Fun with Death and Failure

An exploration of player experiences in a
decentralized open world RPG

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Abstract

Many modern single-player role-playing games offer the player a power fantasy where the experience is designed to make the players feel powerful right from the start, with enemies and challenges that scale to the player characters level and abilities. This study explores what happens with play when power fantasy is replaced with decentralization and especially how this decentralization affects the player's experience of failure and death. To explore this, three experienced *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*-players played the game with the modification *Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul*. After the participants had played at home for at least 8 hours they each participated in individual semi-structured interviews about their experiences. The interviews were transcribed and a grounded theory coding was performed. Finally the results were analyzed to find common themes. The study found that there was initial frustration due to expecting a power fantasy experience but once players adapted, the increased difficulty of decentralization was enjoyable as long as the player's agency was not taken away and the world and its difficulty was logical. While the scope of the study is too small to draw generalizable conclusions it nevertheless shows that decentralized, difficult games work well for certain players. Future research is required on how to mitigate the effects of the initial obstacle.

Sammanfattning

Många moderna single-player-rollspel erbjuder spelaren en maktfantasi där denne ska känna sig kraftfull direkt från spelets start genom att spelets fiender och utmaningar är baserade på spelarkaraktärens nivå och förmågor. Den här studien utforskar vad som händer när denna maktfantasi ersätts med en värld som inte anpassar sig efter spelaren, en så kallad decentraliserad värld. Specifikt undersöks hur decentraliseringen påverkar spelarens upplevelse av misslyckande och spelardöd. För att utforska detta spelade tre spelare *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* med modifikationen *Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul* i åtta timmar. Efter att deltagarna spelat utfördes individuella semistrukturerade intervjuer och intervjuerna transkriberades. Därefter genomfördes en grounded-theory kodning och analys för att finna gemensamma teman. Resultatet visar att det till en början uppstod frustration hos spelarna på grund av att de väntade sig en maktfantasi. Men när spelarna anpassade sin spelstil kom det fram att svårighetsgraden i en decentraliserad värld ökade underhållningsvärdet så länge spelaren kände att denne kunde påverka sin situation och att svårighetsgraden är grundad i spelvärldens logik. Emedan omfånget av studien är för liten för att dra några generella slutsatser visar den att decentraliserade spel med hög svårighetsgrad är underhållande för vissa spelare. Vidare forskning behövs på hur spelare lättare ska komma över den initiala tröskeln.

Nyckelord

Datorspel, rollspel, svårighetsgrad, decentralisation, maktfantasi, speldesign

Table of Contents

Contents

1 Introduction

In modern open world role playing games (RPG:s) there is often an emphasis on power fantasy, the player being a hero of some kind chosen to save the inhabitants of the game's world. A prime example of this is *Bethesda Game Studios' The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), hereafter referred to as Skyrim. The game starts as the Player Character (henceforth referred to as *PC*) arrives to her own execution which is promptly interrupted by the arrival of a dragon. Within a few hours of playing the main storyline, the *PC* is revealed to be the Dragonborn, a being of superior powers and abilities.

Besides these story elements the games mechanics also support this power fantasy. The *PC* has a wide range of skills and abilities at her disposal from archery to swords and magic spells. As the player uses these skills their levels rise and the *PC* becomes more adept at the skills being used. When a certain amounts of skills have increased the overall character level of the *PC* rises, along with the adaptive difficulty of the world. While it can be difficult for the player to face some of the more challenging enemies in the game if they do not focus on at least one combat specific skill the game is still quite lenient and there are few ways for the player to fail.

The adaptive difficulty of Skyrim is designed with accessibility in mind. The game has a big open world and you are supposed to be able to explore and go anywhere at any time without becoming frustrated by obstacles. Frustration is seen as a negative and undesirable emotional state for the player, breaking *flow* (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Much research has been conducted on adaptive difficulty and how to balance games to present an *appropriate challenge* for each player (Charles and Black, 2002; Gilleade and Dix, 2004; Liu et al., 2009).

Yet recently there has been an upswing in the popularity of difficult games such as *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011), *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010) and the rise of the *roguelike* genre. These games present great challenges to their players that are not overcome by adapting the game to the player but forcing the player to master the game's mechanics in order to surpass the challenge.

In the case of open world role-playing games like Skyrim we propose a term to oppose the trope of power fantasy - *decentralization*. This means the *PC* is no longer the central point around which the whole world revolves, but simply another person living in the game's world. The player is now faced with the challenge of taking on the dangers of the game world and *become* a hero rather than start as one.

