

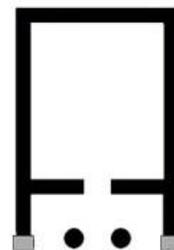
Death in Digital Games: A Thanatological Approach

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Death in Digital Games: A Thanatological Approach

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Introduction

Our time is the digital time. Whether or not one agrees with the term *digital revolution*, it is indisputable that, as Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn have suggested, ‘all institutions will have to be *reinvented* in response to these new technologies’.¹ Media is, of course, one of such institutions. They undergo certain processes of change and re-familiarisation with the masses, processes for which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have very successfully coined the term ‘remediation’.² Digital games constitute a medium where the ground is more than fertile for these kinds of ‘reinventions’. They pose novel challenges, both culturally and academically, and bring forward a need for new methodological tools.

However, it is never an easy task to talk about digital games. They constitute a medium so diverse and versatile that any discussion trying to include all digital games is bound from the start to face a dead-end; either by being too narrow and thus excluding many game titles, or by being too vast to the point of saying nothing of concrete value. The problem becomes more multifarious when one tries to examine death in digital games. Talking about death brings along its own difficulties, yet it goes a step further: it reaches deadpan absurdity. Talking about both of them simultaneously? It may seem rather incongruous at first.

If anyone has ever played a digital game—or watched someone else playing one—it is highly likely that they have used or heard phrases like: “I have to kill that boss”; “I have only two lives left”; or, “I died”—again. That is because, in most digital games, the player has to overcome obstacles and succeed in challenges that are closely linked with death. Winning means surviving; losing means dying, usually horrible deaths. However, it is exactly this plural form that creates a feeling of dismissiveness with respect to death in digital games. After all, in almost all digital games, players have the ability to reload and play again after they die; or they can even “respawn”—as is the jargon term—at the same spot the moment they died.

Therefore, how can one talk about death in digital games when its repercussions are so trivial; when one can just revive after dying, so unlike ordinary life? Nevertheless, in this article, I will

¹ Henry Jenkins, David Thorburn, ‘Introduction: The Digital Revolution, the Informed Citizen, and the Culture of Democracy’, in *Democracy and New Media*, ed. by Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 1-23 (p.10).

² Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

argue that it is exactly in this ability for regeneration in digital games that the player gains the capacity to understand death in a much more straightforward way than in other medial representations of death. Taking into account the unattainability of death as expressed by the work of Maurice Blanchot, I will try to show how the ergodic system of digital games and the bond created between the playable figures and the gamer constitute a phenomenological situation favourable for the conscious comprehension of death.

Death in digital games

From the start it is imperative to differentiate between games. As I said in my introduction, making claims about games in general will only bring failure and condemnation to one's project. Thus, I will begin my analysis by first demarcating the type of digital games that I will be referring to when using the word games in this paper. I will focus solely on games in which death functions as an answer from the game system to the player's misinterpretation of its requirements, which is to say games where death is not something that can happen, but something that is not supposed to happen, so that as a result the player needs to play again in order to resolve his/her unwilling defiance towards the system's rules. In other words, games where death is considered the obstacle against the player's efforts for success.

In these digital games, death is seen as the way of delivering ultimate punishment. If the player does not abide with the rules of the system or fails to understand how it works, then he/she has to be disregarded. That is why Olli Tapio Leino, in his article 'Death Loop as a Feature', writes that:

I am merely observing what it means to play a computer game: to survive as a player, I, you, all of us, must find out what the designers wanted us to do in a game. If we fail to figure this out, we are most likely to get stuck or find ourselves in front of a game over screen. Thus, as a player, I am not unlike a person with a religious conviction to occasional cause, who interprets the world inauthentically in bad faith according to god's purpose seen in whatever happens around her.³

Hence, if you do what it is demanded from you, you get rewarded. If you are unsuccessful in doing so? You die. Consequently, death in digital games could be seen as the implementation of the notion of what Adorno claimed to be the ostracisation of death in the modern capitalistic world,⁴ especially *après* Auschwitz to use the term of Agamben as something exogenetic; that is, something which is not considered an *a priori* or even an *in genere* structuralised event but a

³ Olli Tapio Leino, 'Death Loop as a Feature', *Game Studies*, 12:2 (2012), <http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature> [accessed 26 March 2015] (para. 35 of 60).

