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Self-determination theory applied to Dark Souls: fostering motivation in video game communities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Video games have emerged as a significant field of study in psychology, particularly in understanding human motivation. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that human motivation is driven by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Objective: To examine how the basic psychological needs outlined by Self-Determination Theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are fulfilled through the design of Dark Souls and the interactions within its online communities.

Method: This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis of comments from Dark Souls-related subreddits. A total of 82 comments were analyzed, focusing on themes related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring the anonymity of users and focusing on publicly available data.

Result: The findings confirm and extend previous research on Self-Determination Theory, showing that Dark Souls uniquely fulfills the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Its design, normalizing failure and rewarding perseverance, promotes intrinsic motivation and resilience, while online community interactions strengthen belonging and emotional support. These results suggest that challenging games combining meaningful choices with social engagement can foster both intrinsic motivation and emotional well-being, offering valuable insights for academic research and game design.

Conclusion: This study reaffirms the relevance of Self-Determination Theory in explaining how challenging games like Dark Souls satisfy players' basic psychological needs. Future research should examine how these dynamics operate in other gaming genres and cultural contexts and explore their application in educational and therapeutic settings.

Keywords: Video games, Motivation, Personal Autonomy, Cultural Competency, Social Integration.

INTRODUCTION

Video games have established themselves as a relevant field of study in psychology, particularly in the analysis of human motivation. Their intricate design and interactive mechanics provide a unique environment for exploring deep psychological concepts, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2006). Unlike other media, video games require active user participation, allowing researchers to observe how decisions, rewards, and challenges influence player behavior and satisfaction. This ability to foster immersion and user agency makes them an invaluable tool for understanding how individuals persist in the face of adversity, seek rewards, and construct meaning through interaction with complex systems (Przybylski et al., 2010). However, video games can affect mental health in ambivalent ways. While challenging dynamics can promote persistence, they can also elicit negative emotional responses, such as frustration or avoidance. Recognizing this dual potential would provide a more balanced basis for therapeutic or educational implications. Self-Determination theory and videogames: The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 1985), posits that human motivation is based on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These needs are fundamental to understanding why certain activities, such as video games, are so rewarding and engaging. In the context of video games, SDT has been used to analyze how game design can either satisfy or frustrate these needs, influencing the player's experience and engagement with the game (Ryan et al., 2006). For example, games that provide clear feedback, balanced challenges, and opportunities for social interaction tend to foster greater intrinsic motivation and player satisfaction (Rigby & Ryan, 2011).

Dark Souls as a representative case: The video game Dark Souls (DS) (FromSoftware, 2011) stands out as a particularly interesting case for analysis through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Known for its extreme difficulty, meticulous design, and fragmented narrative, Dark Souls demands a high level of commitment from the player. Unlike many contemporary games, its story is not presented explicitly but is instead uncovered through exploration and interpretation, fulfilling the need for autonomy by allowing players to construct their own understanding of the world (Johnson et al., 2016).

Additionally, social interaction within online communities, such as Reddit, plays a crucial role in the game's experience. Players share strategies, narrative theories, and emotional support, reinforcing the need for relatedness and fostering a sense of community (Kowert et al., 2014). These characteristics make Dark Souls an ideal example for exploring how SDT manifests in a challenging and collaborative gaming environment. Although SDT has been widely applied to video game studies, including analyses of need satisfaction in online multiplayer communities, there remains a gap when talk single-player games with high-difficulty and dark narratives, such as Dark Souls, within community forums for sharing experiences, such as Reddit. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how the basic psychological needs proposed by SDT are met not only within the game but also through social interactions outside of it. Although the satisfaction of these needs is often associated with resilience and emotional well-being, this study does not measure this outcome with psychological or clinical constructs. Instead, they are analyzed as narrative interpretations articulated by players in virtual spaces for open discourse. As such, these emerging themes reflect how players interpret concepts rather than infer psychological processes. Furthermore, this analysis can provide valuable insights for both academic research and game design by highlighting how challenging games can foster intrinsic motivation and social connection in a digital context.

METHODS

Qualitative approach and research paradigm

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach based on content analysis through a case study, which is well-suited for investigating the subjective experiences of Dark Souls players in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) using a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. Given the objective of identifying patterns of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the analyzed comments, this design enables a thorough interpretation of the meaning players attribute to their gaming experience. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex and subjective phenomena, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, by focusing on content analysis, this method captures the richness of social interactions and individual experiences emerging from online communities.