In this study we aim to qualitatively explore how decentralization affects the player's experiences of a previously adaptive-difficulty power fantasy open world role-playing game. Our exploration is conducted by analyzing player reactions to decentralization through semi-structured interviews after the participants have played the game Skyrim prepared with the modification package *Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul* (Ogerboss and Xarrian, 2012). Players were also asked to keep a log which was used as stimulus material throughout the interview and subsequent analysis.

2   Related Research and Themes

To explore the effects of decentralization on the player experience we will focus on a number of themes when performing our analysis. We expect that in the decentralized game-world the player will experience increased *frustration* due to *failure* and *player death* as challenges become too great. These themes are central to the research around adaptive difficulty, but are generally considered negative and to be avoided by developers. Yet as previously mentioned there are plenty of games that use these themes as the primary motivator for the player. There is also plenty of evidence of *expansive rules* (Parker, 2008) being created by players to make games more difficult. These self-imposed rules can become intrinsic to the game by the use of *modding,* creating custom content that adds to or modifies the original game. There are plenty of so called *hardcore mods* available for a wide range of games, all with the goal of making the experience much more difficult. Yet very little research has been conducted to explore why certain players desire this type of experience. To frame our question we look at related research around the themes that we will look for in our analysis.

2.1   Failure and frustration

In a decentralized open world game where the player starts out considerably weaker than most common foes we can assume that s/he will experience a lot more failure, and therefore more frustration, than in a classic power fantasy game. We expect that even though the player will experience more frustration, this increase in challenge will work to the benefit of the player's whole experience of the game world and game mechanics.

Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) define challenge-based immersion as something that happens when the player is engaged with the rules and mechanics of the game. This ties together with Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) flow framework which is often referred to when challenge in games is discussed, often in relation to discussions about adaptive difficulty. According to the flow framework players will get the most enjoyment if the challenges presented in the game matches the players skills (Image 1).
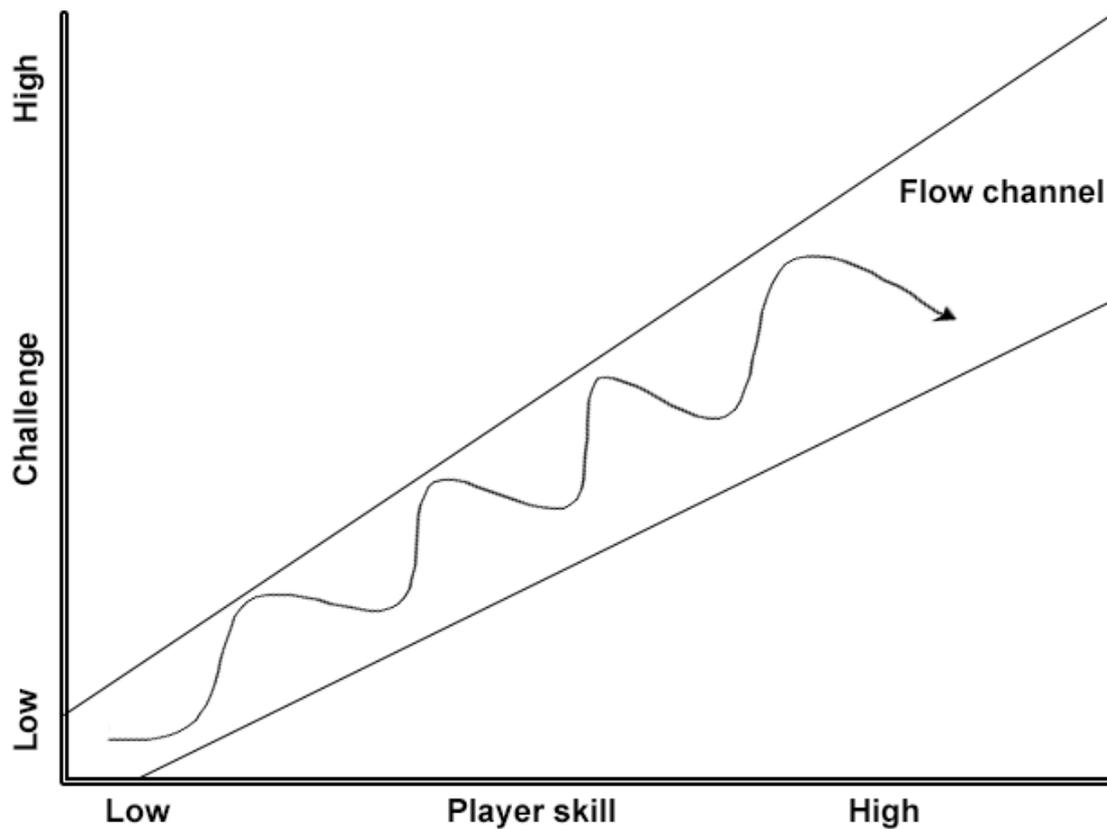
Image 1: Csíkszentmihályi's flow channel showing the relationship between player skill and challenge

