

Becoming Afflicted, Becoming Virtuous: *Darkest Dungeon* and the Human Response to Stress

Penultimate draft – Published in *Games and Culture*

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/15554120221084450>

Abstract: *The developers of Red Hook Studios' 2016 gothic horror 'Darkest Dungeon' said that they wanted to 'capture the human response to stress'. This paper analyses how the game does this with its 'stress', 'affliction' and 'virtue' mechanics. With reference to research literature on stress, I show how these mechanics, which could easily have been cheap gimmicks, approach the topic of stress with admirable detail, offering a complex reflection on the various aspects, positive and negative, of several possible human responses to stress. They show how different responses include similar symptoms, how stress impacts the people around the stressed person, and make the case that stress can break people, but also fuel heroism. It is a fantastic example of how video game mechanics can be used to educate people about complex subjects without explicitly saying this is what they're doing.*

Injury and despondence set the stage for heroism...or cowardice.

- The Ancestor, *Darkest Dungeon*¹

This paper discusses how game mechanics are used to model several possible human responses to stress in Red Hook Studios' 2016 release *Darkest Dungeon*. Mental health has become an increasingly prevalent topic in video games, some of which directly take their protagonists' psyches as a theme for investigation, constructing characters with complex internal torments whose actions and experiences have noticeable impact on their personalities, offering us a window into the complexities of the human mind. Through playing as these characters, video game players can be exposed to a plethora of important issues of psychology, mental health and illness, and learn a great deal about the psychological difficulties of being human. *Silent*

¹ *Darkest Dungeon*. Red Hook Studios/Merge Games/Degica. 2016.

*Hill 2*², for instance, is as much about exploring the protagonists' grief, guilt, and processing of trauma, as it is about exploring the mysterious titular town and encountering its monstrous inhabitants. The 2013 reboot of *Tomb Raider*³ contains a much more mature and realistic portrayal of Lara Croft: still a tomb-raiding warrior, but one that suffers, processes emotion, deals with loss, pain, isolation, and generally has a much more complex, more human mental life than the original Lara. *Spec Ops: The Line*⁴ tells a story of extreme psychological trauma about a soldier who commits atrocities during war and suffers hallucinations, delusions, and post-traumatic stress as a result.

Human psychology and mental health are explored more often in video games than they used to be, but few (if any) have approached the topic of stress as directly or with as much sophistication and thought as *Darkest Dungeon*. Every human being experiences stress to some degree, and it can have a deeply negative impact on a person's mental health. But stress also plays an important, positive role as part of our adaptive responses, partially responsible for how we, both physically and emotionally, deal with threatening situations. Stress is therefore a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, and not easy to define. Hans Selye provided one of the most well-known and generic definitions of stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand"⁵ which, for our purposes, is perhaps too generic since it could include everyday types of stress that have negligible negative effect on a mental health. Eugene Yates has a physiological way of defining stress as "any stimulus that will provoke the release of ACTH and adrenal glucocorticoids", but it is also important to consider the subjective, psychological experience of stress as a phenomenon brought on by events "which produce their effects purely

² *Silent Hill 2*. Team Silent/Konami. 2001.

³ *Tomb Raider 'Survivor' Trilogy* (2013-2018). Crystal Dynamics/Square Enix.

⁴ *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). Yager Development/2K Games.

⁵ Selye, H. *Stress in Health and Disease*. Butterworths. Boston/London. 1976. p. 15

because of their psychological significance”, as Richard Lazarus puts it.⁶ Here, a more appropriate definition to guide our study is the one Seyle finds in the “behavioral sciences, [where] stress is regarded as the ‘perception of threat, with resulting anxiety discomfort, emotional tension, and difficulty in adjustment.” (Fink 2010, 5) Stress is especially important to understand because it is an unpleasant psychological phenomenon that can be extremely damaging but also forms part of our adaptive infrastructure which allows us to apprehend and respond to threats to our wellbeing, which we evolved naturally, and has an important interaction with our physiological systems. For our purposes, stress will be conceived of as the perception of and response to threat, which can manifest in many ways and has both physiological and psychological components.

Understanding stress in line with this definition provides ample opportunity to recognize its multi-faceted nature and reflecting on the many forms responses to it can take. With its ‘stress’, ‘affliction’ and ‘virtue’ mechanics, *Darkest Dungeon* contributes to this type of approach to stress, admirably communicating its complex nature to players without explicitly telling them so. *Darkest Dungeon* showcases several ways that human beings can respond to stress, considers the complexities of these responses, and shows how they might manifest in a combat situation. The developers said “we wanted to capture the human response to stress. Any person can break under pressure, and people break in different ways. [...] However, moments of extreme pressure and high stakes are what drive meaningful heroism.”⁷ In what follows, I will

⁶ Fink, G. ‘Stress: Definition and History.’ *Stress Science: Neuroendocrinology*. Ed. Fink, G. Elsevier. Oxford/San Diego. 2010. p. 5

⁷ ‘Game Design Deep Dive: *Darkest Dungeon*’s Affliction System.’ *Game Developer*. Interview with *Darkest Dungeon*’s creative director/artist Chris Bourassa and its game designer and executive producer, Tyler Sigman. May 28th 2015. Accessed 10th September 2021. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/game-design-deep-dive-i-darkest-dungeon-s-i-affliction-system>

show how the game accomplishes its goal by examining its relevant mechanics and what they tell us about stress responses.

