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<div align="center">Working at Play in Dark Souls</div>

Ask anyone who knows video games about *Dark Souls* and they will say some version of the following: the game is difficult. In reviews of *Dark Souls*, the same note will sound: reviewers and players report their struggle to make it to the end, to succeed in completing the quest. Bosses can't be beat. Players die over and over (and over) again. To succeed, players must discipline themselves to accept defeat and go back to the drawing board to figure out how to be smarter than the foe they face. *Dark Souls*' high degree of difficulty raises this provocative question: If the point of playing video games is to have fun, why has the *Dark Souls* franchise, created by Hidetaka Miyazaki for Fromsoftware Games, been so successful? When did playing a video game require so much hard work and expertise?

In the discussion that follows, I will explore this question first by considering the shifting boundaries between "work" and "leisure." More specifically, I will examine recent articles that consider how and why leisure activities have become serious undertakings—so serious, in fact, that they seem almost indistinguishable from work activities. Indeed, a whole category of activities now falls under the heading of "serious leisure." In light of these cultural developments, I will argue that *Dark Souls* reflects and affirms cultural norms that deem "play" as valuable only when it feels like work. Moreover, *Dark Souls* does not just affirm the high value our culture attaches to hard work, but it also reveals the value placed on a particular kind of hard work—work that involves disciplined learning and problem-solving. Unlike some other games that can be beaten by tediously grinding through level after level, *Dark Souls* elevates a special kind of hard work by setting such a high difficulty standard. Next, I will argue that the in-game culture of hard work and discipline

bleeds into the out-of-game culture of hard work evidenced by the *Dark Souls*' Wiki Site. In short, the ethos of what one might call a serious gaming universe trickles into the fandom, reinforcing that ethos outside of the game. Finally, I suggest the significance of the fact that when *Dark Souls* players collaborate, their collaboration emphasizes utility even as it creates community: community is a necessary means to an end, again reinforcing the seriousness of the game and the players who play it. My exploration of the way playing this extremely difficult game enacts a culture of discipline and hard work reveals how pervasive this ethos has become. While I am not arguing that we should stop playing *Dark Souls* (or other very difficult games), I would argue that examining the work-related culture of in-game and out-of-game activities will make us more conscious of what we get from these games and what we give up when we play them.

Let me begin by describing what makes *Dark Souls* so difficult. First of all, there is no tutorial, apart from some very short initial tutorials that instruct players about the controller buttons. What's more, a player can miss the tutorial prompt entirely because there is nothing stopping the player from simply not seeing the messages. And players have to learn-by-playing at the highest possible level: when a player makes a mistake, the consequences (in game) are dire. Much of the game's difficulty arises out of its unforgiving punishment of the mistakes players make. Checkpoints are scarce, every enemy is dangerous, and bosses are often tough enough to require multiple deaths and trips back to square one before they can be overcome. On top of all this, resources acquired through gameplay are lost following each death, making the multiple player-deaths one endures in attempting to overcome a single obstacle quite costly. In fact, the very first enemy encountered in *Dark Souls* is also the first boss, the Asylum Demon. At this point, the player hasn't even acquired a weapon with which to defend themselves and must instead flee from the boss. Once safe, the player begins to learn the basics of the game as they move through the Asylum and eventually face the Demon yet again, this time equipped with new knowledge about how the demon might be beaten (or so the player hopes). In short, the Asylum Demon acts as a test to see if

the player has learned the basics of the game on their own. If they have not, the Demon will undoubtedly kill the player and send them back to a close bonfire (the checkpoint system of the game) to try again.

This game design stands in contrast to the design of other games which might offer a more forgiving experience. For example, when a player in *Skyrim* fails, they are sent back to a previous "save point" as if everything after that "save" had not happened, and, furthermore, they are allowed to save any time they like; as a result, they can make checkpoints at any time during gameplay. In addition, each save is logged individually, letting players go back to multiple saves in order to rectify any apparent mistakes they made in the past. By contrast, *Dark Souls* only allows a player to create one constantly updating save for each character they make. As a result, players must live with the mistakes they make in-game, using them to learn how to be smarter in their next attempts.

