

Why Do We Suffer for Fun? Ordeal Pleasure in Souls-like Games

Flint Xiaofeng Fan

ETH Zurich
Gloriastrasse 35, 8092
Zurich, Switzerland
fxf@u.nus.edu

ABSTRACT

Souls-like games turn repeated failure into a distinctive form of satisfaction. This paper theorizes that process as ordeal pleasure: the transformation of severe but trusted difficulty into retrospective and prospective meaning. The Ordeal Pleasure Framework (OPF) identifies a core dyad and a social amplifier. Ludic Cultivation makes failure usable by linking fair, learnable adversity to mastery. Aspirational Deferment makes present frustration valuable by orienting players toward future competence. Communal Mythopoesis amplifies this core through shared ordeal stories, lore interpretation, and cultural memory. Through theoretical synthesis and comparative analysis of *Dark Souls*, *Elden Ring*, *Hollow Knight*, *Lords of the Fallen*, and *The Surge*, the paper shows how different configurations intensify, loosen, or undermine ordeal pleasure. OPF contributes a temporal account of competence frustration, a specific account of difficulty-coupled social meaning, and diagnostic concepts for designing difficult games that make frustration feel meaningful rather than arbitrary.

Keywords

ordeal pleasure; Souls-like games; self-determination theory; flow theory; desirable difficulties; player motivation; communal meaning-making

INTRODUCTION

A familiar pattern in *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022) involves a player returning to Malenia, Blade of Miquella, long after a more frictionless game would have invited them to move on. The player studies the rhythm of the Waterfowl Dance, dies, returns, revises timing, dies again, and gradually turns what first appeared impossible into something readable. Qualitative studies of Souls-related communities document players making social-emotional sense of challenge, repeated failure, persistence, and support (Czauderna, von Gillern, and Robinson 2024; Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist 2025). Bandai Namco's May 22, 2025 press release suggests that this design lineage has achieved mainstream reach: *Elden Ring* had shipped more than 30 million units worldwide (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2025).

Many games involve failure; Souls-like games raise the more specific question of why prolonged frustration can feel meaningful, and why eventual satisfaction depends partly on the history of difficulty that preceded it. The pattern is better understood

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through benign masochism than through clinical masochism. Rozin et al. (2013) describe benign masochism as the enjoyment of aversive experience under conditions of perceived safety and control, a framing that helps explain why difficult play need not collapse into pathology. Juul (2013) similarly identifies a paradox of failure: players seek games that predictably make them feel incompetent, frustrated, or unhappy. Wilson and Sicart's (2010) concept of abusive game design adds a design-side account of how antagonistic systems can create meaning rather than mere irritation.

These accounts clarify why aversive play can be pleasurable while leaving the Souls-like configuration underdescribed. Flow theory predicts optimal experience when challenge and skill are balanced (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Chen 2007), whereas Souls-likes often ask players to inhabit imbalance for extended periods. Self-Determination Theory explains game motivation through competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski 2006), while OPF foregrounds how competence frustration can amplify later satisfaction. Learning theory explains how difficulty can support mastery (Bjork 1994; Bjork and Bjork 2011); OPF asks how structured friction becomes intrinsically valued. Community and fan studies explain collective interpretation; OPF asks how difficulty and interpretation become tightly coupled in Souls-like cultures.

This paper therefore asks: under what conditions does difficult play become ordeal pleasure? Core ordeal pleasure names the satisfaction produced when Ludic Cultivation and Aspirational Deferment turn trusted difficulty into evidence of growing capacity. Community-amplified ordeal pleasure names the fuller configuration in which Communal Mythopoesis transmits, intensifies, and stabilizes that value across players and communities. Pleasure and meaning should be distinguished here: meaning is the interpretive condition that makes frustration bearable, while pleasure is the temporally distributed satisfaction produced when present aversion can later be read as earned competence and prospectively felt as evidence that mastery remains possible. The term names a specific configuration within difficult play and Souls-like engagement. Some players primarily seek completion, some avoid community discourse, and some disengage when difficulty becomes too costly. Nguyen's (2020) distinction between achievement players, who prioritize winning, and striving players, who value the process of challenge, is especially useful here. The hinge is trust: frustration sustains ordeal pleasure only when players believe it is fair, legible, and learnable enough to become future competence.

The Ordeal Pleasure Framework (OPF) identifies a core dyad and a social amplifier. Ludic Cultivation describes mastery through iterative engagement with fair, learnable adversity. Aspirational Deferment describes the temporal orientation by which present frustration is interpreted as investment in future competence. Together, these mechanisms explain how failure can become valuable before it becomes pleasurable. Communal Mythopoesis describes the collective practices that transmit and intensify this value by turning difficult encounters into shared stories, interpretive problems, ritual phrases, and cultural memory. The central claim is limited but substantive: these mechanisms can align as mutually reinforcing conditions in Souls-like engagements, while their prevalence, strength, and causal relations remain hypotheses for future empirical testing. Their reinforcement helps explain the distinctive intensity and durability of Souls-like engagement while making the framework useful for both theoretical explanation and design diagnosis.