The Premise and Gameplay of *Darkest Dungeon*

Darkest Dungeon begins with an ominous letter from its narrator which sets the tone for the dark medieval narrative and game world clearly inspired by the work of H. P. Lovecraft. The narrator, known only as The Ancestor, warns that “ruin has come to our family” and tasks the player with returning to their ancestral mansion and nearby hamlet to restore them to their former glory. Having discovered that “the mansion itself was a gateway to some fabulous and unnamable power”, The Ancestor spent the family fortune on excavating it, “unearthing that portal of antediluvian evil” (*Darkest Dungeon*, 2016) and conducting manifold twisted experiments on it. His attempts at taming these ancient horrors failed, and the once-proud lands of his home are now riddled with cultists, necromancers, pigmen, sea monsters and various other abominations. Unable to live with himself, The Ancestor bequeaths your birthright and dies by suicide.

The player’s task is to assemble and lead teams of adventurers on quests for gold and glory, piece by piece purging your ancestral home of the grotesque terrors that stalk the land. The game features ‘permadeath’: if an adventurer dies on a mission, they are unavailable for future quests. Each in-game week, new recruits arrive on the town’s stagecoach that can be added to the player’s roster, which with the requisite upgrades paid for using items found on quests, can hold up to 31 heroes. There are (with DLC) 18 classes of hero, each with their own combat style and abilities, and each hero has randomly generated ‘quirks’, which either positively or negatively affect their performance, personality and behavior. It is up to the player, each week, to assemble a team of up to 4 adventurers and lead them on the quests available from the various

locations in the game, each with their own enemies and challenges – 7 locations, with DLC. These quests vary in length, objective and difficulty and consist in randomly generated dungeon crawls with turn-based combat⁸ which reward the player with resources and money to upgrade the hamlet's facilities. In between quests, the game turns into a kind of management simulator, where the player must decide how their resources and money are to be spent: on upgrading the hamlet, training up their adventurers in the guild, buying them upgraded weapons and armor at the blacksmith, treating their illnesses and quirks in the sanitarium, and so on. As time goes by, the idea is to level up your heroes, increasing their XP, combat skills and equipment quality to make them progressively more formidable, with the aim of eventually taking on the 'darkest dungeon' missions in the mansion itself, the epicenter of the evil corrupting the land. Being successful at the game – which is notoriously difficult and contains a lot of RNG – requires the player to gain a knowledge of how the different classes function, what their abilities are, how to use them, how they can be made to synergize with the other classes, and what combinations of four work best together.

Darkest Dungeon's Stress, Affliction and Virtue System

Your time spent on quests and managing the hamlet is further complicated by the fact that your heroes' lives of adventuring in dark caves and constant violence against supernatural forces (understandably) results in stress, represented in-game by a meter under the health bar

⁸ I will not go into the debate about whether *Darkest Dungeon* is a 'roguelike' since it has no relevance for understanding its treatment of stress. Suffice it to say that *Darkest Dungeon* has randomly generated levels, turn-based combat and permadeath – features that characterize many classic roguelike games – but also has meta-progression insofar as the upgrades for the hamlet persist, and the death of your heroes does not signal the end of the game. If your characters successfully complete a quest, they gain experience and can be used on future quests. Therefore, *Darkest Dungeon* is arguably more 'roguelite' than 'roguelike', but this should not concern us here.

consisting of black squares that turn white as the hero gets more stressed. When back at the hamlet, the player must manage their heroes' stress levels, utilizing the various forms of stress relief available – drinking, gambling, the brothel, etc. Too much stress will affect your heroes' performance and behavior on quests, and they will respond in different ways to the stress of the situation. These responses are represented by the game's 'afflictions' and 'virtues': clusters of status effects that persist until the end of the quest and have a significant impact on the effected hero and the party. These mechanics are how the game makes the point that human beings can respond in complicated ways to stress, and not all of them are negative. Though many people break under stress, stressful situations also provide context for heroic acts, and certain negative responses to stress might have aspects to them that are positive or contain some benefits for the stressed person – emotional responses are rarely as simple and one-dimensional as they sometimes appear. Far from being a gimmick, the stress system is accomplished with detail and finesse and has a lot to say about the complexities of how human beings respond to stress.

