically assist with aiming, steering, reloading, jumping, running, and other basic actions the player may conduct during play. This reduces the challenge of certain aspects of play to remove barriers and make control of characters more accessible. An example of this assistance would be aim assist. This “aim assist” adds a form of reticle friction, where the cursor will slow when hovering over enemies, to assist players in improving their accuracy with ranged weapons.

Tutorials: Cave of Knowledge

After completing a foray through the game’s presented options, I clicked “Begin Journey” and loaded into the game for the first time. Upon starting a new character, the player encounters an opening cinematic that serves to establish the context and setting of the game. Within this cutscene, all dialogue is subtitled, but given the lighter nature of some of the game’s environments, the lack of letterboxing in favor of a simple dropshadow that blends into the bottom of the screen may make it easier for some players to lose some text. Shortly after the cinematic, the player gains control of the character and begins to explore the opening area of the

game. The introductory area exists as an isolated segment of the open world, which serves to orient players to basic controls within a controlled encounter. The map design of this beginning segment contrasts the philosophy and approach the developers utilize throughout the rest of the main game's progression. Whereas *Elden Ring* aims for player agency through an open world and non-linear world design, the introductory area does the opposite by existing mainly as a linear segment. As the player progresses through the opening environments, they encounter a split in the path. Directly ahead, the player can progress forward to an elevator that will transport the player into the open world of the Lands Between. However, if the player takes a right in the forked path, they will encounter a short dropdown overlooked by an elder non-playable character (NPC). Speaking to the NPC will only prompt the player with a simple command: "jump."

Upon heeding the NPC's instructions, the player enters a chain of interlinked caves labeled "The Cave of Knowledge." As the name implies, these caves present a linear path for the player to follow and gain knowledge of the game's central mechanics. Following the cave system leads the player to a series of curated encounters meant to teach the player how to engage with some of the game's fundamental systems. The first encounter places an unaware enemy in the path of the player. The enemy placement presents the player with an opportunity to engage in combat for the first time. As the player approaches the enemy, the game pauses and the prompt below appear.



Figure 4: Pop-Up Tutorial Prompts

The tutorial prompts the game for the player and allows the player to return at their own discretion. These prompts follow a uniform presentation in which a titled mechanic appears on the top of the pop-up window, followed by a brief description of how the mechanic functions along with a related image that represents the mechanic. Additionally, when playing with a mouse,² contextual pop-up menus can speed up navigation and allow for one-handed players. Players can also press the Help button in menus to read a detailed explanation of weapons and stats. These features aid your play of the game in terms of cognitive load on learning controls, dealing with pressure, and coping with the environment and challenges. By allowing players to pause and process the instructions at their own pace, the game reduces player strain while learning mechanics and rules. Individually, these prompts effectively employ of multimodality through their combination of text and visuals. The multimodal approach provides a relatively

² <https://twitter.com/onehandmostly/status/1497051660404895767>

more accessible method to teach players central mechanics. Though it may not accommodate for all types of players, it does attempt to embrace forms of curated difficulty. However, this form of tutorial still creates a moment where immersion comes to a halt. The developers of the game attempt to offset this issue by allowing players to toggle for the removal of these basic forms of tutorials through the options menu.

Through this “Cave of Knowledge,” players engage in critical mechanics of the game such as light and heavy attacks, engaging in stealth, and overcoming enemies' poise and guarded stances. All of these mechanics taught through the cave are integral aspects of the game's combat. Once the player completes “Cave of Knowledge,” the player arrives at the elevator that would be found by taking the more direct path. Once I completed the tutorials associated with the cave and arrived at the elevator, I could see a more direct path from the entrance to the elevator that completely bypasses the tutorial area. I realized the entire section introducing key mechanics of the game existed as an optional section within the opening environment. I questioned the designer's choice to implement, essentially what serves as the game's combat tutorials, as an optional hidden side path. Typically, these hidden side paths are reserved for extra rewards to incentivize and motivate players to explore off the beaten path. Instead, FromSoftware has hidden a majority of its tutorials centered on character control. This design choice does not pose much of an issue for any series veteran, or a player literate in the genre of player action-adventure games, but newcomers to the series will struggle if they overlook this optional side path. This design decision benefits those already competent in the game's mechanics. Allowing experienced players to bypass a series of tutorials further propagates Elden Ring's reputation as a game that gate-keeps player experience. The optional tutorial creates a sort

of “Rich get richer, the poor get poorer” environment where those with the necessary competencies and skills can efficiently gain access to the main game, while those lacking in these competencies will fall further behind. Less experienced players are less likely to venture off the main path because they lack the confidence to do so. Creating a hidden optional tutorial section seems counterintuitive toward any efforts of utilizing design curation to address accessibility.

My criticisms of FromSoftware's decision to separate and almost hide the tutorial section of the game were not mine alone and were shared. Players took to Twitter to voice their difficulties in engaging with a game that hides its main tutorial. Some posts are more lighthearted in how they address their concerns, writing “I definitely missed it and came back to it XD,” while others critique the design choice through forms of irony when they share their reactions ““Cave of Knowledge? Sounds like an optional area I should come back to it later.” Others take a more critical stance as they comment on how the hidden tutorial seems contrary to the game’s internal logic. A tweet describes how “FromSoft could have put the tutorial in a little better, trying to get people to dive headfirst into a hole after people constantly say how much souls’ games fuck with you is not a great idea but if you listen to people saying jump into holes you need it anyways so hey.” Multiple factors work against implementing the tutorial section as an optional hidden side path and though FromSoftware has always mandated some form of a tutorial, the concept that FromSoftware would hide its tutorial in the pursuit of difficulty seems to fit the player’s perception of developers. *Soulsborne* content creator, Iron Pineapple, tweets “reading about how many new players missed the tutorial in Elden Ring is so funny Fromsoft

WOULD put it in a dark pit that some people just run past.” Iron Pineapple’s tweet emphasizes how this decision is both in character for the developers and affecting new players.