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973).

contingent result of our own mistakes.⁵ However, if we abide with this analysis of death in digital games, it means that we approach it as a fixed phenomenon; but, then, can we talk about death in terms of a phenomenological account?

More importantly, can we talk about death in general? Is thanatology—talk about death, from the Greek words *θάνατος*, meaning death, and *λόγος*, meaning speech—anything more than a study on emptiness? Talking about death is at best an uncomfortable experience. More than that, it is what Ivan Callus, in his articles about thanatography and thanatology, calls an ‘awkward’ situation.⁶ He writes that awkward comes from the early meaning of the word in Late Middle English, ‘turned the wrong way, in the wrong direction’; instead from life to death, from death to life. Death belongs to the dead, not to the living.⁷ Thus, how can one talk about death while still being alive?

What a self-explanatory question. After all, I am now talking about death. It may be awkward or uncomfortable or still unnerving, yet nothing prevents me from doing it; it does not matter. What does matter is that all my talking is nothing more than a probability. I can only refer to death as something non-existent, unknowable, abstract, and absent; I can only perceive death through its living traces, as something that constitutes a paradox. Moreover, I am in the position of interpreting death exclusively as a negative dialectic, as Adorno would say.⁸ Something is not living, therefore it is dead. I could never scream, like an awkward Dr Frankenstein, “It’s dead! It’s dead!”, and assert a positive “manifestation”; instead, I can only assert an abstracted condemnation of life.

The unattainability of death

How is someone supposed to grasp death? How can someone examine it, analyse it and, in the case of digital games, mediate it? The representation of death, even though largely evident across all media and narratives, is not merely another theme to be considered. As Simon Critchley puts it, ‘death is radically resistant to the order of representation’.⁹ By constituting such an oxymoron, it must be regarded closely and carefully. Death is indeed the end. Even in the cases of religious transcendences, death is considered as the fulfilment or loss of one state and the passage to another, proportionately novel one. Death cannot be redone. Death is always

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

⁶ Ivan Callus, ‘Comparatism and (Auto)thanatography: Death and Mourning in Blanchot, Derrida, and Tim Parks’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 1:3 (2004), 337-358, ——— ‘(Auto)thanatography or (Auto)thanatology?: Mark C. Taylor, Simon Critchley, and the Writing of the Dead’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 41 (2005), 427-438.

⁷ Ivan Callus, ‘Comparatism and (Auto)thanatography: Death and Mourning in Blanchot, Derrida, and Tim Parks’, p. 352.

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

⁹ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 26.

my death and even in the implausible scenario of regaining life, it is a different life and therefore a different death.

At the moment of death, the I of the consciousness completely ceases to exist, thus rendering us without nothing left to do or talk about. As Maurice Blanchot put it, '*l'instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance*'.¹⁰ That is precisely why the Romanticism associated with suicide, the one that reigned in the hearts of many youths during the late 18th and early 19th century Europe—as portrayed magnificently in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, or even contemporarily in the self-death of Kurt Cobain of Nirvana—is an utter paradox, since the very instant of the meticulously-constructed apotheosis of the ego, is exactly the moment of its loss.¹¹

In every paradigm of the human intellect, and particularly in those which try to answer the core questions of our noematic existence—that is religion, philosophy and literature—the unattainability of death remains unanswered. The biggest challenge which these paradigms aim to overcome, that is, our unknowingness of death, is an all-prevailing aporia. Therefore, representations of death can only be achieved as hypothetical declarations, or as Critchley calls them, 'misrepresentations or rather representations of an absence'.¹² In particular, he states that:

The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is perhaps best conveyed by the figure of prosopopeia, that is the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary is presented by speaking or acting. Etymologically, prosopopeia means to make a face (prosopon+poien).¹³

It may be true that literature through language, or more appropriately the *langue* of Saussure, is a mass murderer capable of witnessing death at its metaphysical attribute manifesting itself as the dominatrix or sadistic ruler of the world it creates. For Critchley, words, simplistically, are the death of Being.¹⁴ Hence, when the dialectical method is employed in relation to things, this amounts to a process in which they are annihilated, with their souls only to be found in Plato's ethereal plane. This, however, does not change our insufficiency in perceiving death only as mere witnesses. We cannot experience death before our own and we certainly cannot conceptualise it.

To conceptualise death is impossible, and it is this inadequacy of ours that, according to Blanchot, really terrifies us about death. We need the reassurance of the afterlife not for the sake of afterlife itself, but most importantly because 'we want to see ourselves dead'.¹⁵ As a

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, 'The Instant of My Death', in Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press: California, 2000), 1-12 (p. 10).

¹¹ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, p. 25.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, 'Glances From Beyond the Grave', *Yale French Studies*, 81 (1992), 151-161, (p. 159).

result, all representations of death constitute a farce. That is the reason why witnessing death, both in real life and in fictional worlds, literally means nothing. The mental image we have of death is blank or arbitrarily conventional. We can never truly comprehend death without experiencing it for ourselves, yet when that happens there will be no one left to tell the story.

Or will there?

Simulating death in digital games

As in common life, in most digital games the main goal is to stay alive until fulfilling one's mission(s). The game system poses challenges, which are translated into death traps for the player. Losing means the end of the game, the end of the player's part in a predefined world. However, in digital games, death works in a manner formally different from other media. In digital games, one can be reborn just as easily as pushing a button. One may see in this trait a mechanism by which players are distanced from how death really works, but I will argue the opposite by saying that it is precisely in digital games that we have the ability to possibly fathom death in its closest approximate representation. In a system where the character and the player become one, talk of a single I of the consciousness is necessarily degraded into obsolescence, and the unattainability of death somehow becomes more blurred.

Kristine Jørgensen, in her article 'Time for New Terminology? Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds in Computer Games Revisited', proposes a new terminology for describing sounds in digital games. One of the terms she uses is the word 'transdiegetic':

This approach described sound as transdiegetic by way of transcending the border between diegetic and non-diegetic: diegetic sound may address non-diegetic entities, while non-diegetic sounds may communicate to entities within the diegetic world. Such sounds have an important functional value in computer games by being an extension of the user interface and providing information such as feedback and warnings to the player. Utilizing the border between diegetic and non-diegetic, transdiegetic sounds merge game system information with the gameworld and create a frame of reference that has usability value at the same time as it upholds the sense of presence in the gameworld.¹⁶

What she basically means here is that sounds from the game system can notify not the character inside the game, but the player, thus being extradiegetic. However, since the player commands the character, the information gathered from the sound will be used diegetically by the player inside the game. For example, when I am playing a game and the music suddenly changes into one with an alarming tone, I become aware that danger is approaching and adapt my in-game behaviour accordingly. As a result, that kind of sound functions as a transdiegetic element.

¹⁶ Kristine Jørgensen, 'Time for New Terminology? Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds in Computer Games Revisited', in *Game Sound Technology and Player Interaction: Concepts and Developments*, ed. by Mark Grimshaw (Hershey PA: IGI Global, 2010), 78-97 (p. 85).

But why should we limit this functionality only to sounds? Almost all kinds of stimuli the player receives from the game system can be interpreted transdiegetically, forming in the end what could be called a *transdiegetic consciousness* between the player and the avatar inside the game world. Nonetheless, the proposed term is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, because many will argue that there is no diegesis in digital games, and, secondly, that the notion of consciousness is difficult to demarcate to begin with, especially when we are addressing two different states: the human and the virtual human inside the game.