So how does the stress system work? In combat, enemies deal regular damage which lowers a character's health points, but they also deal stress damage which progressively fills the stress meter. Stress can build if a fight is generally going badly, if a hero is taking a lot of damage, if they witness one of their compatriots dying, if the party is walking around dungeons in complete darkness, or if the party is forced for retreat from (and thereby fail) a quest. When a hero's stress bar reaches 100 (of a possible 200), they undergo a check in which they have a 75% chance of receiving one of the game's 8 afflictions⁹ and a 25% chance of receiving one

⁹ There is an additional affliction - 'refracted' - added with the 'Colour of Madness' DLC, but it is clearly supernatural, where all the others are real and conceivable human responses to stress. For the purposes of this article, I will ignore refracted.

of the 5 virtues. Upon reaching 200 stress, the affected hero will have a heart attack, which either puts them on ‘death’s door’ (a kind of ‘last stand’ mechanic) or kills them if they are already there. The afflictions and virtues have a noticeable, multifaceted impact not just on the character that receives them, but also on the party as a whole. *Darkest Dungeon* hypothesizes that the afflictions and virtues are potential responses to stress and takes a position on what these responses involve. They are as follows:

Afflictions

- Fearful
- Paranoid
- Selfish
- Masochistic
- Abusive
- Hopeless
- Irrational
- Rapturous

Virtues

- Stalwart
- Courageous
- Focused
- Powerful
- Vigorous¹⁰

I will go into detail about each of these, but immediately we can notice that there are more ways to respond negatively to stress than positively, and it is far more likely that a person will respond negatively than positively. All afflictions carry a chance that, at the beginning of the afflicted character’s turn, they will cause their whole party stress – reflecting the fact that stress

¹⁰ I am taking my data about the afflictions, virtues and their effects from *Darkest Dungeon* itself, but also the *Darkest Dungeon Wiki*, an abundant information source about the game. (https://darkestdungeon.fandom.com/wiki/Darkest_Dungeon_Wiki)

is something that can be transmitted between people, and stress breeds more stress in social situations and combat. Besides this, the afflictions all have one effect in common (except for ‘rapturous’): they all reduce all a character’s ‘resist’ stats by 15%.¹¹ Interestingly, these stats include resistances to disease and bleeding, which suggest a strong physiological response to stress, and the fact that stress causes a physiological response in the central nervous system is acknowledged by scientific research. As Yaribeygi et al. attest in detail in their article *The Impact of Stress on Body Function: A Review*,

the effects of stress on the nervous system have been investigated for 50 years [...] studies have shown that stress has many effects on the human nervous system and can cause structural changes in different parts of the brain.¹²

Already, we have an important correlation between *Darkest Dungeon*’s stress mechanic and one of the ways stress works in real life: stress makes us less resistant to negative physiological effects like, for example, making us lethargic and depressed, which can in turn make us more likely to become ill, and so on. *Darkest Dungeon* recognizes this fact by tying the heroes’ bodily responses to the negative external stimuli. These responses, however, are interwoven with various other psychological responses, with the resulting picture usually more complicated than simply being entirely positive or negative.

The Afflictions

¹¹ The resist stats determine how likely a character is to resist whatever it is that they are facing, such as being stunned by a stun attack, being blighted (poisoned), suffering bleeding, being debuffed, being moved into a different combat position, resisting a trap or catching a disease. The higher a character’s resist stat for any of these things is, the less likely it is that it will work on them.

¹² Yaribeygi et al. ‘The Impact of Stress on Body Function: A Review.’ *EXCLI Journal: Experimental and Clinical Sciences*. 16. 2017. pp. 1057-1072

When a hero becomes afflicted or virtuous, several mechanisms will be put in place, some of which are guaranteed, persistent changes, while others happen only occasionally, by chance. When a hero becomes 'fearful', their damage is reduced by 25%: an instantaneous, persistent, guaranteed change. But the hero also now has a chance of 'acting out' at the beginning of each turn in combat, with a 31.5% chance of performing one of the following three actions: causing the whole party stress, retreating by one slot, or passing their turn entirely. The hero may also refuse to be moved, or shout things at their compatriots in battle that cause them stress. When camping (brief moments of respite in between encounters where heroes can use various 'skills' on each other for healing, stress relief and combat buffs), a fearful hero may refuse to use their skills. All of which could plausibly be consistent with a fearful response to stress in combat: a person consumed by fear could be less effective, more likely to stress out those around them, and more likely to retreat.

However, the effects of the fearful affliction are not entirely negative, which helps this affliction capture some of the nuances of the fearful stress response. Two more guaranteed, immediate, and persistent changes the hero receives upon becoming fearful are a 10-point increase in their 'dodge' stat and a 2-point increase in 'speed'. The dodge stat determines how likely a player will be to dodge an incoming attack and the speed stat determines how likely a character will be to go first on any turn. The increase in these stats mirrors the adrenaline rush present in potential responses to a scary situation. The fearful person might plausibly be less effective at certain things, but their evasive responses will be heightened, and they will perhaps be more sensitive and responsive to threats. This reflects how fear is not an entirely negative

phenomenon: despite it being traumatic and reducing your effectiveness at certain things, it has a function, a purpose: it prepares you for scary situations.¹³

Another interesting thing about the fearful affliction is that, in between combat when walking around the dungeon, it gives the afflicted character a 50% chance of interacting with any religious items the party comes across - ancient altars, etc. Perhaps this is an allusion to the fact that some people, in periods of combat or general stress, will seek comfort in the belief in a higher power – as the saying goes, ‘there are no atheists in foxholes.’ But the fact that there is a 50% chance of the character doing this suggests that people are just as likely to seek solace in God in moments of stress, or not. The game seems to place more emphasis on the ways that people can break over stress and have negative responses to it but places a 50% chance of someone casting about for solace from a higher power in moments of stress.