As the player's skill increases, the challenge must also rise or the player will become bored. Alternatively if the challenges become too great for the players skill the player will become frustrated. This is often accomplished through the use of adaptive difficulty. The recent trend of difficult games seems to speak against the concept of flow, as it seems that increased frustration acts more as a motivator for the player. We propose that it is possible that the overall relationship between challenge and skill according to flow-theory is still true, but players seeking games with increased challenge populate the upper edges of the channel.

With this in mind it is interesting to look at the paradox of failure (Juul, 2013). Juul claims that generally people do not like to fail tasks yet most games have a fail-state. Even though players are almost guaranteed to fail when playing a game players seek them out. This, Juul (ibid.) claims, is because games give the players the promise of redemption. By continuing to play and mastering the game's rules, the player can succeed where s/he previously failed. Juul (ibid.) also argues that the process of playing a skill-based game is a continuous cycle where

the player is introduced to a new goal or challenge, fails at it and then searches for a way to overcome the challenge and finally succeeds. We find it likely that in games with character advancement such as open world RPGs this component is enhanced further - just as the player herself has to increase her skill, the in-game player character does the same thing by gaining levels, gear and new abilities. This might explain the rise of difficult games, as getting stuck on a challenge in an open world game does not necessarily mean that the player is hindered from progressing further in the game. The player can give up on the challenge she is stuck on and instead engage with challenges in another part of the game world to try again later with improved skills and abilities.

2.2   Player Death

We've touched briefly on player death earlier, as the typical consequence of player failure. But is death necessarily the end? There are games that have completely removed player death, such as Prince of Persia (Ubisoft Montreal, 2008). In this game the player is saved by a *non-player character* companion if a mistake is made that would have led to a typical failure-state, such as missing a jump and falling into a hole. Again failure is seen as the ultimate negative and removed completely. But is this really want players want? Cannot death be a learning tool to drive challenge-based immersion?

Tocci (2008) discusses the way death is handled in video games and how it affects the game's ability to tell a story. He examines where the conventions of protagonist death come from and how game designers have tried to get around the problems of death and trial and error. He concludes that the trial and error approach is not inherent to the game medium but is a *"...shortcut of game design, a holdover from an era when games were more limited in their ability to tell stories"* (Tocci, 2008, p.198-199) and existing models of game enjoyment fail to cover narrative-driven games. While Tocci makes some good points, we would argue that when the player is experiencing challenge-based immersion the trial and error of death and retry need not necessarily hinder the player from enjoying the game's story, or the players own story in the game.

Ruch (2013) also examines games and players relationship with death. He uses and expands on examples of game timelines put forth by Juul (2005) to illustrate how player death affects the experience of time in a narrative-driven game. He argues that there are multiple timelines at play while playing video games. The Fictional timeline is the time as presented by the narrative, Action time being the time the player spends in the fictional time. The Action time is where player deaths cause repetitions and replays that increase the third time line, the Play time which is the actual real world time spent playing the game. By using this multiple timeline model (Image 2) the paradox of player death in mid-narrative can be explained. The top line is the fictional timeline of the game's story. Any moment in the fictional time might contain action time, the time it takes to perform an action in the world, such as fighting a boss monster. Within this action time Ruch (ibid) argues that there can be repeated failures over the course of the final line, actual playing time.
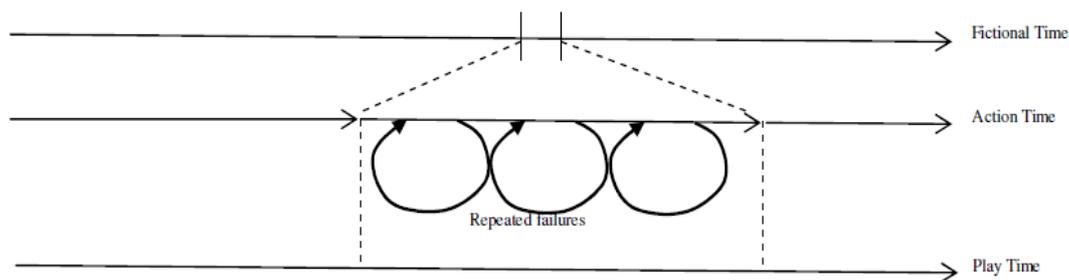

Image 2: Ruch's three timelines that are at play in video games.