When *Dark Souls*' director Hidetaka Miyazaki was interviewed in 2012, a year after the first *Dark Souls* game was released, he was asked about the game's exceptional difficulty, and he observed that he was indeed "aiming at giving players a sense of accomplishment in the use of difficulty"(Jenkins). He added that "*Dark Souls* is rather difficult and a number of people may hesitate to play" (Jenkins). After the release of *Dark Souls III,* Miyazaki observed about the fragmentary story and many other mysterious elements of the game that "I want players to complete it with their own discoveries. I know that this makes it harder and keeps some away from the game" (Starkey). While no doubt some are kept away, many are not. Rather, they feel a sense of accomplishment in overcoming the game's difficulty, as many reviewers attest. In *You Died! The Dark Souls Companion* written by game reviewer Keza Macdonald and game developer Jason Killingsworth, Macdonald describes her early experiences with *Dark Souls* (and its precursor, Demon Souls) in detail and attests that the game had the effect of "making even the tiniest amount of progress [feel] like an impossible victory" (Macdonald Loc.104). Reviewing *Dark Souls III* for *Wired,* Daniel Starkey writes about his failure to defeat a particular enemy that "It was the

437th time I'd died over 74 hours of *Dark Souls III.* ... Filled with resolve, I took a few deep breaths and stepped back into the arena" (Starkey). And writing a piece in *Forbes* magazine that argued that Fromsoftware should not make the game easier, Erik Kain observes of gameplay that "I always begin each new *Souls* game feeling a bit rusty, a bit overwhelmed, and then, gradually, I settle into a rhythm. But that takes work" (Kain).

The vocabulary that these reviewers use when writing about *Dark Souls* often sounds very similar to the vocabulary they might use if they were describing some difficult kind of challenging work task that required special expertise requiring hours of training to acquire. Thus, while video gaming falls under the heading of a leisure activity that one purses in order to have fun or be entertained, one starts to wonder whether game developers are tapping into some understanding about 21st century culture. Is there any difference between work and play anymore? Do we live at a time in which everything we do has become a form of work, even if we enjoy it? Do we want our leisure activities to be more like work activities? And what do the terms "work" and "leisure" even mean?

Trying to define the terms "work" and "leisure" is no easy task, as scholars have long recognized. In *Work, Unemployment and Leisure,* Rosemary Deem explains that "any definition needs to be set in its social and historical context: there's no such thing as a universal definition of either term" (3). We might be moved to distinguish work from leisure by saying that the former is "paid" and the latter "unpaid," but such a definition would be unjust to the many forms of work that go unpaid (volunteer activities are unpaid, but we might consider them work. Stay-at-home parents work, though they are unpaid). Relatedly, thinking about leisure in terms of activities we are not forced to do fails to recognize the commitments that many people make to non-obligatory undertakings. As B. Christine Green and Ian Jones observe in their essay on sports tourism, work no longer means simply "labor done for pay" and leisure no longer means "relaxation, recuperation, triviality, frivolity, and freedom from obligation" (165). Likewise, in "The False Duality of Work and

Leisure," Joy E. Beatty and William R. Torbert, two management scholars, challenge definitions of

work and leisure to expose the overlap in our culture. After examining various definitions of work

and leisure, including those that define each in terms of time (connecting leisure to "free" time and

work with scheduled time), types of activity (connecting leisure to recreational behavior and work

to everything else), and attitudes (connecting leisure to pleasure and work to drudgery), Beatty and

Torbert conclude that the line between work and leisure has become impossible to draw, and that

"a leisurely activity can be worklike, and … work can be leisurely" (Beatty and Torbert 243). In

thinking about how work and leisure exist on a continuum, they also consider "serious leisure,"

which they define as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that

participants find so substantial and interesting that they launch themselves into a career centered

on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (244). Those engaging in

"serious leisure" do not, as a rule, receive any financial benefits from pursuing this "career," though

as Beatty and Torbert note, "some people actually receive pay for their serious leisure" (244).

