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Why Do We Suffer for Fun?

Ordeal Pleasure in Souls-like Games

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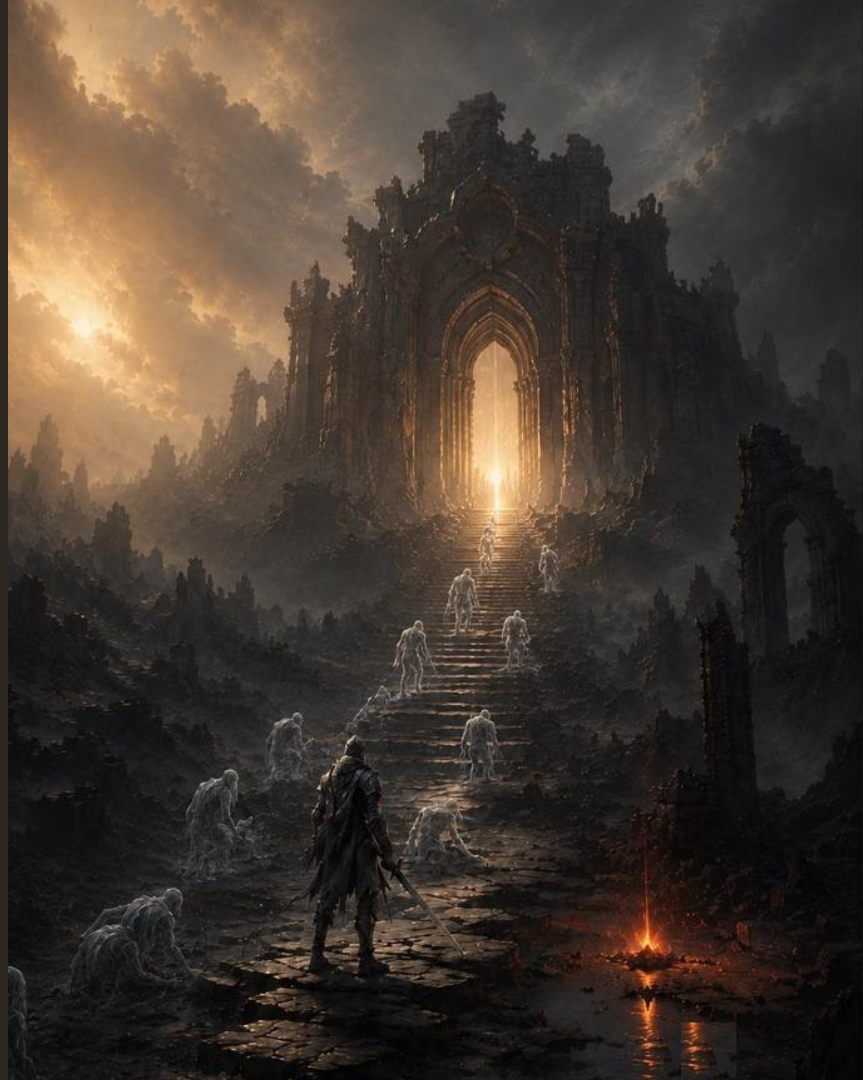
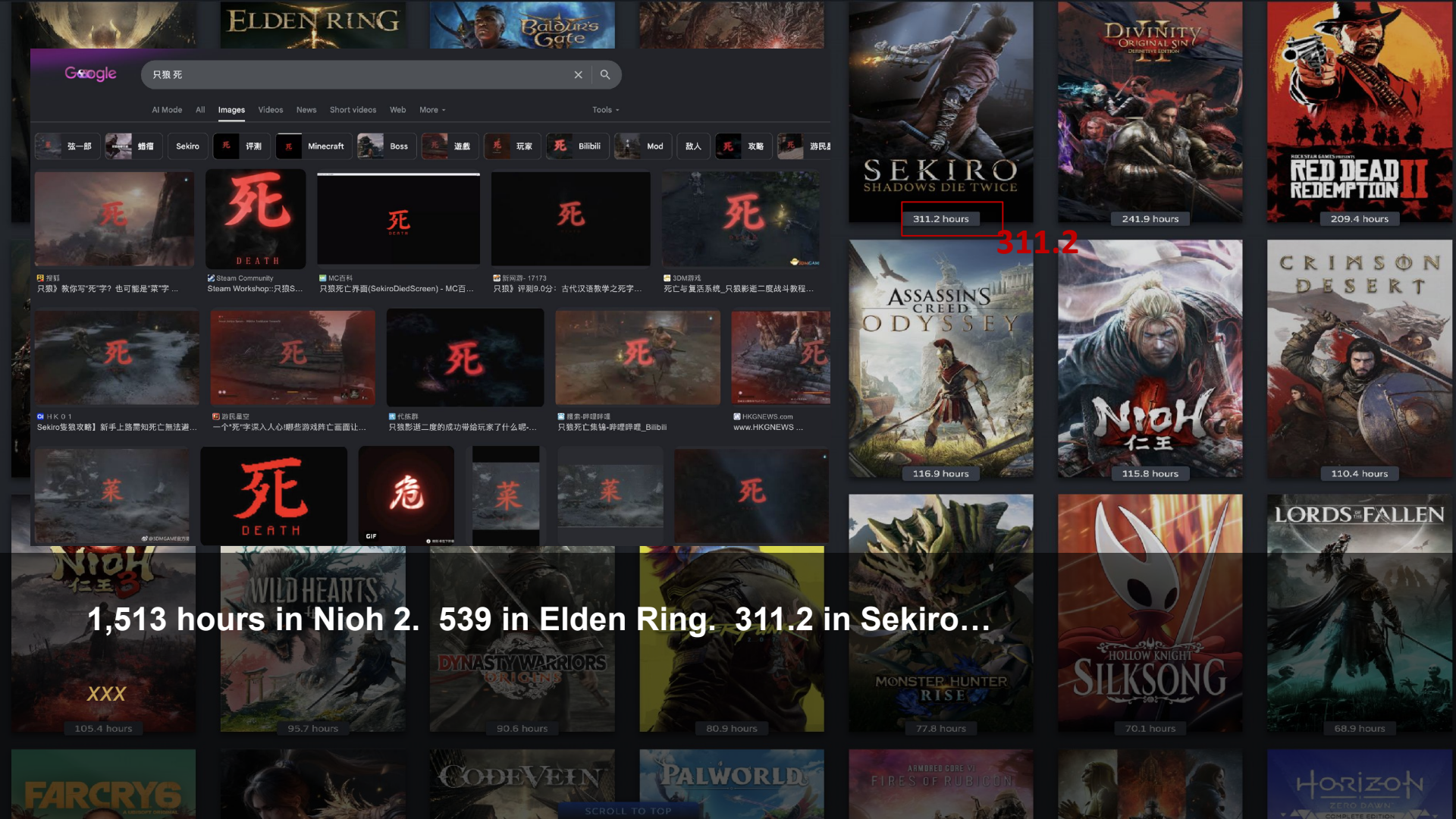
die. learn. return.





