

Surviving the Inferno: My Hardest Difficulty Playthrough of Dark Souls III

I have been playing action RPGs for over twenty years. I have beaten Ninja Gaiden on Master Ninja, cleared Bloodborne at BL4, and finished Cuphead without upgrading my weapon. So when I decided to attempt the **hardest difficulty playthrough** of Dark Souls III, I thought I knew what I was getting into. I was wrong. What followed was a humbling, brutal, and ultimately beautiful experience that taught me more about game design and personal resilience than a dozen normal playthroughs ever could.

Dark Souls III does not have a traditional difficulty slider. Instead, the game's hardest difficulty is self-imposed: starting as a Deprived class, staying at Soul Level 1, using only the starter weapon, and never summoning phantoms. This is commonly called an SL1 run, and it strips away every safety net the game provides. One mistake means death. Two hits from most bosses mean a loading screen. It sounds masochistic, and maybe it is. But for players who crave a pure test of skill, this **hardest difficulty playthrough** offers something rare: a chance to master a game so completely that your own reflexes become the only variable.

Why We Seek the Hardest Path

Some gamers dismiss challenge runs as elitist or pointless. I understand that perspective. Games are supposed to be fun, and dying repeatedly to the same boss does not sound like fun to most people. But for a subset of players, the attraction is not about bragging rights or proving superiority. It is about flow state. When every encounter can kill you, you stop thinking about loot, experience points, or story beats. You focus entirely on the moment. Your peripheral vision sharpens. Your finger hovers over the dodge button before the enemy even winds up. That hyper-awareness is addictive.

There is also a sense of discovery. On a normal playthrough, you can brute-force many fights by overleveling or using powerful gear. On the **hardest difficulty playthrough**, you are forced to learn boss patterns you never noticed before. I discovered that the Dancer of the Boreal Valley has a tell in her idle animation that signals her next attack type. I learned that Pontiff Sulyvahn's phantom can be parried in a way that stuns him longer than a dodge would. These micro-discoveries feel like secrets the game was hiding from me, and uncovering them is deeply satisfying.

Preparing for the Run

Before I started, I spent two weeks researching. I watched videos of other players doing SL1 runs, noting which rings they equipped, which weapon upgrades they prioritized, and which

bosses they found easiest to skip. I also mentally prepared myself for the grind. I knew I would die hundreds of times. I set a rule: no rage quitting. If I felt frustration building, I would stand up, walk away for five minutes, and come back calm.

My equipment strategy was minimal. I chose the Raw Broadsword for its speed and reach, upgraded it to Raw Broadsword +10 as fast as possible, and used the Grass Crest Shield for its stability. I avoided heavy armor because it slowed my roll speed. I used the Flynn's Ring and the Lloyd's Shield Ring to boost my stamina and defense slightly, but I never relied on them. The real defense was learning to dodge.

The Bosses That Broke Me

Not every boss was equally hard. Some that are famously tough on normal runs, like the Abyss Watchers, went down in three tries because their patterns are predictable. Others that most players breeze through became walls.

- **Pontiff Sulyvahn** - This fight took me 47 attempts. The second phase, where he summons a phantom clone, requires you to track two enemies simultaneously. I had to learn to position the clone between myself and the real Pontiff so that his own attacks hit his copy.
- **Dancer of the Boreal Valley** - Her erratic spinning and delayed attacks punished my muscle memory from the first phase. I had to unlearn dodge timings I had used for years and develop new ones based on visual cues from her sword glow.
- **Soul of Cinder** - The final boss of the base game. His second phase, with the curved sword, was where I spent most of my time. Each of his combos has a different punish window, and mistiming a single parry meant instant death.

Each of these bosses forced me to adapt. I could not rely on my usual strategies. I had to re-learn the game from the ground up, and that process was humbling. I remember dying to Pontiff Sulyvahn for the thirtieth time and laughing out loud because I had just discovered a new attack animation I had never seen before. That moment made the struggle worth it.

Lessons Learned Beyond the Screen

Completing this run changed how I approach difficult challenges outside of gaming. I started applying the same methodical practice to learning a new language and to improving my cooking skills. The core idea is simple: break a complex task into small, repeatable parts, practice each part until you can do it without thinking, then combine them. This is exactly what I did with boss fights. I practiced dodging one attack for ten minutes, then another, then combined them into a sequence.

I also learned the value of patience over persistence. Early in the run, I would rush back into the boss room after each death, eager to prove I could do it. That led to sloppy play and more deaths. Once I forced myself to wait a few seconds between attempts, to breathe and review what went wrong, my success rate went up. The same principle applies to real-world problem solving. Sometimes the fastest way forward is to pause and think.

Is It Worth It?

That depends on what you want from a game. If you play to relax, to experience a story, or to feel powerful, then a [hardest difficulty playthrough](#) is probably not for you. It is stressful, time-consuming, and often frustrating. But if you play to test the limits of your own focus and adaptability, to see a game's systems stripped bare and learn every one of its secrets, then it is one of the most rewarding experiences gaming can offer.

I would not recommend this run to a newcomer. You need to have beaten the game at least once on normal difficulty to understand the basic flow. You also need a high tolerance for repetition. But for veterans who feel like they have seen everything a game has to offer, a hardest difficulty playthrough can breathe new life into a familiar title. It forces you to engage with the game on a deeper level, to appreciate the craftsmanship behind each encounter, and to discover strategies you never knew existed.

In the end, I finished my run in 94 hours, with over 600 deaths. I did not get any special achievement or in-game reward. The only trophy was the knowledge that I had conquered the game on my own terms, using nothing but skill and patience. That is enough.