Often related to fear, paranoia has also been linked to stress by scientific research, and experiments have been carried out which claim to show that paranoia increases as stress levels increase.¹⁴ Paranoia often involves fear, but the fear is more chaotic, unpredictable, often directed at those closest to the affected person and accompanied by delusions. Out of all *Darkest Dungeon*'s afflictions, ‘paranoid’ most closely resembles fear: it has the same guaranteed, persistent changes as fear (-25% damage, +10 dodge, +2 speed) and carries a similar chance of causing the whole party stress or retreating by 1 space at the beginning of

¹³ This is not unlike what some philosophers, like Heidegger, have written about fear: he argues in *Being and Time* that it is not an entirely negative phenomenon, but has a disclosive function – fear is the way we apprehend a fearful object as being worthy of fear, how we disclose it as scary. (‘Fear as a Mode of Disposedness (Befindlichkeit).’ Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*. Trans. Macquarrie, J. and Robinson, E. Blackwell. London. 1962. Section 30, pp. 179-182)

¹⁴ Lincoln et al. ‘Impact of Stress on Paranoia: An Experimental Investigation of Moderators and Mediators.’ *Psychological Medicine*. July 2009. 39:7. pp. 1129-1139.

each turn. But it also has a 5-point reduction in ‘accuracy’ and a few other factors that reflect the chaotic character of paranoia. The paranoid hero will sometimes be suspicious of orders by refusing to retreat, refusing to eat, be healed, be moved, use an item, or receive a buff. They might use a random skill in battle for no reason. They will be suspicious of the other members of their party by refusing to use or be the target of camping skills, even occasionally attacking their allies in combat. Generally, the paranoid person has a persistent feeling that everybody and everything is out to get them, so it is conceivable that in a stressful situation they may lash out defensively at perceived threats which, in such a state of mind, could come from anywhere. In *Darkest Dungeon*, this is reflected by the paranoid character’s statements about the world around them and the members of their party and their actions towards them. The character’s state of mind is reinforced by the narrator: “the walls close in, the shadows whisper of conspiracy.” (*Darkest Dungeon*, 2016)

But not every response to stress consists in being terrified or ‘lashing out’ at those around us. In response to stress, a person may become self-centered to the point of only caring about themselves, with their ability to relate healthily with other people compromised – leading to more stress.¹⁵ A stressed person might retreat from social interaction into themselves, losing the stress-relieving benefits of regular social engagement. There has even been research which suggests that, in stressful situations, the brain itself can behave “in a selfish manner by competing for energy resources with the body”¹⁶ in times of stress. *Darkest Dungeon*’s ‘selfish’ affliction reflects this by borrowing some of the relevant aspects of paranoia and fear, while adding some others. ‘Selfish’ characters have a 10% reduction in damage, a 5-point reduction

¹⁵ Van Deusen, Meg. *Stressed in the U.S.: Twelve Tools to Tackle Anxiety, Loneliness, Tech Addiction and More*. Story Merchant Books. 2019.

¹⁶ Peters et al. ‘The Selfish Brain: Stress and Eating Behavior.’ *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. 30th May 2011.

in accuracy, and an increase of 5 points in dodge, which suggests that the character has become less interested in aiding their fellow soldiers in battle, caring more about saving themselves. But it is a different response than fear because the increase in dodge is halved and there is no increase in speed, which might suggest that the character is not being driven by the same intense, adrenaline-fueled ‘fight-or-flight’ response of fear, but rather by a selfish desire to preserve their own life at the expense of others. Other traits that ‘selfish’ borrows from ‘fearful’ and ‘paranoid’ include a 33.33% chance of the character performing one of the following four actions at the beginning of their turn: passing their turn, retreating by one position, using a random skill, and causing the whole party stress. All of which, when combined with the other factors of the ‘selfish’ affliction, suggest a hero that has ceased to care about helping others and focusses only on themselves and self-preservation. As The Ancestor says when a hero becomes selfish, “self-preservation is paramount – at any cost!” (*Darkest Dungeon*, 2016)

Selfishness is further reflected by the fact that, when camping, the affected hero may refuse to help others, and when walking around dungeons there is a 50% chance that they will interact with treasure that the team comes across and steal it for themselves.

An affliction which can be related to ‘selfish’ and ‘paranoid’ is ‘abusive’. Abuse can, plausibly, be linked to stress¹⁷: physical and emotional abuse are often precursors to psychiatric illnesses. As a recent study attests to regarding childhood trauma, “physical, emotional and sexual abuse are subtypes of child maltreatment associated with long-term health consequences including depressive disorders, substance use, and suicide attempt.”¹⁸ Abuse has been linked to stress in

¹⁷ Public health information and abuse hotline websites like ‘Healthline’ or ‘Respect Phonenumber’ have pages discussing the connection between abuse and stress and offer information to help and guidance to those in such situations. (Links in bibliography.)

