Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo: Let's Play as Well Played

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Abstract: This paper explores the premise that a written document alone cannot fully capture and convey what it means for a game to be well-played. It postulates that the Let's Play (LP) narrated video format is an optimal modality for documenting a well-played video game. The authors explore this idea through their own playthrough and LP of Dark Souls by FromSoftware. In addition, they examine how the LP can serve as a record of learning.

Form Meets Purpose

This paper begins from a simple premise: A Well Played paper like this one is certainly sufficient as a form for exploring and analyzing the meanings found in the experience of (video) game play, but a written document alone cannot fully capture and convey what it means for a game to be well-played. In the case of video games in particular, the last seven years have given rise to a modality of expression that is uniquely suited to the exploration of the concept of a well-played game in the form of the Let's Play (LP) video. We further argue that in some sense every LP is a representation of a well-played game, and we will explore this concept through the presentation of our own LP in progress of *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2012)*.* First we will examine some of the particulars of the LP medium, but before that let's consider the history of the Well Played format in brief as experienced by Moses.

Moses's first encounter with the Well Played format happened in 2007 at the Games+Learning+Society 3.0 conference. At that conference, Drew Davidson offered the first such session at GLS and the first *formal* offering in the Well Played format with Well Played: Interpreting Video Games (Davidson, 2007), later to be published as Well Played: Interpreting *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (Davidson, 2008). The Well Played format has since become well established with 3 volumes containing 65 articles published in the *Well Played Journal*, and live sessions at 4 different academic conferences in 2015 (Davidson, 2014). However, at GLS in 2007, it's fair to say that the audience hadn't seen anything quite like a Well Played talk, especially in an academic setting. In particular, a talk that not only included an example of game play but actually revolved around it was revolutionary. It fundamentally changed the nature of the discourse in the conference hall at the Monona Terrace that day by physically situating the talk around the play experience.

While the affordances of the conference setting allow for a particularly intimate engagement with both game and player, the ecosystem of contemporary media that includes video games provides opportunities for sharing the play experience and the player's perspective. Through sharing video records of play with player narration online, there are unique opportunities for players to express how their playthrough is well-played from their perspective, and potentially to receive commentary and critique from other players on the quality of their particular play experience. With this in mind, let's consider the Let's Play medium in brief before exploring the authors' current experience with this medium as they play through *Dark Souls*, what the implications of this experience are for the Well Played format, and how an LP provides a particularly intriguing record of learning in the context of a well-played game.

The Rise of Let's Play

Despite the natural mapping between video game-play and digital video recording, Let's Play actually started out as text and image based posts on web forums. Although we could not find a definitive account of where and when the format originated exactly, there appears to be consensus that it was popularized on the Something Awful Forums around 2006 (Jong, 2011) using the term Lets Play (abbreviated to LP), and that by 2007 video based LPs began to appear on those forums (Fjællingsdal, 2014). The increase in the ability to both generate and view user created video content that YouTube and later Twitch.tv enable has since cemented video as the primary format for LPs. In order to provide a marker indicating the extent to which the LP genre has proliferated, a search we conducted using the compound term "let's play" on YouTube in late June of 2015 yielded over 18 million results.

The rise of LP videos as a medium has inevitably led to a corresponding rise in academic inquiry around the phenomenon of LPs. A preliminary review of current work indicates that researchers have taken up the topic of LPs to further an understanding of identity (Jong, 2011), the position of LPs as paratexts (Mukherjee, 2012), the experience they offer their viewers (Glas, 2015), their position in relation to other formats of streamed gameplay (Smith, Obrist, & Wright, 2013), and the opportunities they present to the field of media studies and the practice of game

development in general (Fjællingsdal, 2014). However, none of the work we found explores the two themes that we discuss here of how each LP is fundamentally an attempt from outside the academy at presenting a well-played game, and how the LP can stand as a record of the player's learning.