Researcher characteristics and reflexivity

The entire analysis team consisted of researchers with experience in research methods. In addition, the authors are familiar with video games and were motivated to conduct this study to contribute to the description of video game experiences. There was no relationship between the authors and the study subjects. One of the authors was specifically familiar with Dark Souls.

Context

Reddit is a space for sharing content and participating in forums about different topics. For videogames users, this digital environment represents an opportunity to share experiences, feedback and recommendations to enjoy and share with others.

Sampling strategy, data collection methods and units of study

Data was collected from comments posted on the Reddit platform, specifically in subreddits dedicated to Dark Souls, such as r/darksouls and r/darksouls3. Data collection was conducted between early 2024 and December 2024. A total of 108 threads were obtained. Posts describing personal experiences related to the game were selected using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were: (1) comments describing personal experiences or reflections connected to gameplay difficulty, learning through failure, exploration/autonomy, narrative meaning-making, or social interaction; and (2) content interpretable in relation to SDT needs. Exclusion criteria were: (1) comments unrelated to player experience (e.g., purely

technical, off-topic); (2) meme-only content without interpretive value; and (3) comments requiring extensive missing context to understand meaning. Spelling correction of comments was done only, when necessary, without affecting the message of the comment. The primary unit of analysis was the comment. Because conversational context can shape meaning in digital mental health and social support research, comments were extracted together with minimal context to preserve interpretability (i.e., the original post title and/or the immediate parent post when necessary). Context was used to interpret the function and tone of the comment (e.g., offering support vs. seeking support), without shifting the unit of analysis away from the comment text. A total of 82 comments were collected and analyzed, representing a diverse sample of perceptions related to autonomy, competence, and social interaction. Thematic saturation was not considered to understand all the thematic patterns in our sample to meet the objectives proposed. Table 1 presents a representative sample of the analyzed comments, illustrating the variety of identified themes.

Ethical topic

Ethical issues pertaining to human subjects Regarding ethical considerations, the analyzed data were obtained from publicly accessible platforms, meaning that the comments were available to any Reddit user. To preserve user privacy, all identifiable information, such as usernames or personal references, was removed. Additionally, the analysis focused on content rather than individuals, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards in digital environments (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Nevertheless, the study acknowledges the potential risk of participant re-identification through verbatim quotations, even when data are publicly available. To mitigate this risk, all direct identifiers were removed, and sensitive or potentially harmful content was avoided.

Data processing

Thematic analysis followed the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The coding process was conducted independently by two authors (FFVR and DAQM), both trained in qualitative analysis. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Data analysis

First, an in-depth reading of the comments was conducted to become familiar with the content. Then, initial codes were generated to capture key concepts related to the core SDT pillars: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Finally, connections were established between the identified themes and SDT constructs, allowing for a coherent interpretation of how players experience and perceive these psychological needs within the context of Dark Souls. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive notes were used to document analytic decisions and minimize interpretative bias. When required for interpretative clarity, comments were examined together with minimal contextual information (e.g., the original post), although the primary analytic focus remained on the narrative content of individual comments.

Techniques to enhance trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data analysis all comments pass a member checking process in redaction and regarding their relationship with psychological needs.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the comments collected on Reddit revealed three main themes aligned with the core pillars of Self-Determination Theory (SDT): competence, autonomy, and relatedness (see Table 1). The following section presents the findings for each of these themes, illustrated with representative quotes from *Dark Souls* players.

Competence

The competence pillar in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is clearly reflected in the experiences of *Dark Souls* players. The game is renowned for its extreme difficulty, requiring players to continuously improve their skills to overcome challenges. Many comments highlight how the sense of achievement upon defeating a boss or clearing a difficult area generates a deep feeling of competence. For example, someone (ID 2) describes how, after hours of attempts, finally defeated Gwyn, the final boss, which made him feel victorious not only in the game but also in his personal life: *"The first time I beat Dark Souls was during a particularly bad point in my life. One weekend when I couldn't bring myself to do anything; eat, sleep, bathe, you name it. I sat there and just played, and played, and played. [...] Soon enough I faced down Gwyn and emerged victorious. After that, I got up for the first time in over 48 hours. Made some coffee and cereal and actually took time to make sure I was clean and clothed and taken care of"* This comment illustrates how in-game competence translates into real-life perseverance and resilience.