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her article ‘Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality’, categorises the different modes of narrativity in the diegetic mode, mimetic mode, participatory mode, and simulative mode, which she specifically describes as: ‘creating a story in real time by designing (or using) an engine that will implement a sequence of events on the basis of its internal rules and the input to the system. Story-generating systems’.¹⁷ She also suggests that games do not belong to the diegetic mode because, as Jesper Juul argues, interactivity demands the here and the now, while diegeses have already happened.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Kristine Jørgensen borrows the content of the word diegesis from film studies and proposes a wholly different approach. The clash of terminology notwithstanding, what it is evident here is that in games the communication between the medium and the participant is not one-sided. Instead, digital games have the ability to respond simultaneously to the player’s input, because they are built as simulation systems specifically designed for that affordance.

In his paper ‘Civilization and its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space’, Ted Friedman writes that:

The constant interactivity in a simulation game—the perpetual feedback between a player’s choice, the computer’s almost instantaneous response, the player’s response to that response and so on—is a cybernetic loop, in which the link demarcating the end of the player’s consciousness and the beginning of the computer’s world blurs.¹⁹

In digital games, the player, as a result, does not only experience himself/herself playing but also the consequences of his/her playing. In this sense, consciousness is described in the light of Sartre’s division between the self and the subject.²⁰ Daniel Vella, in his paper ‘Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in Kentucky Route Zero’, claims that:

The playable figure has a double nature—it is both a manifestation of the player and also, at the same time, a distinct individual, a character with its own attributes and

¹⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality’, <<http://www.dichtung-digital.de/2005/1/Ryan/>> [accessed 26 April 2015] (para. 13 of 56).

¹⁸ Jesper Juul, ‘Games Telling Stories – A Brief Note on Games and Narratives Game Studies’, *Game Studies*, 1:1 (2001), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts>> [accessed 14 April 2015].

¹⁹ Ted Friedman, ‘Civilization and its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity and Space’, in *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, ed. by Greg M. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 132-150 (p.137).

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993).

characteristics that set it apart from the player. [...] In short: the playable figure is granted the status of both self and other, and it is related to both subjectively and objectively.²¹

He then goes on and segments this double nature of the player and the figure into four perspectives. In his words, ‘this would give us four aspects of the player-figure relation: subjective/self, subjective/other, objective/self, objective/other’.²² As he mentions himself these four aspects are not mutually exclusive; they can co-exist and/or overlap one another.²³ Using this model, we can now better understand what transdiegetic consciousness tries to describe, and can better implement it in the analysis of the experience of death in digital games. Hence, when I play a digital game my I as player amalgamates with the I of my avatar, thus forming a dual consciousness. The result is that when my avatar dies, a part of this consciousness survives and thus the experience of death is manifested not only as a witnessed event, but as a subjective differentiation of the identity. What we have therefore is the facet of the I that did not die surviving after the grave, and the facet of the I that died resuscitating before the grave, thus sustaining an identity that is, at one and the same time, unchanged and altered by death, so that it is fully pervaded by death’s unattainability.

In digital games, the human-player cannot die but the avatar-player surely can. This means that there is a part of the experience of death that remains intact in the gamer’s mind; they are there to understand death as the end. They can reload or respawn, yet the previous game session is over, never to be repeated. They, as well, are different; they know death and now they will avoid it or die another death trying. Simultaneously, their avatar has no knowledge of death, thereby preserving the part of their I that is not altered by death—holding them (both I) in such a manner in a limbo of the only possible death experience.

This happens exactly because of this double consciousness formulated between the player and the avatar. However, this bond can only be created because digital games are systems of simulation that change immediately and constantly according to the player’s input. Moreover, this ergodicity of digital games is the feature which enables the player to experience death in an altered manner.²⁴ If it were not for the possibility of dying another death every time we play, the representation of death would be no different to the fictional deaths of characters in novels, films or drama. A book hero will always die the same way; an avatar finds his/her death in variegated circumstances.