Eventually, FromSoft listened to its player base and addressed the critiques concerning its opening tutorial. In a title update patch, the game now prompts players with the location of the in-game tutorial. When nearing the tutorial area, the following pop-up appears:

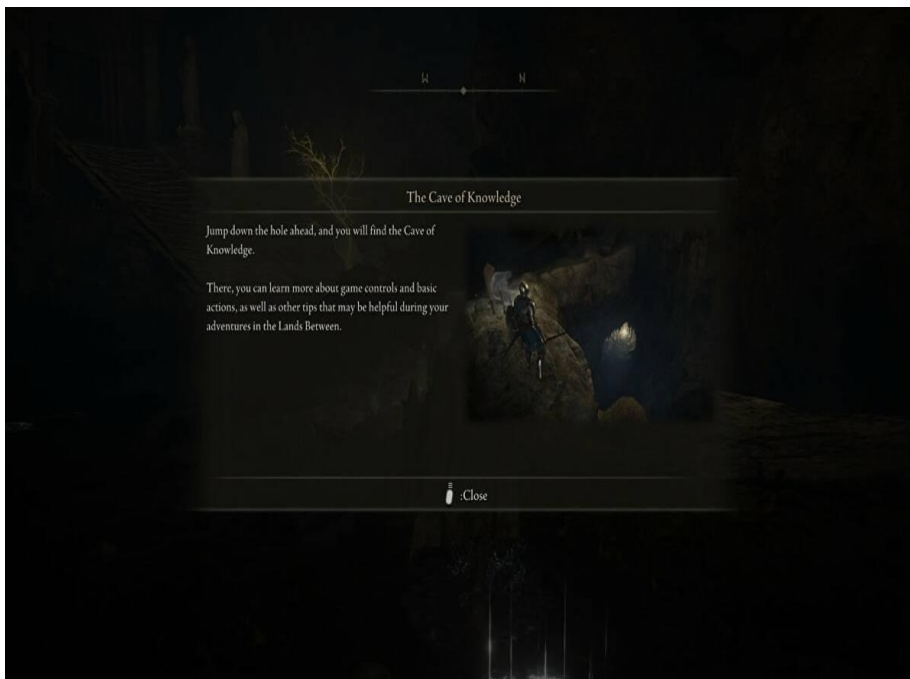


Figure 5: Cave of Knowledge Tutorial Prompt

Similar to the pop-up prompts that appear within the Cave of Knowledge itself, the prompt shows an image of the hole and a description informing players of the tutorial. Many players applauded FromSoft’s efforts to create a more accessible experience. For example, a Twitter user, kingViper, writes “As much as I love ER and souls mechanism, I thought that was lacking, I’m glad they fixed it. All the previous games forced you to do the tutorial. The tutorial skip should be the side path instead of the main path in Elden Ring.” While others felt the inclusion of the prompt compromised an aspect of the game's integrity, critics of the change point towards

the method in which the change occurred. Jade King, a journalist for TheGamer, laments how now player's first experience in the mysterious Lands Between will be an immersion-breaking prompt. He writes, "Now when you start the game, instead of watching the opening cutscene before awakening in a world defined by myriad unknowns, you'll be given an optional pop-up that immediately gamifies proceedings and makes it clear that hopping into this little hole will make the coming adventure that much easier." Many other players voice their concerns in a similar vein. This instance acts as the first of many manifestations of the constant struggle within *Elden Ring* to balance implementations of accessibility and the integrity of its intended experience. How does one approach include accommodations toward accessibility while preserving a natural and intuitive experience? In the instance, of the "Cave of Knowledge," I believe the reactive nature of the solution compromised any chance of a proper solution that balances accommodation and experience integrity leading to FromSoft's decision to just prioritize accommodation. However, FromSoft has shown foresight in other instances and created communal-based systems that address the conflict between accommodation and experience integrity. If the "Cave of Knowledge" would be considered a traditional approach towards tutorials, *Elden Ring* also implements a non-traditional approach through its "Bloodstain" and "Golden Post" systems.

Tutorials: Golden Posts and Bloodstains

Once I made my way through the Cave of Knowledge, I came across an item labeled, “Tarnished Wizened Finger.” The item allows players to leave messages that are visible to other online players. Any messages written using the Wizened Finger will appear as golden posts visible on the floor. After placing the Wizened finger into my inventory, I made my way into the Lands Between using the elevator at the end of the cave. The elevator transports my character from the dark and musty caves to a sunlit vista overlooking plains and distant forests. Yet, the view does not catch my attention. Instead, the light from several golden words littering the floor in front of my character distract me. The figure below illustrates how these messages appear in game.



Figure 6: In-game Example of Golden Post

I investigated each posting. Interacting with the golden words revealed unintelligible messages such as “Maidenless ahead,” while other messages seem to offer advice and instruction to proceed. Signs like “Church ahead. Safety near” informed me of a nearby rest site and a sense of

direction. Interacting with these golden created a sort of impromptu communal tutorial. Throughout my journey, I would often encounter these helpful golden messages before challenging encounters with words of advice on how to proceed, or even some form of mechanic to take advantage of to increase my odds of success. Whereas the traditional tutorial may have been lacking both in its accessibility and content, the community-curated messages created a patch for what the game's Cave of Knowledge lacked. The cave taught basic concepts of how to interact and engage in the game's rules and systems, while the community messages taught me of more nuanced concepts and mechanics hidden in the game. Unexplained Rules are revealed and communicated to players through the efforts of the community. However, these helpful golden messages are not the only community feature that litters the floors of the Lands Between. Alongside the golden posts, exist a more foreboding sign: A bloodstain.