Methodologically, the paper proceeds through abductive theoretical synthesis (Dubois and Gadde 2002). It moves between existing theory, game design analysis, empirical player studies, and published discourse analyses. The core corpus diagnostic: it follows the Souls-like lineage from Dark Souls (FromSoftware 2011) through the initial release of Elden Ring (FromSoftware 2022) because these cases make the proposed configuration especially visible. Later studies are used when they analyze player accounts rooted in that period, especially Dark Souls and Elden Ring Reddit discussions (Czauderna, von Gillern, and Robinson 2024; Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist 2025). The paper's contribution is theoretical integration: a framework for explaining how difficulty, temporal motivation, learning, and community can operate as a coordinated configuration.

The argument begins by showing why existing accounts explain only parts of ordeal pleasure, then develops OPF through its three mechanisms and their interaction. A comparative section uses Dark Souls, Elden Ring, Hollow Knight, Lords of the Fallen, and The Surge as illustrative contrasts selected for diagnostic range. The discussion closes by identifying theoretical contributions, design implications, limitations, and future empirical tests.

BACKGROUND: PARTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

The phenomenon addressed here sits at the intersection of several established literatures. Each explains part of the problem. None alone gives a sufficiently precise account of why sustained difficulty can become meaningful, why it does not do so in every difficult game, or why some Souls-like communities develop unusually durable shared interpretive cultures.

Failure, Emotional Challenge, and the Ludic Sublime

Juul's (2013) paradox of failure and Wilson and Sicart's (2010) account of abusive game design establish that frustration and negative affect can be integral to play. The emotional challenge literature further shows that negative emotions can be appreciated in games, especially when they are embedded in meaningful contexts (Bopp, Mekler, and Opwis 2016; Bopp, Opwis, and Mekler 2018). These works are crucial because they prevent difficult play from being misread as a merely pathological or irrational taste for punishment.

Daniel Vella's (2015) account of the ludic sublime is especially important for Souls games. Vella describes the aesthetic tension between the player's drive toward mastery and the mystery or unknowability of the system. OPF builds from this tension but specifies three mechanisms by which it is sustained in practice: Cultivation captures the mastery side of the tension; Deferment captures the temporal experience of dwelling between present inability and anticipated mastery; and Mythopoesis captures the collective work of turning opacity into shared meaning.

Flow Theory and the Temporal Blind Spot

Flow theory predicts optimal experience when skill and challenge are balanced (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Chen 2007). This model is useful for naming one kind of pleasurable absorption, but it fits Souls-like play only partially. In Dark Souls III, Petralito et al. (2017) surveyed 95 participants and found that achievement and learning moments strongly contributed to positive experiences even though these

moments were enabled by difficulties, failures, and avatar death. The relevant pleasure was tied not just to balance, but to difficulty and failure being converted into achievement and learning. Figure 1 schematizes this conventional flow relation between challenge and skill.

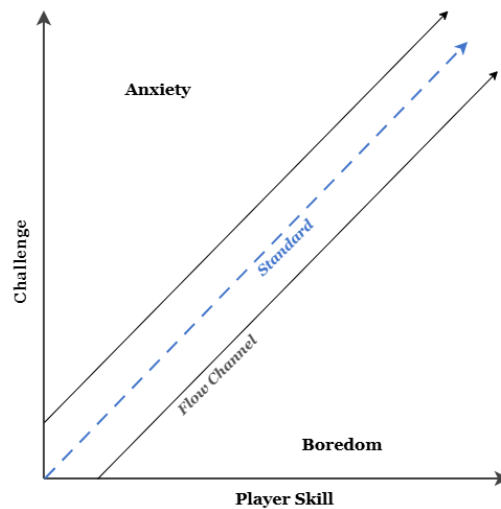


Figure 1: The Flow Channel. The band represents Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow channel, where challenge and skill are roughly balanced. Flow theory remains useful for describing present-moment equilibrium, but it does not by itself explain why players endure long periods above the channel before competence catches up.

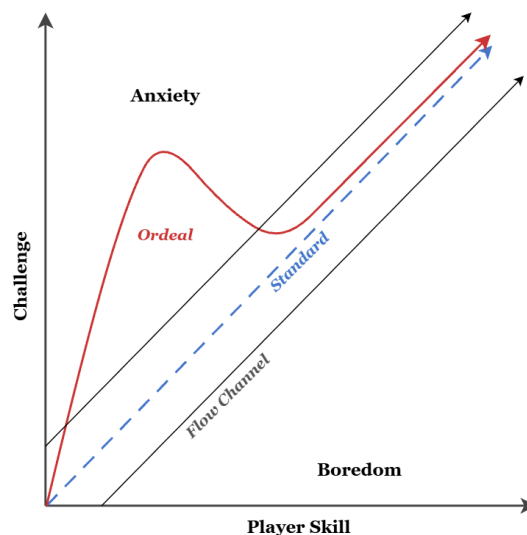


Figure 2: The Ordeal Trajectory. The shaded band adapts the flow-channel relation between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Chen 2007). The Souls-like trajectory moves through an extended imbalance in which challenge exceeds current skill; OPF treats that interval as a temporally structured investment in future mastery.