The analyses of "serious leisure" that Green and Jones offer illuminate even more

profoundly how close descriptions of "serious leisure" seem to descriptions of work, particularly

work requiring well-developed, specialized skills. The qualities they identify as part of serious

leisure activities are those that involve perseverance, development of a long-term career (which

they define as an activity that includes "stages and rewards" (168)), "significant personal effort"

(168), "growth in self-esteem" (168), development of a "unique ethos" (a set of common values and

beliefs), and strong "social identification with the activity" (169). Looking at this list, one finds that

the first three qualities are those we most closely associate with work. When we think of work, we

think of effort in the face of difficulties — that is to say, perseverance — as well as the reward that

we get from facing obstacles.

Tellingly, these more work-associated elements are the ones that most closely match the

experience of playing *Dark Souls.* As I have described above, in order to play *Dark Souls,* players

must commit themselves to developing a deep understanding of the logic of the game and the complex combinations and sequences of moves it takes to make any progress at all. In a recent Reddit post entitled "Finally Beat the Fume Knight," one player writes of playing *Dark Souls,* "I hated it at first, felt like I had no chance...Got my ass kicked quite a few more times til I learned to be patient and chip away/heal. Then I finally did it, damn that shit felt good. Best fight of the game so far for sure" (im_ok_). And in response to a demoralized Reddit poster who was making slow progress in the game, a fellow player had this advice to give:

I'm a huge *Dark Souls* fan and it can get frustrating at times, but there are two rules I can suggest to ease the burden a little bit. Be patient and pay attention to what killed you. *Dark Souls* is about learning how to approach each encounter in order to progress beyond the current obstacle. With each death, you should be learning. OK, so there's an enemy behind this corner and one over there. I can pull the one, then deal with the ambushing guy by himself....It's not the frustration fans love, it's the feeling when you overcome whatever was barring your progress. That's what makes the game shine. (tasteofflames)

In both of these postings (and numerous others), *Dark Souls* players connect the difficulty of the game with patient and attentive learning, experimentation, and a willingness to endure trial and error in order overcome the game's seemingly impossible obstacles. Each reflects how the game rewards training: learn how to play the game by thinking about the mistakes the player might have made and how the player could take a different approach to the problem. Each of these posters writes about the perseverance, patience, discipline, and attentiveness to detail needed to progress. The game is a "burden" that one has to bear but worth it for the reward. *Dark Souls* requires sustained intellectual (as opposed to physical) work.

At the heart of *Dark Souls*' ethos is a version of what we might call the "work ethic," an ethic associated with Western religious sects, most notably the Protestants and the Puritans. Beatty and Jones observe in their analysis of work and leisure that Protestantism "established work as the key

of life. The best way to serve God, according to [Martin] Luther, was to do most perfectly the work of one's calling …[John] Calvin further developed this view in the doctrine of 'maximum effort'… (243). As Western society became more secular, the economic benefits from hard work took precedence over the religious and moral motivations (Beatty and Jones 244). Furthermore, Beatty and Jones note that "in modern times work is seen as the primary means of expanding human powers – developing character and exercising capabilities" (244).

Game developer and player Jane McGonigal makes the case that "Games makes us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves, and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work (qtd. in Niman 28). Examining "hard work as its own reward" (394) in MMOGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) such as *World of Warcraft* as well as in mainstream Hollywood films and television shows, the authors of "Where's My Montage? The Performance of Hard Work and Its Reward in Film, Television, and MMOGs" argue that the hard work ethos represented in each of these media reinforces the work ethic and, more specifically, the ethos of the American Dream:

The ideology of the American Dream, as expressed through the continued notion that hard work is rewarded, lives on in contemporary MMOGs. Developers create procedural systems that demand players engage in hard or tedious work to achieve success, and players themselves (particularly power gamers and hardcore gamers) embrace the dream (397).

The authors of "Where's My Montage" go even further to suggest that while films and television shows condense the representations of tedious hard work through montage so that audiences don't have to sit through hours and hours of watching some character try to overcome an obstacle, dedicated gamers will actually endure hours and hours of grinding through level after level, repeating the same moves time after time, in *World of Warcraft* in order to get a guaranteed reward (397).