Similar to the golden posts, the Bloodstains acts as a unique and alternate form of tutorial within, Elden Ring. What makes this form of the tutorial so unique compared to other respective forms of tutorials, is that bloodstains come from other players and not the developers. Bloodstains function as a communal approach to tutorials. These bloodstains allow players see how another player has died. While players can't see what the ghost of dead players are fighting, if you see bloodstains on the ground before entering an area, you can assume something difficult lies ahead. They can deter you from entering an area, such as the starting field with the Tree Sentinel. On my journey, I encountered dozens, if not hundreds, of bloodstains warning me of dangers to come and signaling to me not to go near that area until I was ready for a massive boss battle. Yet, bloodstains did not exclusively function as a warning to ward me off from certain areas. Rather, at times, it encouraged me and incentivized me to explore and face the game's

challenges for major rewards such as a new spell, weapon, or item. The mechanic lets the player decide what to make of them but usually, seeing more than a few bloodstains signals to players a difficult encounter lies ahead. Whereas tutorials are written, produced, and presented by the developers and what they believe ought to be tutorialized, Bloodstains naturally creates tutorials through the process of trial and error. When the community of players struggles on a specific portion of the game, bloodstains begin to form and pile to warn future players. By watching several the bloodstains, a player can begin to grasp what types of mechanics to expect from the encounter and what strategies led other players to failure. This bloodstain system presents a unique form of communally curated assistance that complements the developer-curated “pop-up” tutorials.

Together, the bloodstains and golden posts make up a form of communal resources to orient and accommodate new incoming players. These systems create a new systemic approach in how to teach and instruct players on the required skills and literacies necessary to engage in the game’s core systems and encounters. The combination between bloodstains and golden posts also marks an innovative approach toward player assistance while maintaining the intended player experience. These systems root themselves within the game's lore and narrative while existing in real-time within the game’s world and environments. By situating these systems within the lore and having them as interactable objects in the game world, FromSoft creates a modular and flexible means of communicating with players on different encounters, strategies, and mechanics. The system creates a responsive and adaptable tutorial that expands and grows as more players play and engage in the game in different ways, all while preserving the immersion of the game experience.

The Ordeal: The Stigma against Difficulty Modes and a Consideration of Easy Mode Alternatives

Git Gud: Exploration of the Arguments against Difficulty Modes

Though the phrase, “Git Gud,” as a representation of the opponents against difficulty modes in Elden Ring may initially seem dismissive, observing the discourse reveals some good faith rationale against a potential easy mode. Of course, bad faith proponents exist within the “Git Gud” conversation who claim accessibility and accommodation as a waste of time without any attempt to justify their position; however, my study and discussion will not center on the inputs from this vocal minority. Instead, the discussion will address the topics of concern within the discourse surrounding difficulty and accessibility within Elden Ring. Many features designed specifically to address issues of accessibility and accommodate players with different needs exist within the game. Yet, why does a portion of the community discourse come screeching to a halt at any request for the inclusion of difficulty modes?

To many gamers, the inclusion of difficulty modes seems intuitive. Several contemporary titles have included difficulty modes by default and the feature has long been a staple within the industry. Regardless, FromSoftware releases title after title with no difficulty options or plans on implementing the system to its future titles. A vocal portion of the community holds Elden Ring’s lack of difficulty options as an integral decision toward the identity of the game. Any mention or suggestion for the game series to implement any form of difficulty adjustment incites a fervent backlash in the communities’ discourse with countless players defending the game’s lack of difficulty adjustment on account of preserving the

“integrity of the game experience.” Essentially, arguments against implementing an "easy" mode can be summarized in the following points:

1. Diluted experience: Implementing an "easy" mode could dilute the experience of the game and detract from the intended vision of the developers. Some players believe that the challenge and difficulty are integral to the overall experience and removing that element would diminish the game's impact.
2. Creative limitations: Game developers may be limited in their creative vision if they have to cater to players of varying skill levels. The challenge and difficulty of a game may be essential to the narrative or themes of the story, and the inclusion of an "easy" mode may force developers to compromise their creative vision.
3. Sense of achievement: A game's difficulty can be a source of pride and accomplishment for players who overcome challenging obstacles. Implementing an "easy" mode may remove the sense of achievement and satisfaction that players get from overcoming difficult challenges.

The decision to implement an "easy" mode in video games is a complex one that involves weighing the benefits of inclusivity and autonomy against concerns over creative vision and player satisfaction.

Through the numerous Reddit comments and Twitter threads I collected, this sentiment of an easy mode threatening the so-called “player experience” was consistently and constantly echoed within the discourse. Redditor Accomplished-Eye embodies these sentiments describing

how “An easy mode would ruin the artistic vision of the game. Part of the experience of these games is the feeling, and frustration of overcoming impossible odds.” Essentially, a fear of compromising the intended player’s experience creates the foundation of a vast majority of the arguments against the inclusion of difficulty modes. The basis of the argument can be summarized by the belief that a core experience defines the appeal and draw of every *Soulsborne* title, the satisfaction that comes from overcoming challenges. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki was keen to share the five development concepts that are the backbone of the *Soulsborne* series:

“We have five key criteria on which the difficulty level is judged. We want any player to be able to clear any obstacle simply by learning from mistakes and paying close attention. Then, the reasons for failure must always be clear and understandable. Every problem must have multiple solutions so that players can tackle it in whichever way they want. The game’s controls can never be a factor from which difficulty is derived. And finally, we want to make sure that there’s the possibility for miracles to happen; those magical moments that spread stories outside of the confines of the game world” (3).

At the core of *Elden Ring* lies an experience defined by overcoming adversity. Players are expected to fail, critically assess their failure, and persevere until they overcome the presented challenge. In doing so, the game creates a feedback loop that aims to consistently provide feelings of pride and satisfaction when playing, which defines the integral experience of the game. This can further be substantiated by Miyazaki describing how “finding answers is always a satisfying thing But in life, you know, there’s not a lot that gives us those feelings readily”(4) as he explains the rationale behind *Elden Ring*’s philosophy towards difficulty. By

including an easy mode, the identity, and appeal of the game would be lost or severely compromised. Critics who stand against the inclusion of difficulty adjustment, take issue with the premise that adding an easy mode exists as wholly beneficial without any drawbacks or issues. The problems associated with the inclusion of difficulty options fall into two main categories: restrictions on developer designs and the introduction of redundant mechanics.