Ruch (2013) also touches on how some games use narrative structures such as narrator's discourse to explain the death of the player, like in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2003) where the narrator will say *"Wait, that's not how it happened"* if the *PC* dies. Finally Ruch (ibid) compares the linear narrative style games to open sandbox games and notes that linear games have more authorial control of the narrative and are thus able to deliver drama at will, while sandbox games rely on the player to find it themselves. We would argue Ruch is correct that death does not necessarily break the player out of the story if the player is heavily engaged in challenge based immersion.

11

2.3   Research questions

To summarize we want to explore what happens with play when power fantasy is replaced with decentralization and especially how this decentralization affects the player's experience of failure and death. This with the goal of opening up the concept of decentralization and identifying areas that warrant further research.

3 Method

Since there has not been much research conducted on the effects of decentralization on the player experience we wanted to explore these experiences with as open minds as possible. As we wanted to dig deep into these experiences and had very limited resources we chose a method that could generate a lot of data from a low number of participants. Asking the participants to play alone at home while keeping a log and then performing a semi-structured interview about their experiences allowed us to explore this with little risk of us influencing these experiences. We decided that doing a grounded theory analysis was a fitting method that allowed us to understand but also dig deeper into this previously unexplored concept of decentralization versus power fantasy.

The process of analyzing the data is based on Thornberg's (2011) idea of *Informed Grounded Theory* where he suggests that in a grounded theory study a foundation of literature or experience can:

> "[...] help the researcher to formulate relevant research questions and make constant comparisons between data and literature to elaborate, revise or criticize pre-existing knowledge and extant theories". (Thornberg, 2011, p.245)."

Based on this we started reviewing literature that could be relevant to the study, focusing on papers written on difficulty, and how players handle death and frustration.

We asked participants to play 8 hours of a modified, decentralized version of Skyrim while keeping a log of their in-game activities and play times. Upon completion we conducted a semi-structured interview. Finally we transcribed the interviews, conducted an informed grounded theory coding and analyzed the data.

3.1 Recruitment

The prerequisites for participants were that they owned a copy of Skyrim and its expansion *Dawnguard* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2012) for PC, and had played

Skyrim but not Requiem beforehand. As we were interested in how the decentralization of a power fantasy game affected the player's experience we needed participants that had previous experience of Skyrim. This also made sure that the participants would not need time to learn the base game. Further, by only accepting participants that had no previous experience with Requiem we hoped to make sure that all participants had roughly the same level of experience when starting the study. We did a convenience sampling and recruited six participants. Out of the six participants three were not able to finish the study due to lacking the necessary software so we ended up with a total of three participants. All three participants were experienced gamers, playing at least two hours a day.

3.2 Play session

The participants were asked to play the game for a total of 8 hours. As the PC starts out very weak the player is very limited in what s/he can do the first hours of the game, therefore we believe that a shorter play time would generate uninteresting data. In order to minimize our influence on the participants experience we asked them to play in their usual gaming context, unsupervised, in their free time. Other methods, such as direct observation or using software to record gameplay were considered but since we anticipated that roleplaying would be a significant part of the participant's experience we decided that we would get the best results if the participants were left to play in private. This was also a logistical consideration as we lacked the necessary resources to set up such a long play session in a more controlled environment. We sent the players written instructions and then prepared mod-pack which contained:

- Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul (Xarrian and Ogerboss, 2012)
- Alternate Start - Live Another Life (Arthmoor, 2012)
- SkyUI (SkyUI Team, 2011)
- Skyrim Script Extender (Patterson, Abel and Connelly, 2011)

(For a detailed description of the games and mods see appendix A.)

While the mod-pack allows players to choose between many different starting locations the participants were instructed to start as a patron of the Sleeping

Giant Inn which is located in the least dangerous part of Skyrim. This was to make sure that the experiences were not skewed due to participants starting out in considerably harder areas. Apart from the choice of starting location the participants were free to do what they wanted in the game. We also tasked players to keep a log during their play sessions detailing their activities every 90 minutes and encouraged the inclusions of screenshots. The purpose of this was to serve as a tool for players to privately reflect upon their experiences and as a tool for us to stimulate conversation during the interview. The logs were not used during the coding and analysis.

3.3 Semi Structured Interviews

As we were interested in the participants personal experiences participants were called in for individual semi-structured interviews after their play-sessions were completed. We chose the semi-structured model to allow for the interview to take unexpected turns and to not restrict the player's re-telling of their experience. We also felt it was important that we allowed each interview to freely evolve without artificial restrictions on the conversation. Each interview was recorded with audio capturing devices and later transcribed for coding and analysis. At the beginning of each interview all participants were asked about their gaming habits and their main motivations when playing RPGs. This was used to provide context for the results.