1,513 hours in Nioh 2. 539 in Elden Ring. 311.2 in Sekiro…

THE PUZZLE

≈ 10+ attempts every second (Bandai Namco one-year stats, 2023)

329 million attempts at one boss

(source: YouTube compilation)

Malenia, Blade of Miquella

RQ Under what conditions does prolonged frustration become ordeal ***pleasure***?

Flow: pleasure in equilibrium

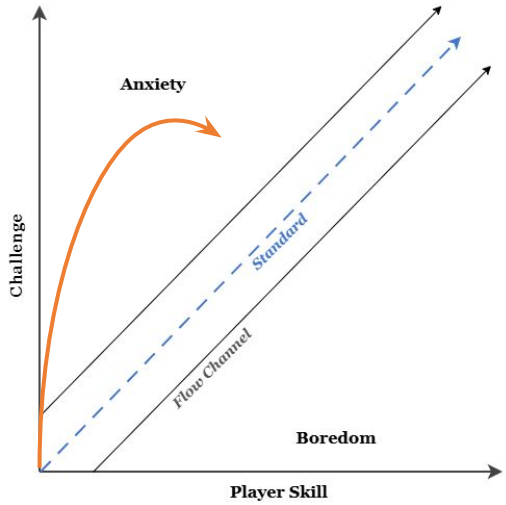
Flow theory

Optimal experience when challenge ≈ skill:

stay in the channel and play feels good

- above it — anxiety, disengagement
- below — boredom, quit

Limit: Souls-like play often holds players above the channel for extended periods



The flow channel (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Chen 2007)

Flow explains pleasure in equilibrium, but not prolonged investment above equilibrium.