Unlike *World of Warcraft, Dark Souls*' players do not grind through levels, and no reward is guaranteed.[1] One could play *Dark Souls* for hours and get absolutely nowhere. Or one could play for one hour and make startling progress and then meet a particular Boss and be stuck for days, or even forever. Thus, I would argue, the value of the work—the sense of accomplishment—is heightened because the *Dark Souls* player has done something that not everyone might be able to do, even with hours and hours of play. The gatekeeping that the difficulty of the game performs both elevates the players who do succeed and demotes the kind of tedious leveling up that *World of Warcraft* requires. In short, the work ethic exerts even more pressure on players because it isn't just a matter of putting in the hours. One has to learn the game to be the kind of expert that can beat the game.

Given how much pressure our culture exerts on students not just to move from grade to grade but to excel in each grade, to distinguish oneself enough to take the hardest classes, it isn't surprising that *Dark Souls* has attracted such a devoted following. Its fans have already internalized the idea that one must not just work hard: one must show that one can solve more difficult problems than the person sitting at the next desk. In the recent documentary film *Race to Nowhere* (2009), filmmakers Vicki Abeles and Jessica Congdon present evidence showing that, as one reviewer of the documentary wrote, "our overarching achievement culture dictates that children lead overprogammed lives in order to compete academically, engage in extracurricular activities, earn high standardized tests scores, gain entry into the best colleges, and secure a foothold into a successful life path" (Bass 99). Indeed, the film argues that our culture now promotes hard work at the highest possible levels, even during elementary school (Bass 99).

And it's not just in-game play that displays this emphasis on a high degree of discipline and learning at the highest levels. The *Dark Souls* Wiki represents the same ethos. In "Getting-to-Know:

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[1] Arguably, *Dark Souls* does have a "levelling" system; however, its function is to allow players to build a unique character instead of being the main way players progress through the game.

Inquiries, Sources, Methods, and the Production of Knowledge in a Video Game Wiki," Olle Skold offers the results of his empirical research on the *Dark Souls* Wiki site (DSW). The purpose of his research on the DSW is to see how the site operates to produce information about *Dark Souls* and to understand how the site supports collaborative work among the gamers. One of Skold's findings is that even though the DSW shows collaborative activities, the site also shows that the information exchanged on the site "enacts the exercise of power over others by being a currency in gameplay situations" (1301). In other words, even in the collaborative endeavor, participants create hierarchies and succeed by showing their ability to produce more and better information about gameplay. With respect to the DSW in particular, Skold found "a high degree of mediated action and communication" (1311), such that certain information was kept off the site if it was not deemed "legitimate" (1311). Interestingly, Skold suggests that the seriousness of the DSW makes it different from other "videogame knowledge cultures" (1316) because the site involves so much vetting, peer-reviewing, and other kinds of editorial work. Moreover, Skold concluded that some contributors to the DSW researched game play *specifically* for the purpose of "supporting knowledge production on the wiki" (1316) and further that "the wiki contributors showcase specialized knowledge and disciplined efforts" (1316).

Although Skold does not take up the question of whether the DSW contributors should be rewarded for their labor, his research does show that the *Dark Souls* fans' labor is of very high quality and that the labor adds to the knowledge-base of the community. Whether Fromsoftware is exploiting the DSW contributors by leaving it to them to provide the guidance that Fromsoftware does not provide is a complex question because the very design of the game is based on the idea that it does not offer such guidance. Instead, I see the work that the DSW contributors provide as something they do for each other, more akin to "an act of gift giving" that Bertha Chin describes in her article "Sherlockology and Galactica.tv: Fan Sites as Gifts or Exploited Labor?" As Chin notes, "the gifts exchanged in fandom earn status and reputation both for the individual and for the

community – or fan site – the individual is associated with" (Chin). Further, Chin observes that

"[O]ffering gifts enables fan creators, such as authors, vidders, gamers, Web site owners, and so on,

to build on and elevate their status in their respective fan communities." In the case of the DSW, the

contributors work to get their material on the site (as Skold demonstrates), and they earn status

because the site is vetted: to get something onto the site is itself an achievement. In the end,

whether one considers what is exchanged a part of a gift-giving economy or exploited labor, what

one can see is that the contributors work in a professional and disciplined way to make the DSW as

valuable as it is.