3.4 Analyzing the data

We started analyzing the data by going through each transcribed interview individually, identifying codes and noting them down on colored post-it notes, one color for each participant. When all interviews were coded the codes were grouped into themes that emerged while coding and discussing the data. A series of longer analysis discussions followed where all the data was compared and contrasted to draw conclusions on both how player decentralization impacted the player experience and what to keep in mind when designing decentralized open world RPGs.

4 Results

Initially the players struggled with the difficulty due to their expectations being influenced by having played Skyrim before. By adjusting their expectations and adapting their playstyle to the increased difficulty this frustration was lessened and participants started to enjoy the decentralized game. We call this transition *the hump*. After passing the hump we found that our participants accepted the increased difficulty and harshness of the games world, as long as those challenges were based on logic and allowed for deductive reasoning and did not remove the participants' agency. Retreat became an acceptable option instead of being associated with defeat. It was only when the participants' agency was taken away and they were unable to even retreat from an encounter that the game stopped being fun. The process of our analysis is available in image 3.
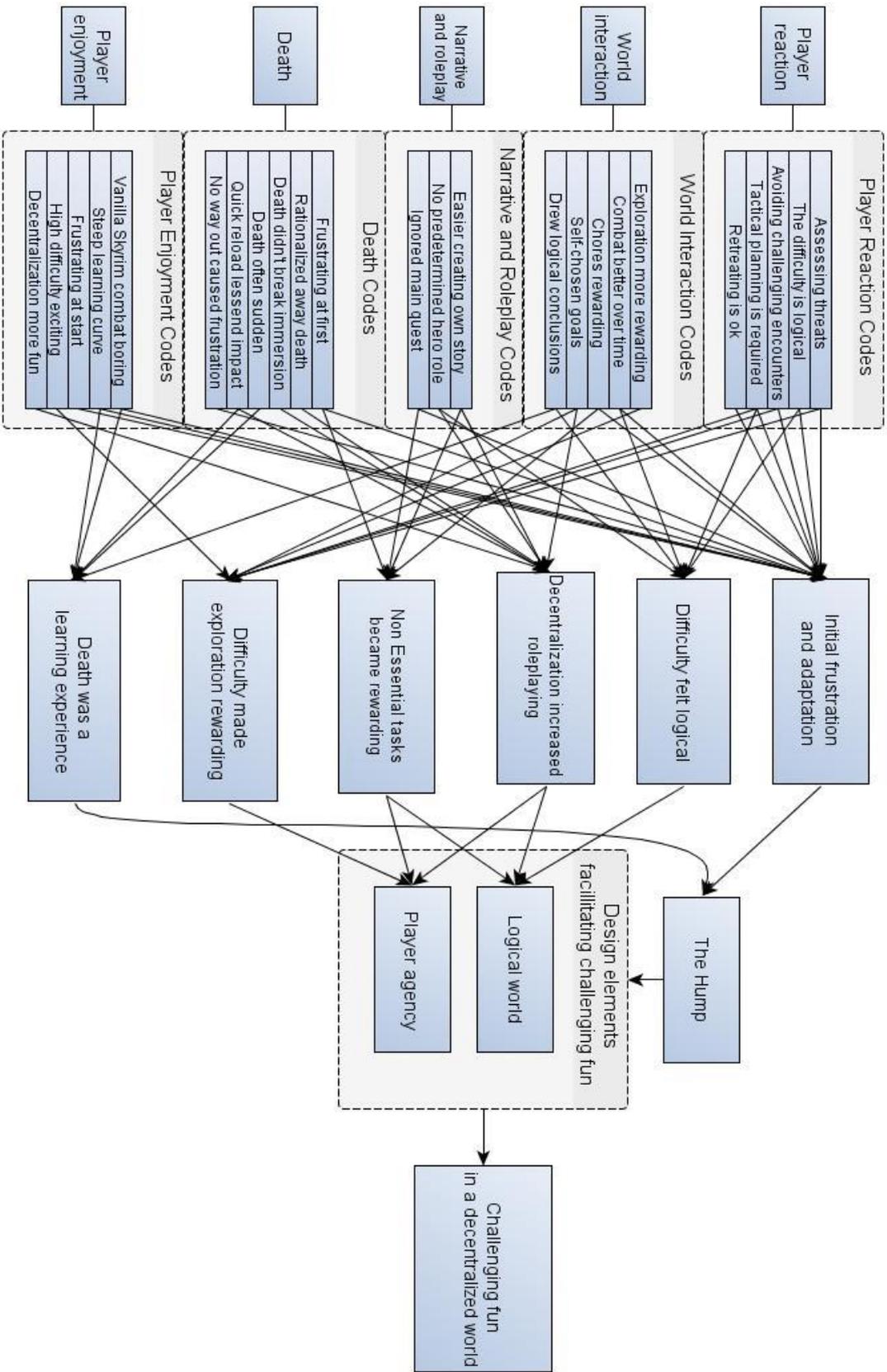
Image 3: Our grounded theory analysis process and results