A charitable reading of flow theory can accommodate part of this phenomenon: frustration may be tolerated because players anticipate eventual flow at a higher level of skill. OPF accepts that possibility while specifying what flow theory leaves comparatively underdescribed: the temporal and retrospective texture of ordeal play. Souls-like players are not always already in flow; they often act from a relation to future mastery. The frustration phase can become meaningful before it becomes balanced. Figure 2 visualizes this contrast by placing the frustration phase above the flow channel before competence catches up.

Self-Determination Theory and Competence Frustration

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains motivation through the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000; Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski 2006). Souls-like games engage all three: players develop competence, choose builds and routes, and often participate in social worlds of advice, messages, summoning, and lore interpretation. Yet SDT leaves a competence-frustration problem. If repeated failure frustrates competence, why can it deepen the satisfaction of eventual success?

Recent work on competence frustration and compensation effects suggests that frustrated competence can generate behavioral repair efforts (Meng et al. 2024). That account helps, but it does not fully capture the affective transformation at stake in ordeal pleasure. The eventual victory matters because the prior frustration has been narrativized as effort, growth, and proof. SDT also treats relatedness at a high level of abstraction. OPF specifies a more particular social form: interpretive relatedness, in which players bond not only by being together, but by making shared sense of difficult worlds and difficult experiences.

Learning Theory and the Intrinsic Gap

Learning theory explains why Souls-like difficulty can be effective. Bjork's (1994) concept of desirable difficulties shows that conditions that impair immediate performance may improve long-term retention and transfer. Bjork and Bjork (2011) further emphasize that making learning harder can be beneficial when difficulty remains productive and avoids arbitrariness. Game-based learning research likewise frames games as environments for cultivating cognitive and noncognitive skills (Shute, Ventura, and Ke 2015).

Game studies has also already theorized the temporal dimension of play. Arsenault and Perron's (2009) magic cycle model treats gameplay as a spiral of questions, hypotheses, tests, and expanding mastery across multiple interpretive dimensions. This is highly relevant to Souls-like play, where players learn not only enemy patterns, but also spatial routes, build systems, world structure, and genre conventions.

The remaining gap is intrinsic and aesthetic. Learning theory can explain how players learn from repeated death. OPF adds the question of why that process becomes pleasurable, culturally resonant, and valued in itself. It addresses this gap by treating learning as cultivated ordeal: a demanding process whose difficulty becomes part of its value.

Interpretive Community and Shared Meaning

Community and fan studies address this social side from another direction. Fish's (1980) interpretive communities show that meaning emerges through shared conventions of reading; Jenkins's (2006) account of participatory culture emphasizes circulation, collective elaboration, and fan labor; and Perreault and Lynch (2022) frame gaming discourse as an interpretive community in which players negotiate meaning together. These accounts explain why game meaning can become collective, but they remain broader than the Souls-like problem. OPF narrows the question to difficulty-coupled interpretation: how players turn hard encounters, obscure worlds, deaths, warnings, jokes, and lore fragments into shared evidence that endured difficulty was meaningful. Community therefore enters the framework as the social process through which individual cultivation and deferment can become narratable, transmissible, and culturally durable.

These partial explanations call for an account of how difficulty, learning, motivation, and shared interpretation become mutually reinforcing. Flow, SDT, learning theory, and fan studies each name a real part of the phenomenon. OPF specifies how their arrangement matters. A player can learn without valuing the learning process, persist without trusting the difficulty, or join a community without treating the game as a shared ordeal. OPF identifies the configuration in which these otherwise separable elements begin to reinforce one another.

THE ORDEAL PLEASURE FRAMEWORK

OPF distinguishes core ordeal pleasure from community-amplified ordeal pleasure. Core ordeal pleasure emerges when trusted resistance becomes usable through Ludic Cultivation and motivationally durable through Aspirational Deferment. Communal Mythopoesis extends that core by giving players shared language, stories, and interpretive objects through which difficulty becomes culturally durable.

Ludic Cultivation: the skill-forming and trust-building side of ordeal pleasure, grounded in mastery through iterative engagement with fair, learnable adversity. The system must remain trustworthy: if rules are legible and consistent, repeated failure can shape skill rather than shatter trust.

Aspirational Deferment: the temporal-motivational side of ordeal pleasure, in which present frustration is treated as future mastery in formation. The player endures present frustration because the process is understood as transformative work, not mere waiting.

Communal Mythopoesis: collective construction of difficulty-coupled meaning. Players turn struggle into ordeal stories, ritual phrases, boss legends, lore interpretation, challenge norms, and cultural memory. Ordinary advice counts only when it helps make the ordeal narratable or meaningful, not merely when it solves a problem.