Dark Souls: A Proving Ground of Suffering

Having disposed of the matter of historical context surrounding both the Well Played and Let's Play formats, we can now get down to the exciting part of this inquiry: the experience of a well-played video game. As noted at the start of this paper, the game in question is *Dark Souls*, by From Software (2012). It has been described by reviewers as "...a thoughtful, atmospheric, and mysterious role-playing adventure that challenges your mind and your mettle." (VanOrd, 2011), "...vicious and unforgiving in the challenge it presents." (Zimmerman, 2011), and, "... Groundhog Day but in the ruins of a fantasy realm...an exercise in self-abuse and language lessons, the eventual player commentary an inventive catalogue of insults and blasphemy...Zelda in Hell." (Smith, 2012). In short, *Dark Souls* is an extremely difficult game.

You might have noticed that the last delightful snippet of reviewer commentary is dated a year after the previous two. This was not simply because Adam Smith at Rock, Paper, Shotgun was late to the party, but because the version of the game he was reviewing (*Dark Souls - Prepare to Die Edition*) was the version released at a later date for Windows. This is the version of the game that we have played for our LP, or more precisely, the version of the game that Moses has played while Paul has served as host, commentator, peanut gallery, and sometimes guide, having already beaten the game himself. The version of the game has some bearing in regard to the history of each player with the game, and direct implications for this conference session as discussed below under "A Playthrough in Process."

In terms of game genre and game mechanics, *Dark Souls* can comfortably be described as a third-person action RPG. The player creates a character at the game's start that technically has a character class (e.g. fighter, sorcerer, etc.), however unlike in many RPGs the player is not ultimately limited by this initial choice in terms of the capabilities the character can develop. Rather, the player has the opportunity to invest one point into various character statistics at each level.

Souls

Levels in the game are attained through the expenditure of the common currency of *Dark Souls,* which are the titular souls. With each level attained, the cost of the next level increases, preventing the player from simply optimizing the character by equally distributing points across stats. In addition, it is noteworthy that souls can be spent on other items in the game including durable and expendable items that can be purchased from merchants, training of certain skills by specialized NPCs, and upgrading weapons and armor with blacksmiths.

There are two basic sources for souls in *Dark Souls*. The most common source is a temporary form of the currency, which is attained through killing enemies. We refer to this source as temporary due to the fact that if the player's character dies prior to investing these souls, the earned souls are left at the "bloodstain" (i.e., the site of the player's death), and if the player dies again prior to retrieving their lost power, the accrued souls are lost as well.

Humanity

In addition to souls, *Dark Souls* has another form of currency called humanity. Humanity comes in two forms in *Dark Souls*. It can be found as a durable item on some enemies, and it can be attained in a temporary form much like souls by killing certain enemies (this is referred to as "liquid humanity"). Humanity plays a specific role in the game. The player's character exists in a state of undeath referred to within the game's lore as "hollowed". However, while the character is never truly human, it can become externally human by expending the relatively scarce resource of humanity.

Being human in *Dark Souls* confers certain benefits and carries a specific risk. When human, the multiplayer function of *Dark Souls* becomes active. This allows players to "invade" one another's games. When a player's game is invaded, the state persists either until one of the two players is dead, or until the invading player decides to leave in the event that they give up on attempting to track down the invaded player. The invaded player cannot leave the particular zone they are in so long as the invader is present thereby preventing further progress. In addition to the multiplayer mechanic, being human provides the player with a better chance of getting useful items to randomly drop off of enemies.

Bonfires

Humanity also plays a role in relation to bonfires, another essential mechanic in *Dark Souls*. Each area in *Dark Souls* has a bonfire, which serves as a respawn point for the player. The player doesn't respawn at the closest bonfire, but rather at the last bonfire they rested at. Certain resources are restored to the character each time a player rests at a bonfire. Specifically, after resting, the character receives a full supply of Estus Flasks, which are the game's health potions, and also a gets a refill on all magic spells the player has gained the ability to cast. However, enemies in the area also respawn when the character rests with the exception of the bosses and mini-bosses, who remain dead after the player has successfully killed them. In addition, a player can expend a humanity in order to "kindle" a bonfire which results in an increase to the number of Estus Flasks restored by resting at that particular bonfire.