4.1 Emerging themes detailed

4.1.1 Wrong expectations caused initial frustration and required adaptation

All participants experienced frustration at the difficulty of Requiem at the beginning of their play session. Two of the participants almost gave up and quit the study during the first hours of play. All participants however felt that once the expectations of playing a power fantasy faded away the frustration also receded. They began adapting their playstyle to the decentralized world. Once the participants discovered that the power fantasy provided by Skyrim was not there anymore, they all required some time to adjust to the decentralized game world of Requiem. All participants mentioned encountering situations where they felt they could not progress any further and had to leave. This did not lead to frustration however as the open world of Requiem allowed them to go and do other tasks. One participant experienced a situation where he felt there was no way to retreat or proceed which led to frustration.

> "I went into it thinking it would be like Skyrim, but that was not the case. I could not just focus on one thing but needed to train all kinds of skills in order to have a decent chance at survival" (P2)

> "In Skyrim once you figure out the [combat] system you are pretty much invincible, here [in Requiem] I figured out the system but kept dying anyway, which was charming" (P2)

> "Initially I thought 'I can't kill anyone, how am I supposed to do this?' Then I gained a few levels just sneaking around avoiding encounters. Then there were enemies I couldn't sneak past so I had to leave and come back later." (P3)

"I ran into a group of necromancers and died a lot simply trying to leave and realized I couldn't. Luckily I had an older save I could return to. It was frustrating to feel I couldn't affect the situation". (P2)

"In vanilla Skyrim it's much easier, you just button-mash melee weapons and everything dies, even if they are a mage or a warrior. In Requiem you need to use everything you've got. I had to use poisons, magic, scrolls to get past some enemies. Even my racial ability, which I ignored in vanilla." (P1)

4.1.2 The difficulty felt logical

A common thread was that participants started to find an internal logic to the high difficulty which allowed them to assess threats and draw conclusions on groups of enemies and to prioritize targets based on their visible equipment. All participants mentioned this change in their playstyle, assessing threats before engaging them and trying to avoid enemies that they deemed too powerful.

"There is logic in it of course. You have to really look at what the enemies are wearing. If a bandit has light armor he can be easily killed with a bow, but if he is wearing full plate armor you can't kill him that way" (P1)

"It's exciting when you have to read your enemies and see what you are fighting and what it can do. Usually [in Skyrim] you figure out the [combat] system and then you're immortal which is no fun". (P2)

"It turns out you can't shoot heavy armored dudes with a crossbow because they're resistant to that" (P3)

19

4.1.3 Decentralization allowed more roleplaying

All three of our informants expressed a general interest towards roleplaying games and all participants mentioned character development and customization as being important to them. Not being burdened with the task of being the Dragon born our participants free to craft their own story in the games world. One participant saw his characters progression from weak to somewhat able to take on bandits as the characters internal transformation from a peaceful citizen of the world to a murderer. Another participant simply chose goals for himself because he felt his character wasn't good enough to take on any of the games quests.

> "In vanilla Skyrim there is no choice, you are the Dragonborn, the chosen one, you can't escape it. With Requiem there is a choice, the main quest becomes an optional quest. [My character] is nothing special, a wanderer wandering around. I met [a group of *non-player characters*] The Vigilants of Stendarr and made it my mission to journey to their base and join them". (P1)

> "I slit someone's throat and went 'aww yeah' so my character started thinking this whole murder thing was just a little bit too much fun" (P3)

> "Every excursion became an adventure that had to be carefully planned ahead of time." (P2)

4.1.4 Non-essential tasks became more rewarding in a deadly world

Two of the participants found non-dangerous chores such as chopping wood and hunting game animals more rewarding and interesting than earlier as it provided

a safe way to earn gold and increase their skills. One participant began reading in game books to try and find clues to strengths and weaknesses of creatures.