¹⁸ Luk et al. ‘A Latent Class Analysis of Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse History Among Suicidal Inpatients.’ *Journal of Psychiatric Research*. 142. 2021. pp. 9-16. p. 9

academic research, a good example being Whipple and Webster-Stratton's study of parental stress in physically abusive families, which also cites several other studies that have investigated a similar theme.¹⁹

In *Darkest Dungeon*, being 'abusive' reflects how emotional and physical abuse can be a result of stress. An abusive hero might cause their party stress (23.5% chance) or attack their compatriots (5.8% chance). Generally, the hero stops caring so much about helping their allies or cooperating – they may refuse to be moved in combat or refuse to use or be the target of camping skills. But when they are 'abusive', these tendencies are accompanied by abusive rage towards those around them, both enemy and ally. The guaranteed, persistent changes involved in being 'abusive' are different from those we have encountered so far: there is a reduction in accuracy of 5 points, but this is accompanied by a 15-point reduction in dodge and a 25% increase in damage. This suggests that the abusive person, because of their rage and aggression, might be more likely in certain respects to succeed in a combat situation and deal more damage: they are so consumed by their anger that they become highly aggressive, looking for fights rather than avoiding them – hence the reduction in dodge. But their abusive rage is such that, even though their attacks do more damage when they land, their accuracy is reduced – they are so blindly aggressive that their effectiveness is impacted. In combat, camping and when walking around the dungeon, the abusive hero will yell abusive comments at their allies, increasing the stress of the group. This is akin to how paranoia functions in the game, but different in the sense that, when abusive, the hero is not so much lashing out at their allies

¹⁹ Whipple, E. and Webster-Stratton, C. 'The Role of Parental Stress in Physically Abusive Families.' *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Vol. 15. 1991. pp. 279-291

because of a perceived conspiracy against them, but because they become angry and consumed by hatred for them and want to unleash their anger on whoever is closest.

The ‘masochistic’, ‘hopeless’ and ‘rapturous’ afflictions can be grouped together insofar as they represent potential responses to stress that are more inwardly directed than outwardly, where the victim largely seeks to inflict pain on themselves. When afraid or paranoid, the hero’s attention is directed onto an external threat. The ‘selfish’ and ‘abusive’ afflictions, though they have self-directed elements, usually manifest in the hero’s behavior towards those near to them. The selfish hero steals from the party and refuses to help them or cooperate when asked. The abusive hero lashes out at their allies and enemies alike. However, in ‘masochistic’, ‘hopeless’ and ‘rapturous’, the hero’s reaction centers on themselves, and they inflict pain directly on themselves, rather than other people.

The only guaranteed, persistent change in the ‘masochistic’ affliction is a 15-point reduction in dodge, representing the fact that because of protracted stress, the hero now seeks pain rather than avoids it. This is reinforced by the fact that the hero now has a 33.33% chance of either causing the whole party stress, moving toward the frontline, attacking or ‘marking’ themselves, meaning they will be more likely to be attacked, and suffer more damage when they are. There is also a chance they will refuse to retreat from battle, eat, be healed, and generally refuse anything that would alleviate their pain. They also become uncooperative, but not to the same degree as an abusive or paranoid hero. The masochistic hero carries a high probability of interacting with items in the dungeon that have a chance of harming them. Linking masochism to stress is not incidental either, as there have been studies which link them previously, like Blum’s *Masochism and Trauma*, which explores “masochistic phenomena as influenced by

severe, protracted trauma”²⁰, which can include protracted stress. The exact link between the masochistic response and stress remains mysterious to some degree, but there is at least some acknowledgement in the research community that there is such a link.

A flipside, or perhaps a particularly intense variation of the masochistic response, perhaps one of the rarer responses to stress and certainly one of the most unique afflictions in *Darkest Dungeon* is to become ‘rapturous’: the only affliction that can be earned by the ‘Flagellant’ class, who has no possibility of becoming virtuous. The rapturous Flagellant not only seeks out pain but is strengthened by it: it courses through his veins like a drug, putting him into a rapturous state – quite simply, he likes the pain, thrives on it, and perceives it as bringing him into closer communion with the divine. The Flagellant is one of the strangest, but arguably one of the most powerful classes in the game, with strong ‘bleed’ abilities and immense healing skills that can bring himself and other heroes back from the brink instantly. A religious zealot that the game describes as “weaponized suffering [...] made flesh” (*Darkest Dungeon*, 2016), the Flagellant becomes stronger the less health and more stress he has: at below 40% health, his damage increases by 20%, and his chance of scoring a critical hit increases by 7%. Two of his most powerful skills only become available for use when he has below 40% health. When on ‘death’s door’, his damage again increases by 20%, his stun, bleed, blight and debuff resists increase by 20%, his accuracy goes up by 5, his speed up by 2, and every other member of the party gets healed for 10% of their maximum health. Using the Flagellant is a complicated, high-risk high-reward strategy but one that can pay dividends if you keep him just alive enough that he reaches his full potential.