The first category of problems associated with difficulty modes comes from the perspective that views difficulty options as a form of restriction of developer design. The argument describes that the implementation of difficulty adjustment systems presents a costly tax on developer capital that can be better spent improving on other aspects of game design. An example presented by YouTuber Ratataskor describes a situation where an encounter is designed with a certain difficulty in mind. Developers create a scenario balancing enemy density, aggression, and environmental options to properly balance and present a specific experience. However, when creating an easier variation of the instance, the orientation and number of enemies no longer function to create the same effect. On a lower difficulty, the individual enemies may no longer pose nearly as much of a threat and now the experience no longer grips players but instead exhausts their patience. A once memorable experience has now been reduced or compromised. Furthermore, Fextralife argues “It’s best to think of the Souls games as progressive Rogue-Likes, where you make it a little further and a little further each time. You are supposed to die in these games.” Fextralife’s description explains how the implementation of difficulty adjustment can compromise how the game operates within its designated genre. In this case, Roguelikes are a genre of game where players explore dungeon environments and are expected to progress by trial and error. Each subsequent exploration of the dungeon becomes

easier as the player learns from each of their premature deaths. To illustrate this aspect of the genre, Fextralife questions “Why else would there be Mimics, Boulders, and those cleverly placed archers in Anor Londo?!?! These things have become community favorites because everyone has died there. EVERYONE!” For rogue-likes, players argue difficulty adjustment features are counter-intuitive as the game should be designed in a way to ensure player failure. An essential aspect of the experience comes from dying from these traps and learning from them. These exploratory deaths constitute the genre of the game.

The final proponent in the argument against difficulty adjustment would be that Elden Ring already presents alternative forms of difficulty modes. The implementation of difficult adjustments would result in redundancy. Proponents of this perspective point towards system mechanics such as the open-world design and summoning systems as sufficient replacements for a traditional easy mode. Once again, the discourse shifts towards a pragmatic perspective where players prefer developers to focus on spending development capital on new features and mechanics rather than developing a system, they deem to be redundant when implemented alongside the current summoning system and open-world design. Reddit user lonehunter66 summarizes the main concerns players have when implementing a new easy mode, stating “it takes time to comprehensively test adding a new easy mode to make sure it is well balanced, and there are no bugs. This is time that is taken away from improving the main experience of the game further.” Following this rationale, the inclusion of any additional difficulty options is viewed not only as repetitive and unneeded, but alters the rest of the game.

Difficulty in Elden Ring

To say *Elden Ring* can be difficult would be a severe understatement. The game's developers relish every opportunity to punish the player for any misstep. The game's challenge consists mainly of tasks that stress the player's fine motor controls. From tight dodge windows to enemy attack damage that can often end a player's life in one to two attacks, the journey players embark upon within *Elden Ring* is fraught with danger. I learned of this danger through personal experience. Shortly after collecting the Wizen Finger, I began to explore the Lands Between. Listening to the instructions given to me by a golden post, my player character made its way down the hill following a dirt road toward a collapsed church. On this road, I found myself hesitating as a bundle of at least fifteen separate bloodstains scattered across the road. Before I even had the chance to consider why there were so many bloodstains, my character was added to the ranks of those bloodstains as the Tree Sentinel, a named boss enemy, struck me with a massive club killing my character instantly.

The status of the game's difficulty cannot be questioned as the game has built its reputation solely on its difficulty. Yet, I question if the difficulty can be modular. Can the game's difficulty be shifted or adjusted in ways to test player's skill in alternate manners? Or does the game solely rely upon instances of fine motor control skills to create difficulty?

Initially, my experience with the game led me to believe that the game simply tested skills of motor control and pattern recognition. Every boss I encountered was a test of patience. I would challenge the enemy, struggle, die, and try again. Slowly over time, I learned the patterns of the enemy's attacks. I memorized when and where to dodge and honed my motor skills to allow me to execute the string of inputs necessary to fell the enemy ahead of me. I followed this

approach for the majority of the game. I was disappointed. How could this game be considered so prestigious in its level of difficulty if it merely relied on testing a player's reaction time and basic pattern recognition? I thought a game with such an infamous reputation and prestige behind its difficulty would implement challenges in a more nuanced manner. Yet, I failed to consider how *Elden Ring* differed from its predecessors. This title shifted into an open-world design with a large emphasis on player agency and freedom. I erroneously assumed that players would play as I did. Following the critical path, while exploring nearby side paths for hidden treasures. Occasionally, I would also encounter optional dungeons to complete. However, this was far from the case. I watched players approach the game fully embracing the freedom of the open world. These players shattered my perception of the game's approach to challenge as they solved the game's challenges in ways I had never considered.

In collecting threads and comments from different social media, I discovered the various approaches players utilize to overcome challenges in the game. Videos of players sneaking into late-game areas flooded my social media. These videos demonstrated various strategies to avoid enemies and bosses. These players would see the terrain to "parkour" onto ledges to gain access to coveted weapons and armor. Depending on how the player engages with the game will challenge and require different skill sets from the player. To demonstrate, let us consider what the discourse identifies as the most difficult boss within the game, Melenia. Defeating this boss was no small feat. The boss consists of two phases and can drain vitality from players, so taking damage actively undoes the player's progress. Approaching this boss directly will test the player in areas of reaction time, pattern recognition, and endurance.

Attentive players are rewarded by noticing that Melenia struggles against certain status effects players can apply to her. Frost and bleed deal massive damage while also causing her to recoil allowing for larger openings for healing or dodging. The game offers items and equipment that can bolster and accommodate players of various playstyles. Playing with ranged builds with elemental weapons and armor will shift the game from testing the player's motor skills toward a more tactical challenge testing the player's ability to determine elemental weaknesses and affinities. In these playthroughs, the challenge derives from developing exploratory skills to discover the proper items to address the specific bosses that block a player's progress. Essentially, players can curate their journey in how they experience challenges through the classes and equipment loadouts they utilize. The reality is this game still relies on your ability to dodge, twitch timing, and other fine-motor-intensive input methods. But Elden Ring compensates for this, not through the implementation of Naughty Dog-esque features, which are features that appear in *Naughty Dog* games such as those shown in figure 3, but through intentional, flexible game design. The key difference here is that Elden Ring is an open-world game that affords players near unlimited amounts of agency in the ways players approach the countless perilous encounters within the game.

Player Agency as a Means of Accessibility

Continuing my journey through the Land Between with my new perspective on how challenge exists within the game, I questioned if open-world design by itself substitutes the need

for different difficulty modes. Does *Elden Ring* provide enough agency to its players to tune the difficulty of the game through contextual factors alone?