Together, these mechanisms specify how the ludic sublime can be sustained in practice. Cultivation structures resistance; Deferment structures the player's temporal relation to that resistance; Mythopoesis circulates and intensifies the meaning of endured resistance across players and communities. Figure 3 offers a heuristic for comparing configurations of difficult play. Comparative cases suggest

that weakening one mechanism changes the intensity or character of ordeal pleasure, while players and difficult-game experiences may engage different subsets of the framework.

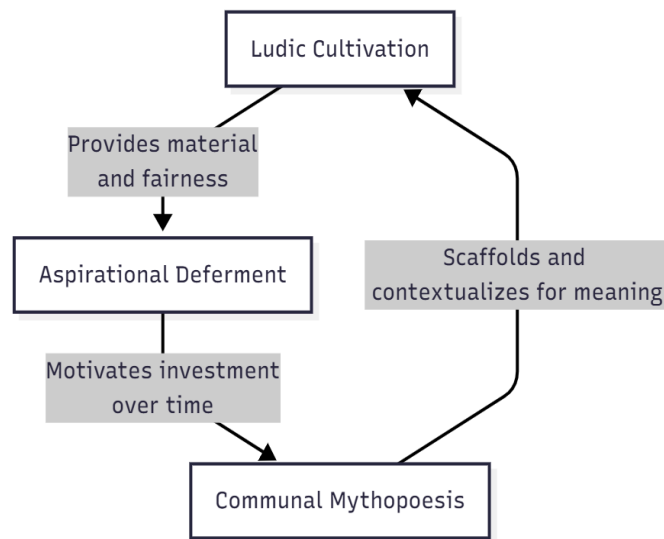


Figure 3: The Ordeal Pleasure Framework. Ludic Cultivation, Aspirational Deferment, and Communal Mythopoesis can form a reinforcing cycle. Fair adversity provides material for mastery-oriented goals; long-term investment motivates social and interpretive participation; and collective meaning-making can scaffold individual cultivation.

Ludic Cultivation: Mastery Through Structured Adversity

Ludic Cultivation is the skill-forming side of ordeal pleasure: mastery development through iterative engagement with fair, learnable adversity. Drawing on Aarseth's (1997) account of ergodic literature, Souls-like games demand active, skill-dependent traversal rather than passive reception. The key design condition is trusted difficulty. Players must have reason to believe that failure can be converted into knowledge. Cultivation therefore establishes the trust condition for Deferment: players must believe failure is legible, fair, and learnable before frustration can be interpreted as investment rather than waste.

Three conditions matter. First, difficulty must be legible: enemies telegraph attacks, rules remain consistent, and deaths can be retrospectively understood. Second, it must be learnable: repeated attempts reveal patterns that can be acted upon. Third, it must preserve viable agency: different builds, routes, timings, and strategies allow players to interpret mastery as earned agency. When these conditions hold, death functions pedagogically rather than punitively.

Souls checkpoint systems can be read as game-specific implementations of desirable difficulty, though this analogy should be treated as a cautious adaptation from laboratory memory research. Bonfires and Sites of Grace create repeated returns through already learned spaces. Boss attempts interleave pattern recognition, movement, stamina management, healing, spatial positioning, and equipment choices. Reused enemies in new contexts encourage adaptation rather than rote

memorization. These design features make progress feel uneven in the short term but durable in the long term.

This is also why fairness is more than a design virtue in the ordinary evaluative sense. It is the epistemic basis of cultivation. A difficult encounter can be severe, obscure, or emotionally taxing and still remain productive if repeated attempts reveal what kind of knowledge the player lacked. Conversely, a less objectively difficult encounter can break the ordeal structure if failure appears disconnected from readable action. Cultivation therefore depends on the player's confidence that the system is answerable, even when the answer is demanding.

Existing empirical and theoretical work supports this reading. Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist (2025) report that players describe *Dark Souls* as cultivating resilience and perseverance. Welsh (2020) shows how mastery becomes embedded in community practice, from speedrunning to late-stage replay. Ludic Cultivation therefore addresses flow theory's temporal blind spot by making failure into usable information. It also clarifies the design difference between hard fun (Lazzaro 2004) and arbitrary punishment: the former preserves a credible path from inability to competence.

Aspirational Deferment: Growth Through Deferred Mastery

Aspirational Deferment is the temporal-motivational side of ordeal pleasure: the orientation by which players treat present frustration as evidence of future mastery in formation rather than as a meaningless delay. It differs from the classic delay-of-gratification model associated with Mischel, Ebbsen, and Zeiss (1972), in which the subject waits for a larger later reward. In *Souls*-like play, the player does not merely wait. The player works through aversive states in order to transform their own capacities.

This mechanism draws on competence motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000) and growth mindset theory (Dweck 2006), but it is more specifically ludic and temporal. A player repeatedly fighting a boss is not simply seeking the extrinsic reward of completion. The player is also building the future self capable of completion. The appeal depends on a perceived trajectory: early impossibility becomes partial understanding, then controlled execution, then mastery.