²⁰ Blum, H. P. ‘Masochism and Trauma.’ In *The Clinical Problem of Masochism*. Eds. Holtzman D. and Kulish, N. Rowman and Littlefield. 2012. pp. 145-159

Upon reaching 100 stress, the Flagellant always becomes ‘rapturous’, perhaps the only affliction with more benefits than drawbacks. The hero gets an even bigger reduction in dodge than in the ‘masochistic’ affliction (-20 points), an increase of 3 points in speed, and an increase in damage of 25%, meaning that if the Flagellant is at ‘death’s door’ and ‘rapturous’ simultaneously, they have a damage increase of 65%. Other potential occurrences include their possibly refusing to retreat from battle, refusing to be healed or moved, moving toward the frontline, or attacking themselves. But since it is the Flagellant class, these things have as much of a chance of making him stronger than weaker, so the ‘rapturous’ affliction arguably has more benefits than drawbacks. It still has drawbacks: the hero might attack their allies, refuse to use camping skills, have them used on them, or cause the party stress – but the potential benefits far outweigh these factors.

‘Rapturous’ acts like a positive kind of masochism: whereas the hero afflicted with the ‘masochistic’ affliction seeks pain, it is not clear that they do so because they straightforwardly enjoy it, it rather seems as though they seek the pain to punish themselves or to distract from the intense stress they are under. Stress might heighten any self-destructive or masochistic tendencies a person has, but it may not be right to say that the person engages in self-destructive behavior just because they enjoy it. The Flagellant, however, does seek out pain because in some sense they like it because it makes them stronger. This mirrors the theological underpinnings of the Christian practice of self-flagellation, where Christians seek “through self-inflicted pain to gain remission for their sins, by sharing in Christ’s suffering”.²¹ From

²¹ Nethersole, S. *Art and Violence in Early Renaissance Florence*. Yale University Press. 2018. p. 107

certain Bible passages²² a doctrine called the ‘mortification of the flesh’ has been derived, according to which ‘mortifying’ (from the Latin ‘mortificare’, literally ‘putting to death’ or ‘subduing’) the sinful aspects of the body through self-inflicted pain is a way of purging the oneself of sinful desires, repenting one’s sins, keeping oneself under control and making oneself stronger in the faith. On this interpretation, by inflicting pain on oneself, the Christian can grow stronger and closer to God.²³ In *Darkest Dungeon*, the Flagellant class takes this logic onto the battlefield, gaining power from the pain inflicted on him and responding to the stress of the situation by becoming stronger.

The ‘hopeless’ afflicted character also engages in self-destructive behavior, but in this case it is because they have lost all hope and want the end to come as quickly as possible. There is, as far as I can work out, no benefit to having this affliction: its guaranteed, persistent changes are a 5-point reduction in accuracy and dodge, and a 3-point reduction in speed. The hero’s hopelessness consumes them, rendering them slow and ineffective. They might also attack or mark themselves, have a chance to move either forward or backwards one position, may pass their turn entirely, use a random skill or cause the rest of the party stress. A hopeless hero will potentially refuse anything asked of them because for them the battle is already lost. Hopelessness is a conceivable response to stress and the ‘hopeless’ affliction, because it has no benefits, suggests it is one of the most negative possible responses: no positive, beneficial

²² Especially Romans 8:13 (“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”) and Colossians 3:5 (“Mortify therefore your member which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness, which is idolatry”). *King James Bible Online*. Kingjamesbibleonline.org. Accessed 07th December 2021.

²³ It should be noted that Christianity is not the only religion with a history of flagellation. Shi’a Islam commemorations of the day of ‘Ashura’ have been known to include self-flagellation. (Jafariya News. ‘Ashura Observed with Blood Streams to Mark Karbala Tragedy.’ Ismail Zabeeh. February 10th 2005. Accessed 7th December 2021. http://www.jafariyanews.com/2k5_news/feb/20ashur.htm)

actions or thoughts can come from a hopeless state of mind – why would you do anything if you had no hope left? At least the ‘fearful’ and ‘paranoid’ responses have upsides: they ready the body’s evasive responses and somehow prepare you for a scary, stressful situation. But if the person has lost all hope, why would they ready themselves for the possibility of getting out of the situation? There are responses to stress in *Darkest Dungeon* that appear more conducive for getting the heroes out of stressful situations: even ‘abusive’ carries a damage bonus and added aggression, which can be useful for a combat situation. A ‘selfish’ hero will at least turn their efforts onto self-preservation. ‘Hopeless’ heroes, however, feel as though they have nothing left to live for, and become welcoming of the end.

Which leaves us with ‘irrational’, arguably the least interesting affliction but plausibly also a response to stress. This affliction is described as a “grab bag” by the producers, since it is simply “any combination of the other affliction behaviors” (Bourassa/Sigman, *Game Developer*, 2015), generated randomly. This captures the fact that people may become irrational as a response to stress and behave erratically, unpredictably, and inconsistently, but it is arguably not as sophisticated and deep as the other afflictions because of its random nature: it captures the fact that irrationality has no logic and is unpredictable, but little else.