Different builds and item load-outs may allow players to shift challenges from one skill set to another, but not necessarily lower the total perceived difficulty of an encounter. To elaborate, in the previously mentioned encounter, the boss fight with Melenia may be approached in various ways that test different skill sets; however, regardless of the player's approach, there will always be a minimum level of perceived difficulty that cannot be reduced. Subjectively, let's imagine we can accurately quantify difficulty as a number between one and ten. Melenia could be classified as an encounter with a difficulty rating of ten. Whether the difficulty comes from the requirement of highly refined reflexes and endurance, or the amount of effort and foresight required to effectively plan to approach Melenia through a ranged build, the perceived difficulty remains the same. Players can shift difficulty from one set of skills to the next, but the intensity can never be reduced. Players who recognize their strengths lie in tactical preparation and may utilize every tool the game offers in terms of elemental advantages, yet they still may fail to overcome the hurdle of defeating Melenia. Even with the shift from reliance on fine-motor skills to tactical planning, the set difficulty of the encounter may still be too high and bar players from progressing. At this point, players only have two options: keep trying or quit. The agency *Elden Ring* affords players in how they approach set encounters by itself cannot be considered to be an appropriate approach towards implementing difficulty in regard to accessibility. *Elden Ring* includes one mechanic aimed to alleviate this issue, summoning.

Summons: Pseudo Easy Mode?

Summoning within *Elden Ring* allows players to call upon companions to aid them in their journey. Summoning in *Elden Ring* functions primarily in two ways: A player uses an item, “Spirit Ashes,” to summon an artificial intelligence (AI) companion mimicking an enemy type from the Lands Between or summoning another player companion. The former method functions as an equipment item that can be upgraded and used consistently throughout the journey. While the game restricts player summoning in more ways than AI summons, player summons operates as a form of multiplayer.

The first time I utilized summons within my journey was shortly after gaining the item given by an NPC, Rennia. The first Spirit Ash players receive allows the player to summon a pack of five wolves. The summons were incredibly helpful, especially in encounters where I found myself to be heavily outnumbered. The wolves provide a form of crowd control and allow for larger windows of opportunity to get in an extra strike or heal if needed. Though *Elden Ring* does not offer difficulty options, the game offers summoning as an optional mechanic that effectively makes the game easier. Many of the enemies are programmed in a manner that allows them to only focus on a single target. By using summons, players will overwhelm the capabilities of the enemy AI, resulting in large windows of time during which enemies are solely focused on the summons instead of the player. In many ways, the system of summons mirrors the philosophy and approach of the golden post system. Summons implement a form of difficulty adjustment without compromising the immersion of the experience while also promoting a sense of community amongst players. Miyazaki, the creative director of the game, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, provided insight into the inspiration for the summon system.

There once was a time my car got stuck on a hill while driving in the snow. The only reason I was able to make it through was from the kind efforts of strangers who were gone just as fast as they came. That inspired me to create the system with summons where if you have a problem the kindness of strangers will come to help as they pass by and leave as soon as the job is done (3).

Miyazaki's summoning system presents a unique communal approach toward difficulty and accessibility. Whereas other contemporaries implement difficulty adjustment through toggling different factors of gameplay such as enemy stats or puzzle timers, Miyazaki instead invests in mechanics that interlink and incentivize players to form communities to aid one other through the challenges presented within the game. Within the discourse surrounding the game, many consider the use of summons to function as a pseudo-easy mode. Many players echo Oli_Kite's sentiment when they describe "Easy mode is just using summons." Oli_Kite's Reddit comment parallels my experience with the game in that many difficult encounters throughout the journey were made substantially easier to approach with the aid of summons. Traditionally, difficulty modes within games offer modular experiences that alter factors such as enemy numbers, health, and aggression. Summons function in a similar manner. By pulling enemy aggression, players experience when playing with summons is comparable to an easy mode. Summons reduce the effective health of enemies through their damage-dealing capabilities, and at times can output more damage than players themselves. Summons can even factor in tactical

approaches as there is a variety of summons available all with different effects and elemental affinities.

However, further investigation reveals the flaws associated with the summoning system. Some players consider summons as too effective to the point that they begin to question whether summons ruin the game. Reddit user, ggmaobu, goes as far as to say, “Spirit Summons are the worst game mechanics in Elden Ring” and describes how the mechanic reduces every encounter into a simplistic order of operation: “enter encounter, summon, keep distance, profit.” Players worry that the integrity of the experience will be compromised using summons. They criticize how the game’s enemies are rendered useless as they cannot respond to both the summon and player simultaneously. The enemy’s inability to process both the summon and player results in an inauthentic experience. By completely overwhelming the enemy AI, summons renders any player choice, or executive decision-making, mute as it becomes irrelevant, and any player will find success solely by relying on summons. The strength of the summons leaves players critiquing its implementation. Players have expressed sentiments related to the summoning system that echo the complaints listed with the change to the “Cave of Knowledge.” The system compromises the integrity of the *Soulsborne* experience by stripping the importance of player agency and exploration. Some players refute the critique of the summoning system by suggesting that players should abstain from this optional mechanic. Abstaining from using the optional mechanic of summoning guarantees that the integrity of the experience of overcoming adversity will be preserved. Yet, to do so would require what some commenters have coined as “Odyssean restraint.” The term references the *Odyssey* and indicates a form of inhuman restraint or instances where it should not be feasibly possible to expect any individual to possess such vast

amounts of self-restraint A player could choose to restrain themselves from using summons, but the temptation to resort to using a summon when they face adversity from a challenging encounter, or boss, seems to require inhuman levels of discipline. Redditors like Cloud1337 “agree [with] ‘just solo if you want more difficulty,’” but also address how many players “instead of getting better, learning the boss or at least leveling, [they will] just activate the summon.” Miyazaki’s community-based approach towards difficulty adjustment is not intrinsically problematic, but rather overturned. Scaling back the strength of AI companions and incentivizing the use of cooperative summons addresses a majority of the issues presented by players.