Petralito et al.'s (2017) findings help explain why frustration and achievement are so closely entangled in *Dark Souls III*: players' reported achievement and learning moments were enabled by prior difficulty and failure. Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist (2025) similarly show Reddit participants connecting the game's difficulty to persistence and self-described coping with depression. Players may persist without experiencing frustration itself as meaningful. Persistence under frustration alone falls short of ordeal pleasure. The key question is whether frustration feels convertible into mastery, or merely like a cost paid to reach rewards elsewhere.

This temporal reframing also explains why designers must be careful with “come back later” structures. Returning later can support Deferment when it allows players to gather tools, experiment, and regain agency. It can undermine Deferment when it simply permits bypassing skill development, producing comfort detached from transformation. The mechanism is strongest when later success remains intelligibly connected to earlier effort.

Communal Mythopoesis: Collective Meaning-Making

Communal Mythopoesis is the collective construction of difficulty-coupled narrative, meaning, and cultural memory through shared ordeal discourse and collaborative interpretation. It is narrower than generic multiplayer relatedness, social support, or strategy sharing. Advice becomes mythopoetic only when it helps convert difficulty into a story about persistence, mastery, identity, place, or communal memory. Strategy guides help players win; mythopoesis helps players understand why the struggle is worth recounting.

Two analytically distinct modes should be separated. The first is shared ordeal bonding: commiseration, encouragement, solidarity, and collective identity generated by facing similar difficulties. The second is lore hermeneutics: the interpretive labor of reconstructing cryptic narrative fragments through item descriptions, environmental clues, discussion threads, videos, and wikis. Souls-like communities often combine these modes, but they are not identical. A player may care deeply about shared struggle while ignoring lore, or may become absorbed in interpretation while avoiding multiplayer assistance.

The design substrate matters. Cryptic lore, memorable bosses, asynchronous messages, bloodstains, phantoms, summon signs, and gaps in explicit explanation make other players' presence visible without making it compulsory. These systems can transform isolated failure into a shared condition. Seeing a bloodstain marks another player's death; reading a message suggests another player's prior attention to the same space; summoning turns individual blockage into temporary cooperation. Difficulty moments become collective points of reference precisely because they are memorable enough to be narrated, joked about, explained, and revisited. Figure 4 illustrates one such asynchronous trace: a player-authored message that turns persistence into visible in-world encouragement.



Figure 4: Asynchronous message mechanic in Dark Souls II (FromSoftware 2014). The player-authored message “Don't give up, skeleton” illustrates how Souls games make social support visible within the play world. Messages can provide strategic information, humor, and encouragement while preserving the feel of solitary traversal.

Published discourse analyses suggest that these practices can scale into substantial collective labor. Czauderna, von Gillern, and Robinson's (2024) study of an Elden Ring Reddit discussion thread reports 2,363 comments totaling 116,911 words and analyzes the thread as an informal social-emotional learning space. Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist (2025) show how "Don't you dare go Hollow" becomes more than in-game language: in the Reddit material they analyze, players use it as a symbolic resource for persistence, self-described coping with depression, and community support. Perreault and Lynch's (2022) account of gaming as interpretive community helps locate this practice within a broader theory of shared hermeneutics.

These studies most directly support shared ordeal bonding: players convert difficulty into encouragement, symbolic persistence, and communal memory. Lore hermeneutics is a related but distinct extension, in which opacity itself becomes collectively interpretable. Separating the two keeps Mythopoesis from collapsing into generic social support.

Communal Mythopoesis therefore helps address the intrinsic gap in learning theory. Individual suffering can become part of a larger cultural memory. Players do not only learn to dodge, parry, route, or build. They learn that others have struggled here, that the struggle is narratable, and that participation in the game's culture can give difficulty a significance beyond completion. Communal Mythopoesis therefore intensifies community-amplified ordeal pleasure: communal traces and interpretations make the significance of difficulty more durable and shareable, while socially distant players may still experience core ordeal pleasure through cultivation and deferment.

Core Dyad and Social Amplifier

OPF is asymmetric rather than simply triadic. Ludic Cultivation and Aspirational Deferment form the core: fair, learnable adversity makes the growth trajectory credible, and future-oriented persistence makes present failure intelligible as competence in formation. Communal Mythopoesis is the social amplifier: it can intensify and transmit ordeal pleasure by making failure shared, narratable, and culturally durable, while core ordeal pleasure can still occur where trust and future-oriented mastery remain intact.

OPF treats this interaction configurationally: weakening one mechanism changes the form of engagement, even when difficult play remains satisfying. The diagnostic value lies in the shift: when trust, temporal investment, or shared interpretation weakens, the same difficult game may remain satisfying while moving from community-amplified ordeal pleasure toward a thinner or differently configured form of difficult-play satisfaction. The evidence reviewed here supports a plausible synthesis and frames testable questions for future research. Petralito et al. (2017) link positive experience to difficulty and failure; Welsh (2020) and Väkevä, Hämäläinen, and Lindqvist (2025) describe community practices that reframe struggle; and Czauderna, von Gillern, and Robinson (2024) show affective support and social-emotional processing within Elden Ring discussion. Together these studies suggest reinforcement, but future empirical work must test whether the mechanisms are causally interdependent, sequentially related, or simply often co-present.