Skold's study of the DSW supports my argument that the ethos of in-game play influences

the ethos of the community outside of the game, and I would argue, in addition, that it is the game's

high degree of difficulty that has reinforced this ethos. What's more, even though *Dark Souls* players

engage in communal behavior both in the game and on the Wiki site, the information exchange

most often focuses on the game itself, as a means to an end. The close-knit group of *Dark

Souls* gamers recognizes that the game cannot be explored fully without some kinds of

collaboration. Collaboration is necessary for the game, not sought after for its own sake. Thus, the

game's difficulty keeps the focus of the exchanges on game play itself, again reinforcing the

seriousness of the game and the players who play it. *Dark Souls*' creator Hidetaka Miyazaki has

observed that he wanted players to work together to overcome difficulties, so he engineered online

components to allow some collaboration (Starkey). For instance, players can leave messages on the

ground which appear in the games of other players if they are online, giving them advice and hints.

Additionally, when a player dies in-game, they leave a bloodstain on the ground which shows up as

a message in the games of other players. If these bloodstains are activated, the other player gets to

see the moments leading up to the death of the first player, giving them some forewarning for

upcoming threats. However, the message-system has very significant limits. Players cannot type out

messages, and only particular words are available to players. It's impossible to leave a personal

message. Also, the bloodstains only show the dead player's character when activated, leaving the viewing player to make an educated guess as to how they actually died. Miyazaki's design ensures that the messages left have to be about the game and only the game.

While I do not claim that no posting about *Dark Souls* is about anything other than how to beat an enemy or find a weapon, as a player of many video games, I recognize that postings are much more about how to progress than about any other topic. Starkey observes that with respect to *Dark Souls,* "Players swap stories and strategies about tactics and strategies. Message boards and wiki pages serve as a repository for the community's own big data. Everyone contributes and everyone benefits, because no one could ever be expected to tackle these games alone" (Starkey). Likewise, in *You Died!,* Macdonald writes of her own early playing experiences as a pre-launch game reviewer, before any Wikis or other support material had been created. She describes "The Chain of Pain," an email thread that these early gamers felt they needed in order to "share our experiences of the game, help each other out, and generally marvel/despair at *Dark Souls*' scale and complexity" (loc. 104). Macdonald singles this experience out as unique to *Dark Souls.* The gamers were driven to contact each other because the game was so hard.

I do not wish to diminish the *Dark Souls*' community by suggesting that the Wiki sites and other communal undertakings are not truly communal just because they are motivated by a need for specific information to make progress in the game. The community is no less a community, and as Macdonald suggests, *Dark Souls*' players also want to share their love for the game, just as fans of other kinds of activities do. However, in the case of *Dark Souls,* the communal activities are goal-oriented. Those goals are connected to the work the game requires. Thus, I see the community as reinforcing the work-ethic that I have discussed above.

There is nothing wrong with believing that, in the words of game designer and author Jane McGonigal, "Games makes us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves, and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work" (qtd. in Niman 28). In her

book *Reality is Broken,* McGonigal makes many far reaching claims about games, including the claim that games (video games in particular) can make the world better and that she, as a game designer, is on a humanitarian mission. She claims that the game she developed, *SuperBetter,* has helped thousands of people cope with their mental health struggles. In a 2012 appearance on "The Colbert Report," McGonigal asserted that scientific research shows that playing video games is actually "the most productive thing we can do" ("Colbert Report" 1:38). As an avid *Dark Souls* player myself, I find McGonigal's claims reaffirming and reassuring, but her claims (and others like it) should not be accepted without more reflection on why everything we do must be "productive" and why our time has no value if we aren't producing something at every moment of every day. If games keep pressing us to work harder, perhaps we should think harder about why we keep buying them.

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