At this point, I considered the viability of summoning as a potential replacement for an easy mode. Considering AI summons are tuned in a fashion that deters players from over-relying on them while also incentivizing a shift towards cooperative summons, the summoning system may seem as an appropriate replacement for an easy mode. Yet, there remain problems with relying solely on the summoning system. Traditionally, easy modes within games allow for players to adjust different traits to meet their individual needs. In the case of players with visual impairments, an easy mode will have an option for the player to toggle to allow them to activate a high-contrast mode, which only affects desired items, making items and key progression triggers more visible. Additionally, easy modes will include on-screen instructions related to gameplay. These on-screen instructions demonstrate to players what buttons inputs must be executed to succeed. These options remain accessible and can be changed at any point within gameplay. Regarding summoning, it cannot be accessed in all areas of the game and requires players to pay an in-game cost to access. By limiting the access to summons through in-game

currency and restricting it to specific encounters, summoning already lacks too much availability to be designated as an easy mode. However, hypothetically, let us consider FromSoftware releases an update patch removing these restrictions. Can we then consider summons a viable replacement for difficulty adjustment options?

Summoning may drastically reduce the difficulty and the level of fine motor control needed, but in other aspects of accessibility and accommodations, the system still fails to provide appropriate accommodations. A successful easy mode allows for “players [to] engage with the mechanics, not ignore them” (Katmiester Reddit) and summoning, unfortunately, does nothing to address various forms of disability in the way a proper easy mode can. My experience agrees with Katmiester’s assessment. Summoning made encounters drastically easier not by lowering the rigor of individual mechanics to my level, but instead, by allowing for a cooperative ally to complete the mechanics in my stead. Often, I would question whether I was even playing the game anymore. I had an in-game character that I could move and slightly contribute with, but for the most part, I was just watching someone more experienced complete the encounter. I was not engaging with the rules and systems of the game; by definition, I was no longer playing the same game. An easy mode ought to be accommodating in a manner that allows players of all skills and abilities to engage and experience the game’s mechanics and systems. Essentially, easy mode, just like any other form of accommodation, aims to allow for engagement and access to social activities. The easy mode must meet the player where they are and facilitate the player's ability to engage in play. Only by granting the player the tools needed to engage in the game’s rules and mechanics, can we consider the accessibility feature as successful. Unfortunately, summons does not meet this standard.

The Adventurer's Return: Consideration of Player-Generated Content

Player Mods: Custom Difficulties

According to *Wikipedia*, video game modding (short for "modification") is the process of alteration by players or fans of one or more aspects of a video game, such as how it looks or behaves, and is a sub-discipline of general modding. Mods may range from small changes and tweaks to complete overhauls and can extend the replay value and interest of the game. *Elden Ring*'s modding community remains active and has created over two thousand unique mods for the title since the game's release in 2022. Out of the two thousand mods posted, one of these mods was designed to provide forms of difficulty adjustment directly within the game.

"Easy Mode for Elden Ring" creates a new NPC for players to seek out and interact with. Once the player talks with the NPC, a menu prompt appears that grants the player the ability to toggle several options. Players can adjust the following options:

- Incoming Damage as a Percentage
- Increase Player attack as a Percentage
- Increase the Size of Player Attack hitbox
- Decrease the Size of Player hurtbox
- Number of Healing items available per rest
- Add/Remove a Multiplicative factor on currency gains
- Removal of equipment weight loads
- Starting Bonus character stats

These options address a wide range of accommodation factors and allow players to create a custom experience fitting to their needs. Each set of options addresses different concerns players may have about the game's default difficulty. For example, options related to customizing the game's available hurt boxes and hitboxes aim to reduce the game's emphasis on fine- motor control and reflex. "Hitboxes" and "Hurt Boxes" refer to the geometric shapes surrounding player characters and enemies within the game's code. These shapes allow the game to determine when a player, or enemy, has been "hit" and will receive damage. By allowing players to finetune these boxes, the game grants players control over the level of precision the game requires. Smaller hurt boxes result in more generous dodge windows that demand less from players. They are no longer required to be as specific and intentional in their positioning, reducing the strain players experience on their fine motor control skills. Larger hitboxes allow players to be less accurate with their strikes while still successfully damaging enemies. Other Options related to damage, both incoming and outgoing, aim to grant players the ability to finetune the severity of the challenge by requiring players to discover fewer enemy openings while also granting players more opportunities for mistakes. Features related to resource management lower difficulty in relation to tactical and strategic aspects of the game. Removing features such as the equipment load, which functions as a limit on how much equipment the player can equip at a time, allows players more freedom in their character load-outs. The mod offers an effective tool for players to curate their experience towards their needs and skill level.

Earlier in my discussion, I stated an easy mode ought to allow players to engage with game mechanics at any skill level, while also remaining accessible at any time during the experience to be considered a successful implementation of difficulty adjustment. "Elden Ring

Easy Mode” mod satisfies the first half of the definition flawlessly. The numerous available features and level of flexibility and control it grants players over different game features promote players to experiment and create an experience fitting to their own needs. Through adjusting various settings, the mod presents players, regardless of their skill level, with the ability to engage with the game's mechanics. However, the mod falls short according to the latter half of the definition. Though it makes great strides compared to the game's default systems, the mod can only be accessed through the NPC located in Limgrave. The player can travel to Limgrave at any time but will risk losing progress. If a player finds themselves stuck fighting a boss located in one of the numerous dungeons scattered throughout the Land Between, the player cannot change or alter any difficulty settings without first leaving the dungeon and traveling back to the NPC. This creates a rather cumbersome process that halts any sense of continuity whenever the player finds themselves in need of adjusting difficulty settings. I understand that the current iteration of the mod may be caused by technical limitations, as the mod can only be integrated so far into the game. Unfortunately, the content still exists as third-party external content and may not have access to integral parts of the game's code as “The potential for end-user change in game varies greatly, though it can have little correlation on the number and quality of mods made for a game” (“Video Game Modding” Par.13). Essentially, the extent to which a game can be modded will be determined by the files made available to end users by the property holder. Based on available files, modders are limited to the extent in which they can seamlessly implement mod features.