The trust relation between Cultivation and Deferment is the most important internal distinction. Perceived unfairness need not collapse engagement all at once. It first

damages Cultivation by weakening trust in the learning contract. Deferment may persist temporarily, but it changes character: players endure the game to reach something else, and frustration itself loses its status as transformative work. The comparative expectation is correspondingly modest. Games that weaken one mechanism may still produce excellent difficult play, but they may produce a different form of engagement. The fuller Souls-like pattern is most visible when difficulty, time, and community continually refer back to one another.

This distinction also clarifies why persistence is an ambiguous behavioral signal. A player may continue because the game is teaching them, because they want a later reward, because a community frames the challenge as meaningful, or because the irritating section blocks access to a better part of the game. The first and third cases more directly support ordeal pleasure; the second does so when the later reward is experienced as evidence of transformed capacity rather than mere access. The framework therefore treats motivation as a question of what kind of meaning continued play attaches to frustration.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONFIGURATIONS OF ORDEAL PLEASURE

The following cases are organized as diagnostic contrasts of the framework. They clarify the framework's distinctions across a reference configuration, a permissive FromSoftware variant, a high-engagement adjacent title, and two partial implementations. The aim is diagnostic comparison: OPF differentiates among difficult games by tracking how fair adversity, temporal investment, and communal meaning-making enter different configurations, including adjacent difficult games that do not reproduce the full Souls-like pattern.

Reference Configuration: Dark Souls

Dark Souls (FromSoftware 2011) remains the clearest reference case because its structure gives relatively little room to avoid the ordeal while preserving strong confidence that the ordeal is learnable. Routes can be explored in different orders, but the game repeatedly returns players to constrained encounters, legible enemy patterns, environmental traps, and checkpoint-based repetition. Its narrative opacity and asynchronous social systems also make difficulty culturally shareable. The result is not simply a hard game, but a design in which mastery, delay, and interpretation are tightly linked.

Later FromSoftware titles such as Bloodborne (FromSoftware 2015) and Dark Souls III (FromSoftware 2016) refine this configuration in different directions, but Dark Souls remains analytically useful because it makes the framework's baseline most visible. The game does not merely ask whether players can overcome a challenge. It asks whether they can learn to inhabit a world in which overcoming, interpreting, and remembering are bound together.

High Integration, Permissive Structure: Elden Ring

Elden Ring brings the three mechanisms together, but through a more permissive structure than earlier Souls titles. It functions as a broad-access configuration of ordeal pleasure.

The open world can strengthen Ludic Cultivation and Aspirational Deferment by giving players ways to manage frustration. A player who cannot defeat a boss can explore elsewhere, find new tools, change build direction, and return with expanded capacities. This can preserve motivation without forcing immediate abandonment. At the same time, the same affordance can dilute cultivation. Players may over-level, bypass a skill bottleneck, or experience uneven tuning that interrupts the sense of fair adversity. Felczak's (2025) analysis of the "git gud" discourse around Elden Ring is useful here because it treats the game as complicating the mastery demands associated with earlier FromSoftware work.

The game's Communal Mythopoesis is nevertheless intense. Although Bandai Namco's press materials describe Elden Ring as created under Hidetaka Miyazaki's guidance and based on a mythological story by George R. R. Martin (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2025), the stronger evidence for mythopoesis lies in player discourse rather than authorship publicity. Publicly visible player discourse around Elden Ring, including social-emotional processing and "git gud" debates, show communal meaning-making in studied public discussions (Czauderna, von Gillern, and Robinson 2024; Felczak 2025). Across the broader Souls lineage, mastery and replay practices also circulate communally (Welsh 2020). Whether such discourse feeds back into individual persistence remains a hypothesis for future empirical work.

Boundary Configuration: Hollow Knight

Hollow Knight (Team Cherry 2017) is an instructive contrast because it is an excellent difficult game with strong Cultivation and Deferment but a different relation to community. Its combat is precise, its late-game challenges demand practice, and its world supports long-term progression. Yet its atmosphere of loneliness and ruin is central to the experience. Stronger communal visibility inside the game might have weakened that aesthetic.

Based on design analysis, Hollow Knight offers rich lore and supports external interpretation, but its community traces are less continuously embedded in ordinary traversal than in Souls. Unlike Souls, Hollow Knight does not embed other players' deaths, warnings, summons, or messages into ordinary traversal. Its lore hermeneutics can be rich, while its shared ordeal bonding is less attached to death, return, and in-world traces of other players. This produces a different configuration of ordeal pleasure. Hollow Knight illustrates that cultivation and deferment can sustain deep engagement without the same degree of difficulty-coupled communal myth-making. It is therefore a boundary case that prevents OPF from becoming over-prescriptive.