Motivation & learning: why difficulty is not enough

Self-Determination Theory

Games motivate by supporting three needs: competence, autonomy, relatedness (Ryan et al. 2006)

Limit: repeated failure threatens competence — yet in Souls-like play, it can intensify eventual satisfaction

Learning theory

Desirable difficulties: harder practice can produce more durable mastery (Bjork & Bjork 2011)

Limit: explains how failure teaches — not why the hard process becomes valued in itself

Motivation explains investment. Learning explains improvement.
Neither explains why frustration itself becomes valuable.

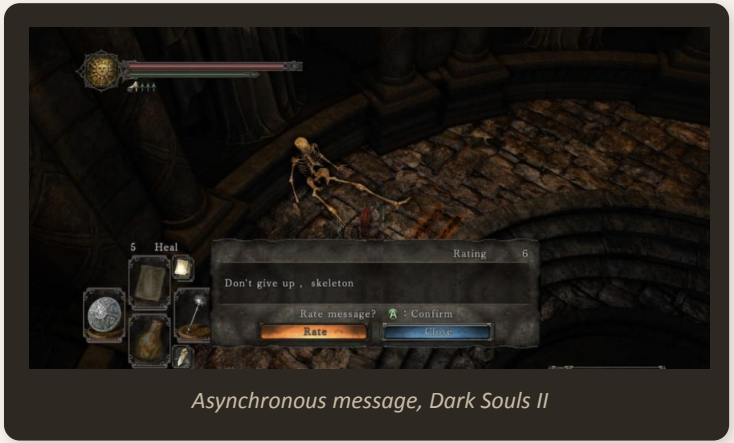
Community: struggle becomes narratable

Community & fan studies

Interpretive communities & participatory culture — fans build meaning together around games (Jenkins 2006).

Limit: general fan/community theory explains shared meaning — but Souls-like cultures bind meaning specifically to difficulty — the suffering gets a language.

“Don’t give up, skeleton”



Asynchronous message, Dark Souls II

Community explains shared meaning, but Souls-like play makes the struggle itself narratable.

THE ORDEAL PLEASURE FRAMEWORK · Three Mechanisms

How Prolonged Frustration Becomes Ordeal Pleasure

CORE DYAD — enables ordeal pleasure

Ludic Cultivation

Failure becomes usable
death becomes information, not just punishment

Aspirational Deferment

Frustration becomes future-oriented
present struggle feels like progress toward mastery

Failure feels learnable; frustration feels like investment.

SOCIAL AMPLIFIER

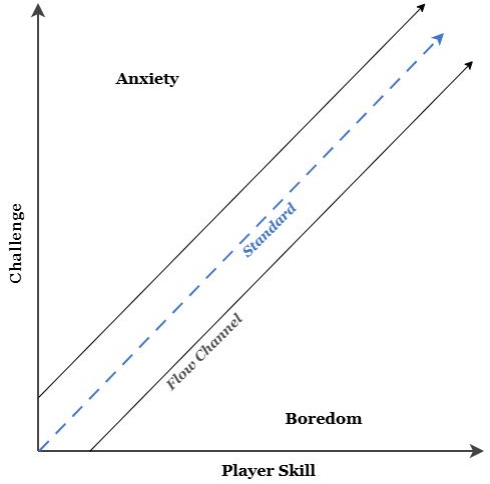
Communal Mythopoesis

Struggle becomes shareable
ordeal becomes story, phrase, lore, memory

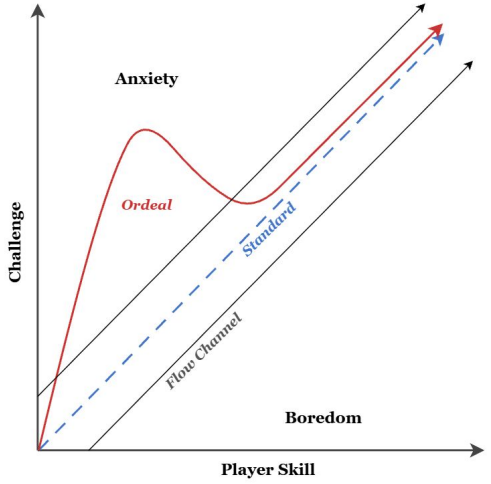
The OPF Framework: failure teaches· efforts points forward · struggle can be shared