Another key aspect of competence is learning through failure. Another player (ID 8) points out that *Dark Souls* normalizes failure and makes it an essential part of the improvement process: *"Dark Souls is one of the few games that tells you: No, you didn't do it right, but that's okay. Try as many times as you want, but you need to do it right"* This emphasis on continuous learning and personal growth is a clear example of how the game fulfills the need for competence. Additionally, another one (ID 16) shares how overcoming the game's challenges helped him apply the same mindset to his personal life, improving both his physical and mental health: *"That lesson… and Dark Souls in general, was what changed my life for the better."* These examples demonstrate how the game fosters a sense of competence that extends beyond the virtual realm.

Autonomy

Autonomy in *Dark Souls* is reflected in the freedom players must make meaningful decisions, such as choosing routes, customizing their characters, and developing combat strategies. This sense of control and agency is fundamental to intrinsic motivation. A player (ID 64) describes how the game fea-

tures allow players to discover how to progress on their own, satisfying their need for autonomy: *"Failure is just a learning process. It does not mean that you are a failure, just that you need to keep trying until you find a way to move forward."* This nonlinear approach encourages discovery and decision-making, making each gameplay experience unique. Additionally, players highlight how the game allows them to choose their own playstyle, whether through heavy weapons, magic, or agile combat strategies. For example, an user (ID 6) mentions how the game provides tools to overcome challenges but leaves it up to the player to decide how to use them: *" Yet, you're slowly given the tools you need. One after the other, through trial and error, you find yourself winning fight after fight, and the game emphasizes impossible odds."* This freedom to experiment and adapt reinforces the player's sense of autonomy.

Finally, another one (ID 47) emphasizes how the game's design, inspired by director Hidetaka Miyazaki's personal experiences, fosters autonomy by allowing players to find their own path: *"If you read about Miyazaki's life you will see how much of it is told through the gameplay of dark souls and how much the ideas about 'striving to achieve' and 'never giving up' are entwined with the game and Miyazaki's own desire to reach out to others through the gaming medium".* These examples illustrate how *Dark Souls* fulfills the need for autonomy by empowering players to make meaningful decisions.

Relatedness

The relatedness pillar manifests in social interactions within the *Dark Souls* community, both in-game and on platforms like Reddit. Players find emotional support, share strategies, and build a mutual aid network. A player (ID 14) describes how the game's characters, such as Andre of Astora and Solaire, became figures of emotional support: *"… Andre of Astora was probably more of a father to me than my actual father [...] Solaire reminded me so much of my older brother …"* These emotional connections with in-game characters reflect how the game's narrative design fosters relatedness.

In online communities, players find a space to share their experiences and receive support. For example, a player (ID 1) recounts how the game and its community helped him get through a difficult breakup: *"When I discovered Dark Souls, I was going through an awful break-up. It's almost like the frustration this game gave me while starting out distracted me from being upset with real-life problems."* Additionally, iconic phrases from the game, such as *"Don't give up, skeleton"* and *"Praise the Sun"*, have become symbols of encouragement and motivation within the community. Another one (ID 48) highlights the kindness and mutual support among players: *"I'm constantly reminded how overall nice the dark soul's community is. Just a bunch of pleasant folks getting destroyed, then getting cheered up by each other"*

Finally, in-game social interactions, such as the cooperative system and messages left by other players, also foster relatedness. As a player (ID 34) describes how the game helped him reconnect with friends and overcome a creative block: *"This game helped me reconnect to two of my best friends and also helped me through a really rough patch in which I felt unable to compose or write music of any value."*

These examples illustrate how *Dark Souls* fulfills the need for relatedness by creating a sense of community and mutual support among players.

During coding, attention was also paid to potential negative experiences, such as frustration, social toxicity or feelings of hopelessness. However, no sustained negative cases that contradicted the SDT framework emerged in the analysis, reflecting inclusion criteria that focused on motivational experiences.

Regarding the categorization in Table 1, the summary of the comments was assigned to SDT components based on their dominant thematic emphasis identified by consensus. Full comments could be analyses in more than one SDT pillar according to the complexity of the experience described by players.

DISCUSSION

This study has explored how DS players experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the context of the video game, based on the analysis of comments posted on the Reddit platform. The results reveal that the game's design and community dynamics meet the basic psychological needs proposed by SDT, contributing to a deeply motivating and meaningful gaming experience. These findings are then discussed in relation to previous studies, and their theoretical and practical implications are highlighted.

