2009's DEMON'S SOULS gave PS3 owners an intricately detailed dungeon crawler packaged with a world of hurt and agony. More frustrating than challenging, and yet garnering heaps of critical praise, DEMON'S SOULS became somewhat of a cult/sleeper hit in the market. It was so much of a success that the sadistic minds over at From Software developed a "spiritual" successor by the name of DARK SOULS (available now on XBOX 360 and PS3), a cross-platform crawler that will ensure gamers aren't the only ones pounding controllers into their stress-addled skulls.

DARK SOULS isn't just a dungeon crawler by any stretch. It's a dragon slayer, a broadsword swinger, an arrow launcher, a path finder, a spell caster, and above all, a true exercise in both the patience and tolerance levels of the gaming community. This game is steeped in challenge and aggravation, and in no way is that a bad thing. To anyone who's ever bought a game and said "it was okay, but I beat it in like 8 hours, so it's not really worth the $60," DARK SOULS throws down the gauntlet and spits in your face. It doesn't just throw down a gauntlet; it throws it down underneath a pile of bones and decay, and then pours buckets of blood on top of this pile-o-challenge and says "we defy you not to get your money's worth." There's more challenge in this game than you can shake a severed arm at.

As the story goes, there really isn't a direct plot to the game. In no way is the vast and expansive world designed for a linear narrative to be followed, so beyond exploring the world and developing (read: leveling up) your character, the story is pieced together based on how you encounter the "friendlier" inhabitants. The introduction tells us that a dominion of dragons once ruled the world, and four beings representing divided groups (men/pygmies/sorceresses/the undead) joined together to harness a powerful magic and defeat the dragon overlords. After their fall, a disease known only as Darksign began to plague the human population and turn them into undead "hollows," a sort of zombie-army lacking any emotion but retaining enough function free will to tear through your ass with developed swordplay and knowledge of crude weaponry. The main character begins the game as an undead prisoner, but somehow retains the sense of compassion and faith lost on other afflicted souls. He happens upon escape and sets down a path to restoring humanity around

him.

After playeing for about 30 minutes, trying to get my controller bearings while exploring a decaying dungeon, I was killed by an emaciated prisoner wearing a loincloth and swinging a sword-hilt. I seriously don't think it had a blade on it, I'm pretty sure he just bludgeoned me to death. About two dozen deaths within another hour later—trying to take on two enemies at once, planning an attack against a large beast, thinking I was dodging oncoming attacks—I realized I was in the tutorial. Regardless of death count, mounting frustration, and the realization that every death nixed any hard-earned experience points and items, I didn't resort to throwing controllers across the room. I trudged on and found the game consistently rewarding for every valiant effort I put forth.

DARK SOULS comes with an intriguing online-gameplay where players can interact with fellow gamer's quests without direct interaction as well as player-vs-player combat and co-op play. Fans of brutal medieval warfare will appreciate the careful attention the developers paid to the combat portion of the game. While it pays to attack your enemies from as far away as possible, there's something inherently satisfying in dodging an oncoming strike and successfully landing a vicious scimitar stab through the back. Maybe it's the geyser of blood that ensues, maybe it's the hilariously shocked look on the face of your foe, or maybe it's just an amazing recreation of the raw emotion behind a combative victory. At any rate, choose your close-sparring partners wisely, as most enemies in this game will hand your ass to you over and over again. I should know, I was gored by a feral boar.