The Virtues

The virtues are arguably less interesting and nuanced than the afflictions since they are all simpler and all straightforwardly positive: there are no downsides to any of them. There are, of course, reasons for this that pertain to the balance of the game: a hero only has a 25% chance of becoming virtuous the virtues can turn a difficult quest on its head – this is how the game shows that people can break under stress, but stress can also provide context for and produce

heroic actions. The virtues therefore must be overwhelmingly positive: if they had complex sets of benefits and drawbacks like some of the afflictions, there would not be much more benefit to becoming virtuous. Nevertheless, for reflecting on the nature of the different human responses to stress, the virtues offer much less rich material than the afflictions. Upon reaching 100 stress, a hero has a 25% chance of receiving one of the game's 5 virtues, which are all accompanied by immediate, guaranteed and persistent changes, and carry a 25% possibility that they will perform a particular action at the beginning of each turn. These changes and actions are, as with the afflictions, consistent with the virtue in question.

'Powerful', for instance, carries a 25% increase in damage, with a 25% chance of increasing other heroes' damage by 15% at the beginning of a turn, reflecting the fact that stressful situations can result in the hero finding increased strength despite the situation, and inspire others to find similar strength. 'Stalwart' also showcases the additional strength and resistance one might find in a stressful situation, awarding the hero a 15% increase in 'Protection' (damage resistance), a +8% 'Death Blow Resist' (meaning that when attacked on 'death's door', the hero will be 8% less likely to die), and a 25% chance of reducing their own stress by 15 at the beginning of each turn. 'Courageous' also reflects a kind of mental fortitude one might find in troubling circumstances, highlighting the fact that people can be driven by stressful to be particularly brave, and their bravery can inspire others and make them braver. This is done with a 33% decrease in stress to the courageous hero, an increase of 2 to speed and 25% chance of reducing other heroes' stress by 4 at the beginning of their turn. The last two virtues showcase the fact that combat abilities can be heightened in a stressful situation without simply becoming more powerful and dealing more damage – the hero might become generally more adept at handling the situation around them. A 'Vigorous' hero gets a 4-point increase in speed, an added 10% in dodge and carries a 25% chance of healing themselves for 10% of max HP

on their turn. ‘Focused’ increases a hero’s accuracy by 10 points, critical chance by 8%, and gives a 25% chance of increasing the same stats in other heroes.

The virtues also represent conceivable responses to stress and contribute to the game’s case that the human response to stress is not always negative – people can break under stress, but stress can also be a source of courage, strength, and heroism. But arguably the virtues are less conceptually rich and nuanced than the afflictions, which offer a complex reflection on the various aspects of the responses to stress they concern. The virtues, however, are all straightforwardly positive: there is no downside to them, and they are much less complex and sophisticated as the afflictions – but in the context of the systems of *Darkest Dungeon*, and because of the point it wants to make about stress, they need to be heavily balanced in favor of the hero and their party.

Conclusion

Darkest Dungeon makes excellent use of what Ian Bogost calls “*procedural rhetoric*, the art of persuasion through rule-based representation and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures.”²⁴ It is through the construction of a systems of rules and representations, and the interweaving of this system into a narrative world, that allows *Darkest Dungeon* to make serious claims about a complex psychological subject important for human life, and testify to how complex and nuanced this subject is without being one-sided in its treatment of it. It manipulates computational processes to make the player reflect on and ultimately learn about the human response to stress. *Darkest Dungeon* treats the topic of stress

²⁴ Bogost, I. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. The MIT Press. Massachusetts/London. 2007. p. xi

with sophistication and surprising detail, clearly putting a lot of thought into representing the complexities of the various ways people can respond to it. It shows how these responses, despite coming from different emotional places, often display similar symptoms: harming oneself might be a symptom of hopelessness, masochism, or irrationality. Fear and paranoia involve similar phenomena. People might seek out pain and engage in self-destructive behavior for different reasons. *Darkest Dungeon* shows how stress also impacts the people around the stressed person and how stress builds up in other people through being around someone who is stressed. In the afflictions, we find a complex reflection on the various nuances, positive and negative, of each response. We also find that some responses are worse than others – it is arguably better to be ‘fearful’ or ‘paranoid’ than ‘hopeless’: ‘hopeless’ offers no benefits, whereas ‘fearful’ and ‘paranoid’ offer heightened speed and dodge, a reflection of how fear, which is also involved in paranoia, might not be a pleasant feeling but can be part of a life-preserving response to a threatening situation. *Darkest Dungeon* accomplishes its goal of capturing the human response to stress commendably. What could easily have been a gimmick adding little depth to the game is one of its strongest, most distinguishing assets. By carefully manipulating and balancing the game’s various statistics and mechanics, *Darkest Dungeon* can reflect interestingly on the various human responses to stress, taking a position on what the different responses involve and showcasing how they might affect a person and those around them in a combat situation.

