

The Other Playground The Other Playground: Negotiating Precarity in *Dark Souls III* Player vs Player Encounters

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ABSTRACT

The *Dark Souls* game series (FromSoftware 2011-2016) is known for its incidental multiplayer encounters wherein players can watch, be aided by, or fight other players throughout a single-player campaign. This extended abstract outlines an assessment of how fan community-produced player vs player etiquette may respond to *Dark Souls III* PvP encounters, in which one player chooses to invade the playground of the other. In this extended abstract I will outline my examination of this etiquette, asking if it may be read as a set of formalized identity-producing moves that appeal to fairness in order to negotiate the precarity that is central to game design and player experience in *Dark Souls III*.

Keywords

precarity, multiplayer, players, game analysis, performance, fandom

INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract proposes research that assesses grammarised PvP (player vs player) mechanics in *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware 2016) and unites this with analysis of etiquette developed within player communities to negotiate PvP encounters. The research addresses how the porous nature of *Dark Souls III*'s single-player narrative campaign allows it to feature unique and incidental multiplayer interactions and aims to enquire after player devised etiquette established primarily through online fan-communities. It asks how appeals to fairness may allow players to navigate precarity in PvP gameplay and if etiquette produced by player communities can be read as a response to the risks and speculation within this precarity.

PRECARITY IN *DARK SOULS*

PvP multiplayer games have been studied extensively for their complex social implications around individual and community identity. Unique etiquettes in these game-worlds develop in response to designed playgrounds which require players to produce and manage identities in line with play experience (Boellstorff 2008). However, the incidental nature of *Dark Souls III*'s PvP mechanics break established genre conventions that typically separate combative multi-player and single-player

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play. Souls PvP takes place within player campaigns, with one player choosing to depart their game world to invade the playground of another player. Notions of subjugation and precarity are built into the Souls gameplay experience, allowing Dooghan (2023) to read the brutality central to Souls game design as an affective, procedurally-enforced representation of capitalist necropolitical realities. PvP procedure design advances this designed precarity as iterative gameplay continues to be at risk of invasion by a speculative, unpredictable opponent; removing the security and familiarity of 'trying again' in the instance and contributing to affective experiences of precarity that cannot be transcended.

PLAYING FAIR

Responding to the relationship between solo-narrative-based-play and PvP-play, Souls player communities have produced unofficial etiquette; rules for good sportsmanship which range from grammarised move-sets and performances to impositions for fair play. The use of "etiquette" follows the use of the term in online fan communities, and it encompasses many player actions from emotes to healing actions. These performances of etiquette are central to interactions which allow players to produce, signify, and embody virtual identities (Fornäs et al. 2002). Exploration of this etiquette and the procedures which they respond to allows for cogent analysis of how *Dark Souls III* players navigate identity-producing interactions in a playground that is designed to prioritise precariousness. While the appeal of play may come from the thrill of risk, an appeal to fairness within the magic circle through a 'non-playing authority' allows the dangers of the risk to be managed (Schechner 1993; Linderoth and Mortenson 2015). I assert that the etiquette developed in Souls fan communities can be read as a strategy to manage the uniquely transgressive risks and insecurities that come with *Dark Souls III*'s PvP moves: invader/invaded dynamics; sudden encounters vs planned departures; and absence of built in meta-gamic communication (Jørgensen and Karlsen 2019).

Many participants in online Souls fan communities possess a degree of shared knowledge of gestural communication, suggesting that social interactions may be managed through these expressions. Without any form of chat system, *Dark Souls III* prevents distinction between play and meta-play interaction with fellow players/opponents and as such there is no distinction between the virtual player identity and the actual player identity (Boellstorff 2008). Hence, emotes take on gestural significance. For example, bowing signifies a player's respect for etiquette rituals which prohibit certain behaviours, removing some of the unpredictability of the encounter. As the play session becomes incidentally social, adapting behaviour by, for example, not drinking estus (a healing potion) indicates inclination to manage the invader vs invaded dynamic in which the invaded game-world may, for the invader, become a playground for physical, intellectual, and spiritual conquest. Players may negotiate the invader vs invaded relationship by implementing etiquettes that favour fairness in ways that would likely come built-in to games that exist firmly in the PvP genre.

While etiquette in multiplayer gameplay is not unique to *Souls* games, in these instances it may be read as a response to game design which prioritises precariousness. Player etiquette appears to reach for fairness not necessarily offered by the game itself. This research will undertake a discursive analysis of *Dark Souls III* as text and the rhetorical procedures of and around PvP (Bogost 2007). It will assess the mediative potential of etiquette and synthesise this reading with data gathered through fan created resources and through discussion with *Dark*

Souls III players, creating an unofficial rulebook of *Souls* PvP etiquette. These tracks of enquiry will synthesise to make assertions based upon the findings: couching the interpreted data in close analysis of procedure in *Dark Souls* PvP mechanics, and literature that concerns play, identity, ritual, and performance.

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