Lordran

While there are many aspects of *Dark Souls* that we could easily spend numerous pages describing, including the ostensible goal initially presented to the player (to ring the two Bells of Awakening), there is one final characteristic of the game that is worth mentioning up front before discussing our LP and how this particular play through can be regarded as a well played game. The setting of *Dark Souls*, known as the Kingdom of Lordran, is in many ways a uniquely designed game world. On the one hand, the scaling difficulty of encounters over the course of the game certainly carries it's own special quality. However more importantly, as Lordran unfolds, it is a fundamentally connected space. That is to say, as the player progresses further in the game, the various zones are not so much discretely designed levels as they are part of a larger geography. New locations in the game will frequently offer new perspectives on locations the player has been previously, as well as glimpses of the possible locations that lie ahead. In this respect, the process of discovering the Kingdom of Lordran in *Dark Souls* is fundamentally different from the more typical experience of exploration in a game where a new zone or level certainly holds new perils and promises, but also carries with it a feeling of being a fundamentally separate place from the player's prior location.

A Playful Pairing

In *The Well-Played Game*, Bernie DeKoven addresses the topic of the play community and its essential role in ensuring that a game is well-played. In contrasting a play community and a game community, he writes, "The nature of a play community is such that it embraces the players more than it directs us toward any particular game." (DeKoven, 2013). Moses and Paul have been part of such a community more or less since they first met in 2007. The community of play they belong to is locally defined, in large part because it embraces both analog and digital games (the former requiring physical co-presence). Its membership has fluctuated over time, and at times it has intersected with other play communities, but it has retained at least three players at its core including Paul and Moses for the duration of its existence. Currently it consists of over a dozen members, although it is rare for all of the active members of the community to play a single game together at the same time.

Embracing players and supporting a mutual enjoyment of whatever games it takes up has been an unspoken rule of this play community, even though neither Moses nor Paul had read DeKoven's work until roughly a year ago. This has led the community through a wide range of games across an array of platforms. The only genre of games the community hasn't picked up directly is organized sports, although members of the community do intersect directly with the specific game community of the Mad Rollin' Dolls flat track roller derby league. All of this is to say that Paul and Moses have always engaged in playful activities together with the sort of intentionality and willing attitude that DeKoven describes, and that their foray into both *Dark Souls* and LPs can be characterized in this manner.

Nested Play Communities

In the context of producing an LP of a single player game, the nature of both playing well and of the play community are fundamentally changed. Playing single player video games does not require active membership in a play community, although as James Paul Gee (2003) asserts, membership in an affinity group where practices of play are shared has long been a hallmark of video game play. In the context of our LP Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo, Moses and Paul have entered into a broader affinity space around *Dark Souls* that Moses has previously theorized as a nested community of practice (Wolfenstein, 2011) in that video games, LPs, and *Dark Souls* can all be considered as connected affinity spaces, some of which can be characterized as play communities. Considering both players and audience of an LP as members of a play community certainly squares with DeKoven's construction of the idea, and furthermore Smith, Obrist, & Wright (2013) have specifically explored both performer and viewer as co-participants in streaming gameplay with each role benefiting from unique incentives.

While we cannot speak to the experience of any of the small number of viewers of our channel who are not us, we can speak to the composite play activity which is recording an LP of a game. There is no doubt that play in the context of an LP consists of both actual gameplay and commenting as Smith, Obrist, & Wright describe. In fact, Paul's playful engagement with the activity is built almost entirely around engaging in speculative commentary, offering color, and in certain moments offering advice to Moses. However, by both explicit and tacit agreement between us, advice given by Paul has been extremely limited, as part of our mutual consideration of what makes a first playthrough of a game like *Dark Souls* well-played is severe gating around the player's knowledge of what lies ahead, and limiting reliance on external sources for strategy and guidance except under relatively extreme conditions.