Player Mods as an Extension of Communal Approach Towards Accessibility

Elden Ring's lack of difficulty options derives from the developer's vision of creating an environment of adversity and challenge to be overcome through engaging with the community. Miyazaki hoped to create an environment where players were encouraged to lend a helping hand to one another in their shared journey toward overcoming adversity. Through the pairing of communal systems and set difficulty, Miyazaki effectively entices players towards engaging with the community. Though the current in-game systems do not adequately address and provide accommodation for players, the system presents a unique perspective in responding to the need for accessibility. A community approach presents a methodology apt for both identifying and bolstering accommodation in high-need areas.

The community-driven systems in *Elden Ring* create responsive feedback loops in which the player base identifies high-difficulty areas and consequently generates content supporting future players in overcoming these specific encounters. Systems like the golden posts and bloodstains automatically occur in these challenging areas as the community encounters spikes in the game's difficulty individually and returns to leave helpful notes for future players. Summonings work similarly as players identify the most challenging enemies and areas and will leave their summon signs to aid players as they approach these spikes in difficulty. The community naturally responds to the ebbs and flows of difficulty and responds by creating accommodations as they see fit with no involvement or input from developers. These communal systems effectively become self-regulating and independent from developers in generating content. The philosophy of these systems resonates with the player base as they extend the approach through player-generated mods.

Miyazaki imparted the player base with specific tools to use towards community engagement. These tools, while presenting the community with various means of interaction, were also rather limited in scope. Golden post only allowed for communication restricted by the textual options available, while summoning was a system limited by a need to maintain a form of balance, as to not invalidate any other game mechanic or strategy. These tools were strong starting points toward communal-based accommodations but always seemed to stop short of creating a fully accessible experience. Where the current in-game systems are predicated upon community engagement contextualized through the limited tools offered by the game's design, player generated content, such as mods, do not share the same restrictions. Players identified shortcomings of the available toolset and as a community coded and developed the implementation of player modifications that allow for in-game difficulty adjustment.

Player Reception of the Easy Mode Mod

Elden Ring's easy mode mod presents an effective approach toward accommodation and accessibility. Fortunately, the game has only benefited from the mod's inclusion. Whereas player mods satisfy gaps in-game content and "exist as a response to wanting," the success of the easy mode mod has made the need for difficulty adjustment apparent (monkeylovingape6969). The mod currently has over 190 thousand unique downloads with over two thousand endorsements. The reception surrounding the mod has been overwhelmingly positive. Gamebyte, a digital magazine covering game news and media, released an article covering how "*Elden Ring's* Easy Mode mod is one of the most popular mods on Nexus right now!". Pipboy_warrior further builds

on this sentiment describing how “As someone who's often defended Miyazaki and his team's design of Elden Ring, I have no problem with this mod. It lets players implement the changes that they want without putting the onus on the developers to alter their vision of the game.” The mod seems to have struck a balance between offering effective accommodations towards accessibility, while also preserving the perceived integrity of the “Elden Ring experience.”

Though the reception may be predominantly positive, there still remains a group of gatekeepers who scoff at the idea of players modding in adjustable difficulty. An enduring attitude of elitism surrounds these critiques as elitist players condescend to casuals writing, “most accessible and flexible souls game yet and people still need to bypass intended design for whatever reason...I point down at these sorry folk” (Punypilgrim). PunyPilgrim’s tweet not only literally “points down” people opting to use player-generated difficulty options, but rebukes modding as something that “bypasses intended design.” Not only do these elitists self-assign moral superiority but decry any reliance on modded difficulty as a breach of authenticity. Zykilik, a Twitter user, responds on a thread of a player celebrating how the mod granted them access to the proper “souls experiences.” They declare “[this player] is not playing the way the devs intended to **at all** which [the developers] ultimately decide the "dark souls experience,” therefore, invalidating the experience of the accommodated player. Comments critical of any form of player modification consistently emphasize the “souls experience” as the overcoming of challenge and adversity and constantly differentiate between the original difficulty and modded difficulty as two separate games. They describe how “You did not beat Elden Ring with this mod installed, you beat Elden Ring on easy mode with this mod installed,” insisting any tool which mitigates challenge runs counter to the purpose of the game and no longer exists as the same

game. Zyklik further condemns advocates of player-modded difficulty adjustment as “It is laziness to improve and adapt to the challenges that Elden Ring presents players.” Most of the critical discourse surrounding modded difficulty relies on this semantic argument to belittle and discriminate between those capable of completing the game on the original difficulty and those who cannot.

However, further observation reveals these critiques act as more of a means to discriminate than as a genuine form of feedback directed at approaches in accessibility design. Following these posts made by critics of a player-modded difficulty frequently resort towards “shifting of goalposts” once their claims are granted any sort of credence. Considering that engaging in player modded difficulty may result in lost unique experiences, the “True” souls experience exists as incompatible with mods. Then if difficulty options do not define the “true” intended experience, then it must be some method of playing that defines the true way to play. Zyklik also believes the only way to engage in *Elden Ring* would be to utilize only one sort of build because “melee builds are the purest form of Souls combat.” Conveniently, the true form of *Elden Ring* always seems to reflect the interests, abilities, and demographics of the ones levying the critiques. Kazizui promptly identifies this trend by asking, “When people use those “cheat” weapons, you losers still complain and say that the game isn’t supposed to be played like that. Why do you care so much?” They care because, by othering other players’ experiences, they bolster their own sense of superiority and can ruthlessly defend their own attachments to their perception of the game. Through this otherization, players can waive any form of moral criticism against a game they have learned to associate with their identity and pride.

Overall, community reception of modded difficulty, regardless of the critiques posed by gatekeepers, remains overwhelmingly positive. A majority of the community accepts the use of player-generated content to complement the current suit of in-game accessibility options and systems.

CHAPTER 4: A JOURNEYS END CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATION FOR FUTHER STUDY

Conclusion

At the beginning of my study, I set out to observe and evaluate how *Elden Ring*'s systems, mechanics, and rules situate themselves to create a pseudo approach towards accessibility. Parsing through online discourses, I constantly encountered arguments against the inclusion of native difficulty modes describing how the game already appropriately responds to the need for accommodation and accessibility through its curated encounters, world design, and community-based systems. I wanted to learn whether these systems were truly sufficient replacements for traditional means of accommodation. I sought to answer how game developers calibrated difficulty using a procedural rhetorical analysis. Additionally, how in-game systems could provide immersive means of addressing accessibility of in-game content.