> "Chopping wood became a great source of money. I usually ignore deer and hares but now I started looking for them to increase my archery skill" (P1)

> "There were a few hours where I just chopped wood before I felt I could go anywhere. I also suddenly found myself interested in monster-books to try and find strengths and weaknesses, which has never been interesting before." (P2)

4.1.5 Decentralization led to more rewarding exploration

Exploration was mentioned as the primary motivator by two participants. They both felt that exploring the game world was more interesting in the decentralized game world. One participant even began seeking refuge and spend the night indoors to avoid the perceived dangers of the night.

> "The danger [of the decentralized world] made it much more interesting to explore. There was much more planning involved rather than simply aimlessly running around." (P2)

> "I guess it's not really necessary but because things are so dangerous it's nice to have a safe and cozy place to return to." (P2)

> "Exploration became more rewarding with the difficulty". (P1)

4.1.6 Death was a learning experience

All participants experienced dying a lot. Yet it seems like it did not bother them much. Two participants adopted a *many worlds*-type view towards death. All

three participants mention that death became a learning experience, especially early on, to figure out what they could or couldn't do. They also mentioned the fact that the short time between death and the game loading the previous save helped avoid frustration.

> "Death didn't break the game for me, I thought of it as an alternate reality, you watch yourself die until you find the reality where you beat an encounter" (P1)

> "I saw death as my character running simulations of a situation in his head until he came up with one that allowed him to win. And when I did die, it reloaded so quickly that it didn't ruin it for me" (P3)

> "There was a little bit of Hotline Miami-effect going on. You died so often that you stopped caring about it" (P3)

> "I died a lot in the beginning trying to figure the combat out. Once I ate the wrong [alchemy] ingredient and died so fast I first didn't realize what had happened. I learned not to eat that" (P2)

5 Discussion

Based on our analysis, playing Skyrim with Requiem becomes an entirely different experience. The decentralized world is much more dangerous and unforgiving. All the participants in the study experienced initial frustration because they were expecting a power fantasy. It is reasonable to assume that this caveat holds true for all difficult games, the initial experience is dependent on you knowing what you are getting yourself into. Once the participants learned what Requiem was about, they began enjoying the challenge and have fun. Combat became more interesting and the lack of predetermined role for the *PC* made role playing more interesting.

5.1 The effects of failure, frustration and death

With Skyrim's adaptive difficulty removed, the game no longer allows you to travel anywhere at any time, and it appears that all our participants enjoyed this as the challenge of simply surviving a trek through the woods became engrossing and fun. The results point to a number of conditions that have to be met for this to occur; the player needs to be aware of the type of game they will be playing, yet feel that despite the difficult situation their sense of agency remains and they have some influence over the situation. What they experienced appears similar to challenge-based immersion as described by Ermi and Mäyrä (2005). When that sense of agency is removed, and there is no way out of a situation, the frustration runs over and players wanted to quit.

It also appears that difficult games like Requiem create a different sort of flow channel, with the challenge and frustration starting off as much higher and the channel being much wider, leading to an increase in peaks and valleys. The peaks are higher as difficult challenges are presented, yet swing down when non-essential tasks are performed. It seems that players appreciated the valleys as safe ways to help progress their characters (chopping wood) and a lull in challenges might be welcome once in a while (taking refuge in an inn at night).

When faced with an insurmountable challenge resulting in repeated deaths all our players seemed to rationalize this somehow as not really happening, or happening in a parallel universe. This appears similar to Ruch's example of using

narrative discourse to explain away a player's death, with the player being the narrator to their own story (Ruch, 2013). This appears to be in line with what Ruch suggested, while engaged in challenge-based immersion players will accept repeated failures during their play time and fit the end result into their narrative. It also touches on Juul's (2013) promise of redemption when failing. As long as the players felt they still had some way to affect the outcome, they attempted to do so, only giving up when their options seemed to run out. The main difference from Juul's theory being that players do not always necessarily succeed in overcoming every challenge, but might have to escape and come back to face it another day. The escape itself however can also be seen as a challenge to overcome. The open world aspect of Requiem does allow players to choose which challenges to engage in but does not lock them to it, allowing a path for retreat and reassessment.

Based on our results it is important to design difficult games so that the player never loses her agency. As players expecting a lower level of challenge might get turned off the game before adapting to the difficulty, it is important to communicate the logical difficulty of the game and give new players tips on how to play in the dangerous game world.