Partial Configurations: Trust and Mythopoesis

The next two cases function as hypothesis-generating probes for partial integration. They show what OPF predicts when borrowed Souls-like conventions leave the learning contract, temporal payoff, or mythopoetic scaffolding less securely connected; reception evidence remains only a coarse contextual signal. Lords of the Fallen (Deck13 Interactive and CI Games 2014) adopts many Souls-like conventions. The Metacritic PlayStation 4 critic-review page consulted on May 13, 2026, listed a 68 Metascore from 45 critic reviews, categorized as "Mixed or Average" (Metacritic n.d.-a), but this is only a coarse, platform-specific reception signal; the stronger claim remains the paper's design-reading hypothesis. The design risk is perceived

arbitrariness: if players read failure as insufficiently instructive, the trust needed to treat repeated failure as future competence in formation may weaken. In that case, Cultivation may weaken first and Deferment may become unstable because failure no longer feels reliably convertible into mastery.

The Surge (Deck13 Interactive 2017) offers a competent mechanical variant. The Metacritic PlayStation 4 critic-review page consulted on May 13, 2026, listed a 73 Metascore from 58 critic reviews, categorized as “Mixed or Average” (Metacritic n.d.-b), but this is only a coarse, platform-specific reception signal. It partially emphasizes cultivation through combat and progression systems, and its science-fiction setting provides clear goals. As a design-reading hypothesis, The Surge's clearer industrial setting and more conventional progression appear to offer fewer occasions for large-scale mythopoetic labor, clarifying its partial configuration within OPF. The game can support satisfying difficult play while producing a less culturally durable shared ordeal than Dark Souls or Elden Ring.

Table 1 highlights a central point: ordeal pleasure is architecturally complex. Designers cannot reproduce the Souls-like pattern by adding difficulty, ambiguity, or community features in isolation. What matters is the relation among fair adversity, temporal investment, and shared meaning.

Game	Ludic Cultivation	Aspirational Deferment	Communal Mythopoesis	Configurational diagnosis
Dark Souls	Emphasized: legible adversity, constrained routes, teachable deaths	Emphasized: repeated return and clear mastery trajectory	Emphasized: messages, bloodstains, cryptic lore, durable shared memory	Reference configuration: tightly integrated ordeal pleasure
Elden Ring	Emphasized but permissive: open-world routing can support or bypass cultivation	Emphasized: long horizon, tools, exploration, return later	Emphasized: large-scale interpretation and cultural touchstones	Broad-access configuration: strong ordeal pleasure with more permissive routes
Hollow Knight	Emphasized: precise, fair, demanding combat and traversal	Emphasized: long-term progression and optional late challenges	Less difficulty-coupled: rich lore, but solitude remains central	Adjacent configuration: strong cultivation and deferment with less difficulty-coupled mythopoesis
Lords of the Fallen (2014)	Design-reading hypothesis: trust in difficulty may weaken when failure feels arbitrary	Design-reading hypothesis: frustration may remain external to growth	Less visible: community discourse appears less central	Risk configuration: weakened trust can turn difficulty into friction
The Surge	Partially emphasized: competent mechanical challenge	Partially emphasized: clear goals and progression	Less central: less ambiguity and smaller cultural footprint	Partial configuration: competent cultivation with less visible mythopoetic scaffolding

Table 1: Comparative summary of mechanism integration in illustrative titles. Ratings are heuristic interpretations based on design analysis and secondary reception evidence.

The cases also constrain the framework. Dark Souls illustrates the reference configuration, while Elden Ring suggests how broad appeal may come partly from relaxing that configuration. Hollow Knight illustrates how strong difficulty and long-term mastery can flourish without the same difficulty-coupled community apparatus.

Lords of the Fallen and The Surge clarify how borrowed conventions may leave trust, deferment, or mythopoetic scaffolding less securely integrated across a design. The comparison matters because OPF identifies relations among mechanisms across different configurations of difficult play.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Contributions

First, OPF adds a temporal account of competence frustration to motivation theory. Flow theory and SDT are strongest when explaining present-moment engagement or need satisfaction. Aspirational Deferment emphasizes that players can render present frustration meaningful by orienting toward future mastery. This specifies the conditions under which competence frustration can be interpreted as developmental.

Second, OPF specifies a social amplifier beyond generic relatedness. Communal Mythopoesis identifies interpretive relatedness: a mode of social motivation grounded in difficulty-coupled meaning-making rather than mere connection, cooperation, advice, or competition. This links game motivation to interpretive community theory (Fish 1980), participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), and game-specific accounts of interpretive communities (Perreault and Lynch 2022). It also clarifies why shared ordeal bonding and lore hermeneutics should be distinguished even when they overlap.

Third, the framework offers a configurational account of difficult play. The relation between the core dyad and the social amplifier helps explain why Souls-like engagement can become unusually intense while leaving room for excellent difficult games organized around other arrangements. OPF therefore functions as a hypothesis-generating framework for identifying how difficult play becomes meaningful.