Upon my investigation, I discovered *Elden Ring* had a unique manner of instancing difficulty and challenge upon its player base. Through open-world design, the game affords players a near-limitless amount of agency in how they engage in the game's challenges. Player agency allows for the game to create flexible encounters where challenges can be situated to test a player's fine motor control, or perhaps a player's ability to plan tactically and strategically depending on which of the game's various mechanics the player chooses to employ. This approach towards accessibility parallels drives for multimodality within aspects of universal design, especially in the context of rhetoric. The drive for multimodality places the onus on rhetors to create messaging and rhetoric accessible to the audience. Similarly, to how we can

observe the implementation of multimodality to accommodate our messaging, FromSoft creates an engaging multimodal experience. This approach of multiple semiotic meanings does not derive solely from what mediums are employed (visual, auditory, textual) but from how the audience engages with the game's content. *Elden Ring* has enacted a rather ingenious design in how it situates player agency as a means of accommodation. Though I still believe this system cannot address needs for difficulty accommodation exclusively, the system can still be co-opted along with other accessibility features to create an engaging, immersive, and accessible form of media.

Yet, the game's open-world design and limitless player agency were not the only features claimed to function as forms of difficulty adjustment. Many players point towards the game's summoning system as an in-lore mechanic to address any difficulty concerns. While summoning substantially reduces the difficulty of any given encounter within the game, the system fails to provide an inclusive and accessible means of engaging within the game. Summoning can be reduced to essentially having someone more skilled, or able, play the game for you. Engaging in the game's summoning system would rarely result in a truly immersive experience in which a player can engage in the game's rules and mechanics at a reduced intensity; instead, the player requesting the summon's aid will watch as the game practically plays itself. Miyazaki hoped to emulate the experience of community aid through the summoning system to create a form of accommodation. Though the summoning system may fail as a form of accommodation for the game's difficulty, the concept of community-driven systems addressing audience needs can be a rather productive approach toward accessibility.

Whereas summoning represents a less effective implementation of community-driven accommodation, in-game systems such as the golden posts and bloodstains demonstrate the value of these systems more effectively. A major problem in creating accommodation and resources exists in the limitations of available resources and tools that are both accurate reflections of the needs of any given audience and are timely. Both problems are resolved by the current iteration of the communal systems within *Elden Ring*. Golden posts and bloodstains are systems that create self-regulated resources of information for new and incoming players.

Players fully embody the spirit of community engagement as a means towards accessibility as they extend the philosophy towards the creation of player mods which present the much-needed difficulty options. Any need for accommodation can be addressed by the community using player-created mods. *Elden Ring* reflects the observations of Bierre et al. regarding paradigms of universal accessibility where they explain “[ways of] support[ing] accessibility, including community modding of games” (3). Games present a unique medium where the responsibility of creating an inclusive and accessible experience can be shared between both developers and a game’s community.

Essentially, the answer to whether *Elden Ring* successfully creates an accessible game through solely curated encounters, and open-world design would be a resounding *No*. These features are all steps towards accessibility, but none of these features can stand independently as appropriate accommodations. However, these features complement traditional accommodations in making universally accessible games a demanding but still manageable and achievable task.

In conclusion, I set out to answer the following questions:

1. How does Difficulty manifest within the title, *Elden Ring*?
2. How do these different forms of difficulty interact with both the player and how they engage in the game's systems?
3. How do alterations to a game's rules or perceived difficulty alter a player's experience of the game?

I discovered that difficulty within *Elden Ring* manifests through a combination of multiple factors. From fine-motor control, strategical planning, and tactical execution, *Elden Ring* challenges its players to face its enemies utilizing all the listed skills. These different forms of difficulty provide the player with various means of skill expression, but the game fails to offer any meaningful forms of difficulty adjustment.

This results in players either persevering through the game's challenge or quitting from frustration. However, players may also choose to engage in game modification to gain access to forms of difficulty adjustment. Through modification, players engage with tuned versions of the game's systems and mechanics which are scaled to their respective skill level.

These alterations to the rules of the game result in an increase in player participation and engagement. Yet, a minority of the game's player base views any form of rule alteration as an invalidation of the player's experience. This invalidation stems from a sense of superiority falsely attributed to a belief their skill granted them access to the "true" experience of the game. This sense of validation players receives incentivizes them to invalidate the experiences of less skilled/able players to create a more exclusive accolade for themselves. Disregarding this form of

otherization present within the community, I observed that altering the game's rule set generally resulted in higher levels of player engagement and satisfaction.

Considerations for Further Study

While conducting my study of *Elden Ring*'s non-traditional accessibility features, I noticed some limitations placed upon my study. Considerations of other titles of related difficulty, endearingly labeled as "Soulslikes" may have presented other forms of difficulty adjustment or accommodation does not present within the subject of my case study. Titles such as *Nioh* and *The Surge* belong to the same genre of game but have other systems-oriented forms of difficulty adjustment. Conducting another case study on one of these "soulslikes" can create a useful source of comparative data to discuss how this genre of the game builds a reputation on their high levels of difficulty while recommending appropriate implementations of accessibility that may extend beyond a single title but are applicable for the entire genre.

Additionally, I encountered several different threads and postings steeped in an aggressive and hostile tone adamantly defending the game's lack of traditional difficulty adjustment features. I address the arguments presented within this portion of the discourse but begin to consider what aspects of online engagement drove them to represent their positions in such a vitriolic manner. I considered potential reliance on othering to protect their perceived experience within the game. Yet, a further examination of the forms of rhetoric employed in the defense of the "Git Gud"

argument may yield some further insights into why some communities are hesitant to adopt proper means of accommodation.

Essentially, my recommendation for further study revolves around constructing the same research within the new context of different titles within the genre, or by reassessing the observations of this study to specify and study a subset of the discourse in greater detail in order to understand shortcomings in rhetoric advocating for the accessible design.

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