5.2   Method critique

As the number of respondents in this study was quite low it is hard to draw generalizable conclusions from the data. However, as this was a qualitative study and our aim was to dig deep into a players experience of a game and see what questions would arise when players familiar with a power fantasy game played the same game with a decentralized character, we argue that it was more important to be able to thoroughly analyze a few players experiences than get a high quantity of lesser quality analyses. Our participants were all frequent gamers, playing at least two hours a day. Our aim was to study experienced players as a study focused on difficult games is unlikely to generate interesting results with novice players. Considering the hump experienced by our participants we would argue that decentralization as a design concept is aimed towards more experienced players that spend a lot of their time playing games. Our participant requirements were also pretty steep in terms of software needed

and requiring participants to be physically available for an interview. This arguably limited the amount of potential participants.

All participants touched on similar themes in their interviews leading us to conclude that the thematic saturation is high, meaning that even if we would have had additional participants in the study the probability of additional major themes being discovered is low.

Using an already existing power fantasy RPG with an already created mod that decentralized the PC eased the implementation of this study considerably. We wanted participants with prior experience of Skyrim to not skew the results due to players being unfamiliar with the core mechanics of the game, especially as our mod-package made the game harder. We propose that if the study had been conducted with players inexperienced with Skyrim it would have been hard to focus on the contrast between power fantasy and decentralization.

6 Conclusions and future research

Games with adaptive difficulty have been extensively researched and death and frustration are generally seen as negatives. Yet difficult games have become increasingly popular. This study explores how play changes when the power fantasy of The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim is turned into a decentralized experience.

To do this three subjects familiar with the roleplaying game Skyrim was tasked with playing a modified, decentralized version of Skyrim for 8 hours. Semi-structured interviews were done with each subject to explore their experience. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed through a grounded theory coding.

Based on our results players do not find repeated deaths and failure frustrating in an open world RPG as long as they retain some sense of agency and the difficulty is grounded in the logic of the game world. Players starting the game with the expectation of playing a power fantasy will however encounter a lot of frustration until adapting to the decentralized world and its logic.

Based on our findings further research into how the impact of the hump can be mitigated is needed. Can the player's transition into a hard game be made smoother without compromising the concept of a difficult game?

Decentralization appears to work as a polar opposite of power fantasy and presents different design challenges than games with adaptive difficulty. We the authors propose that this paper can serve as inspiration for further delving into the depths of death, failure and fun.

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Appendixes

Appendix A – Games and modifications used in the study

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) is an open-world roleplaying game for Xbox 360, Playstation 3 and PC (hereafter referred to as *Skyrim*). As of February 2014 over 20 million copies has been sold across the platforms making it one of the most sold games ever (Peckham, 2014). While Skyrim boasts a big main-quest one of Skyrim's selling points is that the player can ignore it and instead occupy herself with vast amounts of sidequests, both fully scripted and randomly generated ones called radiant quests. The PC-version of the game can easily be modified by players using a downloadable Creation Kit (Bethesda Softworks, 2012).

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard (Bethesda Game Studios, 2012) is the first official expansion to *Skyrim*. It was included since it was required for *Requiem* to work. The content in *Dawnguard* is level-gated meaning that player cannot encounter the Dawnguard quests until they reach character level 15, something that we deemed impossible to accomplish during the stated 8 hours of play time that our study asked for.

Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul

Requiem - The Roleplaying Overhaul (Ogerboss & Xarrian, 2012) is an overhaul for Skyrim, which means that it changes almost every mechanical aspect of the game (hereafter referred to as Requiem). This includes changing the abilities available to the PC, how combat works and how the world and the player interact with each other. The stated goal of Requiem is to provide a more difficult hardcore roleplaying experience. It does this primarily through a de-leveled world and by stripping the PC of all skill points, leaving the player to start at zero.

The de-leveled world means that enemies no longer increase in strength with the PC, as is the case in vanilla Skyrim. The games treasure rewards are also decoupled from the PC's level. The result of this de-leveling is that the world is much more dangerous, as enemies of all kinds and strengths are already present, but the rewards are also increased due to the fact that all levels of items are also present from the start. The player can in theory find very powerful late game items right from the start, but is also extremely vulnerable to the enemies of the world.

Alternate Start - Live Another Life

Alternate Start - Live Another Life (Arthmoor, 2012) allows the player to skip the predefined start sequence of *Skyrim* that throws the player into the main quest and instead gives the player a lot of lore-friendly starting options. We will refer to this as Alternate Start.

SkyUI

SkyUI (SkyUI Team, 2011) is an interface mod that overhauls Skyrim's interface. It is needed for *Requiem* to work and was therefore included in our prepared package.

Skyrim Script Extender

Skyrim Script Extender (Patterson, Abel and Connelly, 2011) extends the scripting functionality of *Skyrim* allowing modders to modify and access even more of *Skyrim's* variables. It is used both by *SkyUI* and *Requiem* and was therefore included in our prepared mod-package.