This is a great example of how video games can be more than just entertainment and use their mechanics to convey complex, nuanced points about important human issues to players without explicitly saying that this is what they’re doing. *Darkest Dungeon* is a grim dungeon crawler, but it is also, purely by virtue of the way it constructs certain mechanics, an admirable reflection on the various ways that human beings can respond to adversity and how many of our adaptive

responses (like fear) may feel unpleasant but have a life-preserving function. There is something educational about playing games like *Darkest Dungeon*: through engaging interactively with its mechanics, we learn vicariously through the experiences of its characters something about what it is like to be ourselves. This is precisely the kind of thing that can elevate a video game from being a well-produced, challenging, engaging pastime to an artwork in the highest sense of the word: through gameplay, they tell us about what it means to be human. Like other artforms, video games and their mechanics can be used for cultural commentary, for normalizing phenomena in need of it, and providing food for thought on issues pertinent to human life. You can learn about stress and its associated adaptive mechanisms by reading a psychological or scientific treatise on the subject, but it is a credit to video game design that you can also learn a considerable amount about this by playing *Darkest Dungeon*.

Appendix: Table of Effects of Afflictions and Virtues

Afflictions

Fearful

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -25% Damage / +10 dodge / +2 Speed

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (10.5% Chance)
- Retreat 1 Space (10.5% Chance)
- Pass Turn (10.5% Chance)
- Refuse to be Moved (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use a Camping Skill (33% Chance)
- Interact with 'Worship' Items (50% Chance)

Paranoid

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -25% Damage / -5 Accuracy / +10 Dodge / +2 Speed

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (9.4% Chance)
- Retreat 1 Space (9.4% Chance)
- Use a Random skill (9.4% Chance)
- Attack an Ally (3.1% Chance)
- Refuse to Retreat (33% Chance)
- Refuse to be Moved, Healed or Buffed (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use an Item (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Eat at Camp (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)

Selfish

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -5 Accuracy / -10% Damage / +5 Dodge

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (8.3% Chance)
- Retreat 1 Space (8.3% Chance)
- Pass Turn (8.3% Chance)
- Use a Random Skill (8.3% Chance)
- Refuse to Use a Camping Skill (33% Chance)
- Interact with 'Treasure' Items, Stealing the Loot (50% Chance)

Masochistic

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -15 Dodge

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (8.3% Chance)
- Move Forward 1 Space (8.3% Chance)
- Attack Self (8.3% Chance)
- Mark Self (8.3% Chance)
- Refuse to Retreat (33% Chance)
- Refuse to be Moved, Healed or Buffed (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use an Item (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Eat at Camp (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)
- Interact with 'Torture' Items (50% Chance)

Abusive

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -5 Accuracy / +20% Damage / -15 Dodge

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (23.5 % Chance)
- Attack Ally (5.8% Chance)
- Refuse to be Moved (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)

Hopeless

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -5 Accuracy / -5 Dodge / -3 Speed

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (5% Chance)
- Move Forward or Retreat 1 Space (5% Chance)
- Pass Turn (5% Chance)
- Use a Random Skill (5% Chance)
- Attack Self (5% Chance)
- Mark Self (5% Chance)
- Refuse to Retreat (33% Chance)
- Refused to be Healed or Buffed (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use an Item (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Eat at Camp (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)

Irrational

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -5 Accuracy / -10% Damage / -5 Dodge / +2 Speed

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (5.2% Chance)
- Move Forward or Retreat 1 Space (5.2% Chance)
- Pass Turn (5.2% Chance)
- Use a Random Skill (5.2% Chance)
- Attack Ally (1.7%)
- Attack Self (5.2% Chance)
- Mark Self (5.2% Chance)
- Refuse to Retreat (33% Chance)
- Refused to be Healed or Buffed (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use an Item (33% Chance)

- Refuse to Eat at Camp (33% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)
- Interact with any Item (7.5% Chance)

Rapturous (Flagellant Class Only)

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- +25% Damage / -20 Dodge / +3 Speed

Possible Effects:

- Cause Party Stress (8.3% Chance)
- Move Forward 1 Space (8.3% Chance)
- Use a Random Skill (8.3% Chance)
- Attack Ally (8.3% Chance)
- Attack Self (8.3% Chance)
- Refuse to Retreat (33% Chance)
- Refuse to be Moved or Healed (33% Chance)
- Refuse to be Buffed (10% Chance)
- Refuse to Use an Item (10% Chance)
- Refuse to Use or be the Target of Camping Skills (33% Chance)

Virtues

Stalwart

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- +15% Protection / +8% Death Blow Resist

Possible Effect:

- Reduce Own Stress by 15% (25% Chance)

Courageous

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- -33% Stress / +2 Speed

Possible Effect:

- Reduce Other Heroes' Stress by 4 (25% Chance)

Focused

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- +10 Accuracy / +8% Critical Hit Chance

Possible Effect:

- Buff One Other Hero for 10% Accuracy and +10% Critical Hit Chance (25% Chance)

Powerful

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- +25% Damage

Possible Effect:

- Buff Other Heroes for +15% Damage (25% Chance)

Vigorous

Persistent, Guaranteed Effects:

- +4 Speed / +10% Dodge

Possible Effect:

- Heal Self for 10% of Max Health (25% Chance)

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