OPF IN MOTION

The Ordeal Trajectory



Flow-optimized play — the flow channel



Souls-like play — conceptual ordeal trajectory

Players eventually re-enter the channel through the ordeal trajectory, and hence the zone.

Designing difficulty that transforms

Limitation & Next Steps

- *Built from design analysis + existing empirical studies -> need direct player studies*
- *Survivorship bias: analyzes players who persisted, not those who quit*
- *Next: longitudinal studies, experimental manipulation of fairness, checkpointing & lore*

Implications For Game Design

- *Can players trust failure? — fair, legible, learnable*
- *Does effort become future capability? — not a toll*
- *Can struggle become shareable? — narratable, not just solvable*

Beyond difficult games

- *Educational games – teach about persistency; can difficulty becomes meaningful learning, not just assessment?*

CONCLUSION

We *suffer for fun* when difficulty can be read as transformation.

Open to collaboration:

AI-enabled educational games
Cultural learning & heritage interpretation
Serious games for wellbeing

BMW study slides @DiGRA2025

My homepage

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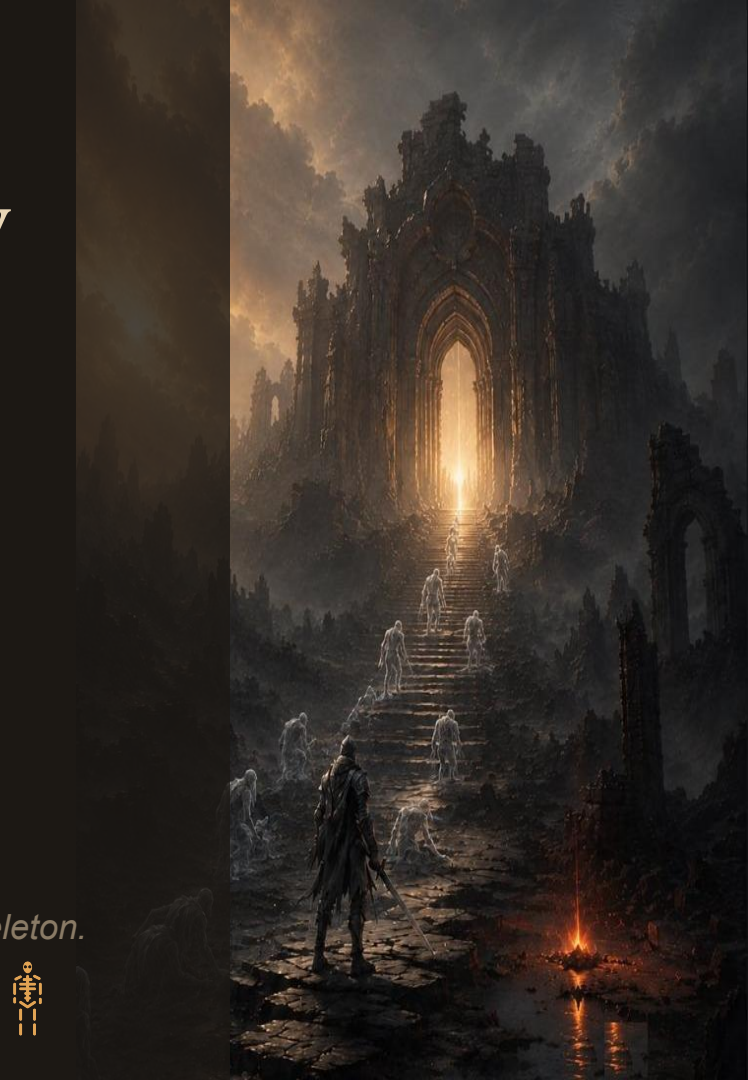
Thank you — don't give up, skeleton.



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