Competence

The findings on competence in Dark Souls align with previous studies highlighting how challenging video games foster intrinsic motivation by providing clear goals and immediate feedback (Ryan et al., 2006). In this study, players described how overcoming difficult obstacles, such as bosses or complex areas, generated a sense of achievement and personal growth. For example, someone (ID 2) mentioned that defeating Gwyn made him feel victorious both in the game and in his personal life. This finding aligns with research suggesting that games balancing challenge and skill promote competence and self-efficacy (Przybylski et al., 2010). However, Dark Souls takes it a step further by normalizing failure as part of the learning process, reinforcing resilience and perseverance—elements less explored in previous studies.

Additionally, competence in Dark Souls is not only based on overcoming individual challenges but also on the normalization of failure as part of the learning process. For example, another player (ID 8) mentions that the game does not impose a definitive penalty for mistakes but rather encourages players to try again until they improve. This approach aligns with the idea that video games can foster psychological resilience by teaching players to manage frustration and prolonged effort (Juul, 2013). Likewise, another player (ID 16) recounts how the lessons of perseverance in the game have had a positive impact on their personal lives, improving their physical and mental well-being. This reinforces the concept that video games can act as tools for the development of emotional and cognitive skills beyond the gaming environment, thus being categorized as serious games and used as educational and behavioral change technology (Lima & Otero, 2024).

Table 1. Main characteristics.

ID	Comment (summary)	Relationship with SDT
1	Dark souls as a distraction from personal issues	Relatedness (focusing on the game to overcome external challenges)
2	Playing dark souls during a difficult time helped restore daily routine	Competence (overcoming challenges in the game reflects the ability to overcome obstacles)
3	Dark souls teaches that anything can be overcome with perseverance	Competence (The game encourages continuous improvement).
4	The undead curse as a metaphor for depression	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game)
5	Dark souls help to find Inner strength.	Competence (the game as a tool to discover one's abilities)
6	The game encourages perseverance despite initial frustration	Competence (learning from mistakes and improving)
7	Dark souls reflects depression and teaches how to face problems	Competence (the game as a metaphor for life)
8	The game normalizes failure and encourages continuous improvement	Competence (accepting failure as part of the process)
9	Dark souls as a tool for overcoming addictions	Autonomy (using the game as therapy)
10	Video games as a refuge during difficult times	Autonomy (using the game as an escape)
11	Dark souls as mental exercise for real-life problems	Competence (the game as mental training)
12	Dark Souls as a Game That Touches the Souls of Players	Autonomy (Emotional Impact of the Game)
13	Beating Gwyn as a Metaphor for Overcoming Depression	Competence (The Game as a Reflection of Life)
14	Characters in the Game as Emotional Support Figures	Relatedness (Identification with Characters)
15	Dark Souls as a Distraction and a Lesson in Perseverance	Competence (The Game as a Tool for Self-Improvement)
16	Learning from Mistakes in the Game Applied to Real Life	Competence (Transfer of Skills)
17	Warning About the Importance of Seeking Professional Help	Relatedness (Community Awareness)
18	Dark Souls as an Existential Game That Connects With Its Audience	Autonomy (Identification With the Game)
19	The Game as a Metaphor for Job Hunting and Personal Growth	Competence (Skill Transfer)
20	The Positive Message of the Game: "Don't Give Up."	Relatedness (Community Support)
21	Overcoming Dark Souls as a Reflection of Passing Difficult Exams	Competence (The Game as a Mirror of Real-Life Challenges)
22	The Curse of the Undead as a Metaphor for Depression	Autonomy (Personal Interpretation of the Game)
23	Dark Souls as Therapy and a Source of Hope	Autonomy (The Game as an Emotional Tool)
24	The Game's Message: "If You Fall 7 Times, Get Up 8."	Relatedness (Community Support)
25	Overcoming Challenges in the Game as a Reflection of Overcoming Obstacles in Life	Competence (The game as a metaphor for life)
26	The game as a reflection of depression, but also as a tool for overcoming it.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
27	The game as a source of personal learning.	Competence (the game as a tool for self-discovery).
28	The game as a reminder not to give up.	Relatedness (community support).
29	Dark Souls as a distraction during difficult times.	Autonomy (using the game as an escape).
30	Combining gaming with physical exercise to improve mental health.	Competence (skill transfer).
31	The game as a tool to overcome difficult moments.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
32	Dark Souls as support for people with mental disorders.	Relatedness (identification with other players).
33	The game as a source of joy and connection with others.	Relatedness (social interaction).
34	The game as a tool to reconnect with friends and overcome creative blocks.	Relatedness (social interaction).
35	The game as a tool to understand others' depression.	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
36	The game as a source of hope in dark times.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
37	Recommendation of content related to mental health and video games.	Relatedness (community awareness).
38	Gratitude for the community's support.	Relatedness (mutual support).
39	Iconic game quote: "You have a heart of gold."	Relatedness (community support).
40	The game as support during an illness.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
41	The game as a source of joy and connection with characters.	Relatedness (identification with characters).
42	The game as stress relief.	Autonomy (using the game as an escape).
43	The game as a restorer of faith in video games.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
44	The game as support in times of depression.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
45	The game as a source of motivation through frustration.	Competence (the game as a tool for overcoming challenges).
46	The game as a source of adventure and wonder.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
47	The game as a metaphor for the struggle against depression.	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
48	The Dark Souls community as a source of support.	Relatedness (mutual support).
49	The game as a tool to overcome depression.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
50	The game as a profound and emotional experience.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
51	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
52	Recommendation of a podcast about Dark Souls and depression.	Relatedness (community awareness).
53	The game as support in times of depression.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).

