

Help or Hinder: Contingency and Cruelty in Dark Souls

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the notion that the game mechanics we see in many popular video games are also present within the imagined status-quo of gamer culture. In particular, I intend to complicate the notion of contingency – the possibility of a future event or circumstance which can not be predicted clearly – as a component of many game mechanics, as I will argue that while it may be that which draws us to gaming, it is also that which impedes fun for certain bodies in gaming culture. As an element central to many game mechanics, contingency is seen heavily within best selling games like the Dark Souls (2011) franchise and significantly also in the ‘hardcore’ gaming culture that forms around them, a culture which we problematically imagine to be comprised of mainly young, straight, white men. This imagining of the status-quo of gaming culture becomes problematic, as suggested by Adrienne Shaw (2010), in that it designates gaming culture as the culture of an ‘other’ – thus creating an exclusionary feedback loop in which we only recognise and therefore allow for the inclusion of certain (young, masculine) bodies. This creates a very specific tension for those bodies who are not housed well by this stereotype, as their inclusion within gaming culture is taken out of their control and held out precariously and perpetually ahead of them – it becomes contingent. As such, I posit that contingency plays a large role in this exclusion and the subsequent maintenance of the imagined status-quo of gaming culture, as the possibility for an outsider to be a part of the imagined gaming culture is handed over to those already inside of it, as they are granted the authority to decide whether certain bodies are included or not.

In this examination of contingency within games and gaming culture, I will be discussing specific instances within the original Dark Souls (2011) game that rely upon it as a mechanism for play. Of particular concern within Dark Souls will be the notion of ‘humanity’ – a status that once achieved allows for online play, and most importantly for interaction with other players. The notion of contingency becomes prevalent within the ‘humanity’ game mechanic as it allows players to interact for the sake of helping each other in-game, while also allowing for players to deceive each other by invading other players’ worlds in an effort to steal their humanity. To further the importance of contingency in the action of engaging in online play, the uncertainty of these actions is encouraged throughout the game by specific non-playable characters and items that the player will find. What is suggested in this is that the possibility for other players to either

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help or hinder is a central characteristic to the humanity mechanic within the game, ensuring that contingency is an integral part of gameplay.

In this way, contingency is a large part of Dark Souls, and plays a significant role in what may attract a player to the game. Conversely, contingency is that which keeps certain players from being able to fully enjoy the gaming culture that arises around games like Dark Souls. In this way, players enter into a relationship of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) in gaming whereby that which drew them to gaming initially is that which prohibits their full enjoyment of it. This relationship is cruelly optimistic as some players hold out a sense of optimism for the fantasy of being included in the imagined status-quo of gaming culture because of their enjoyment of contingency in gaming, but are denied this wish contingently based on their inability to fit into the stereotypical gamer identity. As such, throughout this paper I will suggest that to overcome the impasse that is cruel optimism, players must stop holding out hope for this fantasy and instead seek to break down the structures that uphold the imagined status-quo of gaming culture.

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