A Playthrough in Process

For these reasons at current Moses does not know how much of the game still lies ahead. For those familiar with *Dark Souls*, as of the last LP recording session the character Johnson (currently level 30) has returned to the Northern Undead Asylum where he found the Rusted Iron Ring, but was not prepared to take on the Stray Demon there. He is currently prepared to make a serious attempt at Blight Town. Although he has been largely unsuccessful in prior attempts, but Moses has leveled Johnson up and improved his pyromancy capabilities since the last serious attempt prior to the GLS conference. In addition, Paul and Moses have noted that the time Moses has spent playing *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) has clearly transferred into increased skill in playing *Dark Souls*. That said, there is no guarantee that Moses will actually finish *Dark Souls*, as he may potentially quit the game in frustration, or "go hollow" to use the parlance of the broader *Dark Souls* community. However, Moses has shown perseverance in prior difficult games (Wolfenstein, 2012), and has in no way tired of the repeated deaths of his character Johnson. Paul believes that based on his progress thus far, Moses stands a reasonably good chance of completing the game.

Gating of information is one key characteristic that has gone into Paul and Moses's consideration of this playthrough as well-played, but it is not the only one. Another essential consideration in the analysis of this particular playthrough of *Dark Souls* as a well-played game is the pacing of the play sessions. This has varied significantly from the manner in which video games are more commonly approached. Paul has hosted all play sessions, and the saved game that Moses is playing is attached to Paul's Steam account. As such, we have met exclusively at Paul's residence (with the exception of the sessions recorded live at GLS 11) and have played by and large once a week, usually on Thursdays. Moses has avoided purchasing a copy of *Dark Souls* for himself despite his deep excitement about the game, which has provided him with no additional opportunities to practice the game, and no chance of playing past the furthest point we have reached in recording Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo. As noted above, due to the release of *Bloodborne*, Moses has gained an opportunity to practice some of the core skills of the game since both games use a very similar control scheme, but they are also distinct, and the designed challenges of both the levels and boss fights are also by and large unique even if some general principles apply to both (e.g. locked strafing, conserving stamina, etc.).

Drunk Souls

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not note that one regular (although certainly not constant) feature of our local community of play is the consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially craft beer, while gaming. Our engagement with *Dark Souls* has not strayed from this tradition of our play practice, and while the significant majority of LP sessions have begun in a sober state, beer has consistently been consumed most evenings, and in some instances play has taken place in a mild to moderately intoxicated state. This has led to the impromptu labeling of some LP sessions as "Drunk Souls" when it becomes clear that the play, commentary, or both have become impacted by alcohol consumption. Perhaps needless to say, drinking while learning to play a game can impact both the learning curve and the performance.

A Record of Learning

We began recording "Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo" in mid September of 2014. We've recorded between one and six episodes on any given evening with a mean of 2.45 recordings. As of the submission of this paper for these proceedings, 36 of the 46 play sessions recorded between the start of the LP and early December have been posted to the "Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo" YouTube channel. 10 of the episodes recorded during that time were accidentally recorded without sound, and 1 was recorded without video. While one of the episodes without audio has subsequently been dubbed over and added to the channel, the other nine have been reserved for analysis and potential future use. In addition, Paul and Moses have continued to record LP sessions since then (although the recording schedule has been somewhat hampered due to scheduling), and have a this point recorded more than 96 episodes in total including two episodes recorded at GLS during the Well Played talk, and an additional

four recorded during an evening in late July.