Autonomy

Autonomy in Dark Souls is evident in freedom players must make meaningful decisions, such as choosing routes, customizing their character, and developing combat strategies. This finding complements previous studies highlighting the importance of autonomy in intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). For example, a player (ID 64) described how the game features allow players to make progress on their own, fostering a sense of agency. This non-linear approach broadens the understanding of how video games can fulfill the need for autonomy by offering multiple paths and solutions instead of guiding the player linearly. Additionally, the ability to personalize one's playstyle, as mentioned by a user (ID 6), reinforces the idea that games allowing meaningful choices are more likely to sustain players' interest and engagement.

It is also important to highlight that autonomy in Dark Souls extends beyond the game's mechanics, influencing the player's perception of decision-making in real life. For example, a player (ID 6) emphasizes how the game provides progressive tools but leaves the responsibility to the player to find the best way to use them, reflecting self-directed learning in real-world environments. Another one (ID 47) mentions that the game taught them that there is no single correct path, but rather that each person must find their own way to overcome challenges— a principle that can be extrapolated to decision-making in daily life. This design, which allows players to explore without strict guidance, reinforces the idea that video games can foster autonomy in problem-solving and the construction of personal identity (Nardi, 2010).

Relation

Social interaction in online communities, such as Reddit, plays a crucial role in fulfilling the need for relatedness. Players find emotional support, share strategies, and build a mutual aid community, aligning with studies that highlight the role of virtual communities in emotional well-being (Kowert et al., 2014). For instance, a game player (ID 14) described how in-game characters like Andre of Astora and Solaire became sources of emotional support. This finding is novel as it not only focuses on interactions between players but also on how game characters can foster a sense of connection. Additionally, iconic phrases like "Don't give up, skeleton" and "Praise the Sun" have become symbols of support within the community, emphasizing the im-

Table 1. Main characteristics. (Continued)

54	The game as a tool for maintaining emotional balance.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
55	The game as a challenge that fosters continuous improvement.	Competence (the game as a tool for overcoming challenges).
56	The game as a distraction in difficult times.	Autonomy (using the game as an escape).
57	The game as a tool to make hard days more bearable.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
58	Reflection on the player's persistence against enemies.	Competence (the game as a metaphor for life).
59	The game as a refuge in difficult times.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
60	The game as an example of perseverance through failure.	Competence (the game as a tool for overcoming challenges).
61	The game as a source of satisfaction and motivation	Competence (the game as a tool for overcoming challenges)
62	The game as a reflection of depression and a source of hope	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game)
63	The game as a tool to overcome grief	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
64	The game as a metaphor for the struggle against depression	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
65	The game as a tool for feeling productive.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
66	The game as a source of joy and connection with others.	Relatedness (social interaction).
67	The game as a meeting point for people with depression.	Relatedness (identification with other players).
68	The game as a reflection of the fight against depression and the importance of not giving up.	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
69	The game as a lesson that the will to continue is what truly matters.	Relatedness (community support).
70	The game as a tool to forget problems and feel better.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
71	The game as a source of emotional healing.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
72	The game as a form of escapism in difficult moments.	Autonomy (using the game as an escape).
73	The game as a tool to face challenges and overcome fears.	Competence (the game as mental training).
74	The game as a refuge for people with depression.	Relatedness (identification with other players).
75	The game as a tool to overcome depression and find motivation.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
76	The game as a source of reconnection with art and storytelling.	Autonomy (emotional impact of the game).
77	The game as a tool to combat learned helplessness.	Competence (the game as mental training).
78	The game as a tool to develop patience and self-control.	Competence (the game as mental training).
79	The game as a metaphor for a difficult but rewarding relationship.	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
80	The game as a tool to break negative cycles.	Autonomy (using the game as therapy).
81	The game as a reflection of the temporary nature of problems.	Autonomy (personal interpretation of the game).
82	The game as a metaphor for the struggle against depression and the importance of relationships.	Relatedness (social interaction).