Design Implications

Design for trusted cultivation. Difficult encounters should remain readable, learnable, and retrospectively intelligible. The player should be able to understand why they failed and what they might try next. “Git gud” works only when getting good is plausibly achievable through practice.

Architect temporal investment. Long games create room for Aspirational Deferment, but only if players receive evidence that effort matters. Early challenges should become manageable; new tools should reframe old problems; and alternate routes should preserve the relation between effort and mastery so players are not simply paying frustration as a toll for unrelated rewards.

Give players material worth interpreting. Cryptic lore is not sufficient by itself. Productive ambiguity requires a substrate dense enough to reward inference. Empty obscurity creates confusion; strategically distributed fragments create interpretive labor.

Design optional community scaffolding. Messages, ghosts, bloodstains, summoning, and asynchronous traces can make solidarity visible without forcing synchronous play.

These systems support players who want community while preserving the solitary texture valued by others.

Use the framework diagnostically. When a difficult game fails to sustain investment, the question is not only whether it is too hard. It is which mechanism is weakest: whether difficulty is untrusted, whether the temporal path to growth is unclear, or whether the game offers too little material for shared meaning.

These design implications work as diagnostic questions. Does the game give players reason to trust failure? Does its temporal structure preserve the relation between present cost and later capability? Does its world or community offer material through which struggle can become narratable? Different games may answer these questions differently. The value of OPF for design is to help identify which part of a difficult experience is doing motivational work and which part is merely creating friction.

Limitations, Boundary Conditions, and Future Work

The framework has several limitations. First, it is built largely from successful and culturally visible cases. This creates survivorship bias. Players who disengaged from *Dark Souls* or *Elden Ring* under the same conditions are less visible in the materials used here. OPF therefore explains one pathway through which ordeal pleasure emerges for some players, including a clear place for disengagement and resistance.

Second, player variance matters. Some players actively avoid community discourse yet still experience strong cultivation and deferment. Others rely heavily on guides, summons, or build templates and still find the ordeal meaningful. Rather than treating these differences as exceptions, future work should study how players occupy different roles: solitary strivers, guide-assisted apprentices, lore interpreters, communal supporters, speedrunners, and completion-oriented achievement players.

Third, Communal Mythopoesis raises a community-formation problem. If community intensifies ordeal pleasure, how does the community form before the intensifier exists? The likely answer is temporal compounding. Early adopters can be drawn by cultivation and deferment alone; their discourse later becomes scaffolding for subsequent players. This makes Mythopoesis an accumulative amplifier.

Future research should test OPF empirically. Longitudinal studies could track players across first encounters, repeated failure, guide use, community participation, and eventual mastery. Experimental studies could manipulate perceived fairness, checkpoint spacing, lore ambiguity, or the visibility of other players' failures. Comparative discourse studies could separate shared ordeal bonding from lore hermeneutics and measure how each relates to persistence.

Two hypotheses follow directly. H1: reducing lore ambiguity while holding difficulty constant should reduce lore-hermeneutic community interpretation more than short-term learning. H2: increasing perceived arbitrariness while holding nominal difficulty constant should first reduce Ludic Cultivation and, through that weakened trust, reduce Aspirational Deferment, because players will be less likely to interpret failure as convertible into mastery. Both hypotheses are falsifiable and would help determine whether OPF describes causal reinforcement or only a persuasive interpretive pattern.

The framework may also transfer only partially to other difficult genres. Precision platformers such as *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games 2018), roguelikes such as *Spelunky Classic* (Mossmouth 2009), bullet-hell games, and competitive games all involve difficulty, repetition, and mastery. Yet they differ in narrative ambiguity, community structure, and the relation between skill development and shared meaning. Adjacent DiGRA work on *Black Myth: Wukong's* cultural authenticity, hybridity, and ludonarrative resonance suggests that mythological and cultural specificity can also shape global game meaning (Fan 2025). OPF should therefore be applied comparatively, with attention to where cultural resonance and ordeal pleasure overlap, diverge, or reinforce one another.

CONCLUSION

This paper asks why some players come to experience difficult play as pleasurable without treating frustration itself as intrinsically pleasant. The Ordeal Pleasure Framework argues that core ordeal pleasure emerges when Ludic Cultivation and Aspirational Deferment convert trusted difficulty into temporally distributed satisfaction; Communal Mythopoesis then amplifies this core when shared stories, lore interpretation, and cultural memory make struggle narratable across players.

The paper's central claim is comparative and configurational. Meaningful difficulty appears across many arrangements, and players vary in which mechanisms they engage. The Souls-like configuration can intensify and stabilize ordeal pleasure when fair adversity, future-oriented persistence, and collective meaning-making reinforce one another. OPF identifies conditions under which difficult play may become persistently meaningful, socially amplified, and intrinsically valued, while leaving the strength and causal order of those conditions for future empirical work.

The ordeal matters when difficulty can be interpreted as transformation rather than obstruction. In that configuration, frustration becomes part of how pleasure is produced.

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