At least prior to GLS 11, we have been the primary audience for our own LP as Paul remarked in one of the earlier episodes, and as we have discussed both when the microphone has been on, and when it has been off on numerous occasions. However, this in no way diminishes one of the key points of this particular paper in considering the value of an LP as a representation of a well-played game in relation to learning. Although we have only barely begun analyzing "the tape" with performance analysis conducted across the first 28 recordings, one thing that has become immediately evident is the manner in which this record serves as an opportunity to chart Moses's progression in understanding the game systems of *Dark Souls* in terms of combat mechanics and strategies, the underlying models of the game as expressed through its statistical systems, and the geography and lore of Lordran.

In watching episodes of "Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo," we have observed Moses make clear and distinct progress, and at times regress, over the course of play. Especially early on, the time delimited nature of play sessions contributed directly to back sliding between the end of one evening's play, and the start of play the following week. In fact, Moses can in some instances be seen to regress and advance in his competency as a player over the course of a given evening, sometimes demonstrating less ability as the night progresses, sometimes improving steadily as the evening proceeds, and in still other instances alternately improving and declining in performance.

Live at GLS 11

The session at GLS 11 consisted of three parts. First we provided some minimal background on the topic of *Dark Souls* and engaged in an abbreviated review of the LP videos on YouTube, tracing Moses's progression through the game thus far, and highlighting some key moments in his learning as he has negotiated the Kingdom of Lordran. Following this, we conducted a live recording of a new episode of "Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo." To conclude the session, we opened up the room for discussion. Since we accidentally started the session half an hour early, we recorded an additional episode for the LP after our conversation with conference attendees.

In the session, we explored the details of Moses's progress through *Dark Souls* up until the current point in the game. Topics discussed included: learning the controls, *Dark Souls* combat tactics, understanding the weapons system, and development of geographic awareness in Lordran. Particular attention was given to the dynamic of game discovery and what it meant for Paul and Moses to look at this LP as well-played through the lens of DeKoven's *The Well-Played Game*, and in the context of their shared experiences with other games. One audience member also asked about more traditional narrative lenses for giving a game a close read. Paul noted that reading the literal narrative of *Dark Souls* is somewhat complex since there is very little direct exposition in the game, with the story embedded instead in item descriptions, snippets of optional dialogue, and the character of the environment itself. We also provided an example of how Paul provides a soft form of coaching during play, pointing to this sort of game-play as a type of distributed cognitive activity. Paul suggested that Moses explore the area around Firelink Shrine for a potential path back to the Northern Undead Asylum, primarily because the lighting in the theater made it somewhat difficult to make out key details in some of the darker areas in the game like Blight Town, but also because he recognized an opportunity for this form of exploration that Moses might otherwise not have stumbled upon.

The Suffering Continues

We have had the opportunity for one additional recording session since GLS 11 but prior to the submission of this proceedings paper. Over the course of that session, Paul provided Moses with a few additional key hints that helped him find his way back to the Northern Undead Asylum, but there was inadequate time and energy that particular evening for a further attempt at Blight Town. However, we intend to resume play and recording at the earliest opportunity as the summer progresses, and neither of us have any intention at this point in time in turning from the challenge of joyously suffering through this play experience.

As an addendum, it is worth noting that our live recording session and conference talk at GLS 11 seems to have had some unanticipated consequences. On the one hand, "Prepare to Suffer with Paul & Mo" went from seven subscribers to 13 after the conference. Individual videos have also seen a spike in viewership at the time of and since the conference in excess of the numbers that the subscription increase might indicate. Perhaps more interestingly, Paul ran into one of the session attendees since the conference and was informed that our session inspired this conference attendee to start a let's play of their own. We find this last phenomena particularly interesting in that we believe it unlikely that the existence of our LP in its own right would have been likely to inspire anyone to make one of their own. Rather, there seems to have been something transformative about the practice of giving a Well Played talk that reframed what the activity of doing an LP might be like, at least for this individual. We can hardly think of a more gratifying result of playing a game and recording an LP than inspiring others to participate

in this same playful activity.

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