Note: Table 1 analyzed based on supplementary material 2.

portance of shared language in building group identity.

It is evident that the Dark Souls community plays a key role in players' sense of belonging. Comments (ID 1) describe how both the community and the game itself helped players overcome difficult moments in their personal lives, functioning as a space for emotional support. This phenomenon reinforces the idea that video games can serve as catalysts for the creation of collective identities and social support, as well as potentially advantageous tools in the social domain, especially for players who do not easily express their emotions and feel socially inhibited (Kowert et al., 2014). On the other hand, interactions such as help messages and the cooperative system also strengthen player relationships, providing opportunities for collaboration and empathy (Isbister, 2016). In fact, video games can be a powerful medium for forming communities and social support networks, as they enhance social interaction within digital environments by facilitating the reduction of physical distance and geographical barriers between gaming companions (Kort et al., 2007).

Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of this study expand the understanding of how video games can satisfy basic psychological needs. While previous studies have focused on more accessible or casual games (Rigby & Ryan, 2011), this work highlights how a challenging game like Dark Souls uniquely fosters competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Furthermore, the analysis of online communities offers a novel perspective by exploring how social interactions outside the game contribute to the overall experience. These findings have implications for both academic research and game design, suggesting that games integrating meaningful challenges, autonomous choices, and opportunities for social interaction can be particularly effective in promoting emotional well-being and intrinsic motivation.

From an applied perspective, the findings of this study can contribute to the design of new video games that integrate more challenging mechanics and embedded social interaction systems that promote motivation and emotional well-being. Studies have suggested that video games not only influence players' emotional states but can also enhance resilience and the ability to cope with frustration in other areas of life (Granic et al., 2014). Future research could explore how Dark Souls principles can be applied to gamification in educational or therapeutic contexts, offering new opportunities for the application of SDT in video games. However, challenging video games could not be beneficial for any population. Specific context that control patients with depression or anxiety at risk of frustration, avoidance or displacement that affect functionality is important to enhance potential applications in daily routines.

Limitations

Certain methodological limitations were identified, such as the representativeness of the comments obtained from Reddit and the inherent subjectivity in interpreting them. Since the data comes from a specific platform, the sample may not capture the full diversity of players' experiences, particularly those who don't participate in online forums or who disengage from community discussion. Furthermore, qualitative analysis is subject to the researcher's interpretation, which can introduce biases despite efforts to ensure systematic coding. First, self-selection bias, as the dataset reflects the perspectives of users who may be overrepresented compared to other engaged or motivated players. Second, desirability bias may be present in inspirational terms that align with the community narrative. Finally, cultural and linguistic bias may be present, as the subreddits analyzed were predominantly English-speaking and may reflect different interpretations of challenges, achievements, and motivation.

Future studies could complement this analysis with mixed methodologies, incorporating structured surveys or in-depth interviews, such as focus groups, to broaden and contrast the understanding of the player experience. It would also be useful to explore how these dynamics manifest in other challenging games or different cultural contexts.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study reaffirms the relevance of Self-Determination Theory in understanding players' experiences in video games like Dark Souls. The findings demonstrate that the game's design and social interactions within online communities fulfill the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, contributing to a deeply motivating and meaningful gaming experience. Moreover, this work provides valuable insights for game designers, suggesting that games integrating meaningful challenges, autonomous choices, and opportunities for social interaction can be particularly effective in promoting emotional well-being and intrinsic motivation. Finally, it underscores the importance of continuing to investigate how these dynamics manifest in other contexts and games to expand our understanding of the psychological impact of video games.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there were no conflicts of interest.

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