Gonzalo Frasca has provided a definition of simulations that explains succinctly the above argument:

²¹ Daniel Vella, ‘Player and Figure: An Analysis of a Scene in Kentucky Route Zero’, in *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2014 Conference*, p. 3.

²² *ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁴ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system. The key term here is ‘behavior’. Simulation does not simply retain the—generally audiovisual—characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors. This model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions.²⁵

Indeed, he goes on and paraphrases Heraclitus’s apothegm, ‘you can never step into the same river twice’,²⁶ to ‘you can never step into the same video game twice’, since every game session is inherently different from all others.²⁷ Thus, the moment the avatar dies inside the game it is truly the end. As a player, we cannot go back, but only do it again. Nevertheless, at the same time *we* remain, as the half of a double consciousness, and so returning to a different game with a knowing mind frame. Naturally, this supposition can only work in games where the players are controlling an avatar in a virtual world and which give the affordance of habituating their environment through the avatar’s connection, as is for example the case in most first-person shooters. Gordon Calleja terms this attachment very indicatively as ‘incorporation’.²⁸

That is why death can be more appropriately experienced in its unattainability in digital games. In other media, death requires a strong suspension of disbelief and yet still they fail to portray it as anything more than that: a depiction, similar to other themes. Of course, each medium has its own affordances with regard to framing concepts; for example, language in literature can be formed in revolutionary schemata that could possibly convey the absurdness of death. However, even in these cases, the audiences remain only as witnesses; they never actually experience death and are therefore unable to comprehend it.

When we die in digital games—it is irrelevant if it is in first person or third person—we truly die. We do not really die, but we die virtually. Pierre Lévy distinguishes between the virtual and the possible by asserting that the first is the antithesis not of the real, but of the actual. He says: ‘The possible is exactly like the real, the only thing missing being existence. [...] Unlike the possible, which is static and already constituted, the virtual [...] invokes a process of resolution: actualization’.²⁹ In a similar manner, Espen Aarseth, in his article ‘Doors and Perception: Fiction vs Simulation in Games’, portrays the difference between the virtual, fictional, and real in digital games:

Games may well contain fictional content. But they also contain content that is different from the elements we recognize from older media. These elements are ontologically different, and they can typically be acted upon in ways that fictional content is *not* acted

²⁵ Gonzalo Frasca, ‘Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology’, in *The Video Game Theory Reader* ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221-234 (p. 223).

²⁶ Daniel W. Graham, ‘Heraclitus’, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>> [assessed 29 April 2015].

²⁷ Frasca, ‘Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology’, p. 326.

²⁸ Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

²⁹ Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, trans. by Robert Bononno (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998), p. 24-25.

upon. [...] It follows that there are at least three different ontological layers to game content: the real, the virtual, and the fictional.³⁰

Aarseth gives a very appropriate example: ‘The bullets in a game of *Counter Strike* are not real bullets, but neither are they fictional’.³¹ For him they are virtual; they cannot cause real death, but they cause virtual death. The game stops, it is the end and there is nothing we can do to change that than start over; yet still it would be a new game, a new experience, a new way to act and a new way to die. Unlike in the event of a death of a fictional character, it is also our end. When a fictional character dies in a book we read or in a movie we watch, that does not mean that we cannot continue reading or watching. In digital games, it means exactly that: that the game is over. Even if we play in multiplayer mode and, as a result, after our death the game continues, for us it has ceased to be a simulation and continues on as a mere representation.

The same applies to games where and when deaths are portrayed representationally, meaning they are not a reaction of the game system to show us we did something wrong, but a resulting continuation of our choices. Death also functions differently in games, where the player does not incorporate the world through an avatar, but rather retains a god-like stance and controls many entities inside the game as a puppeteer. In these games, the conversation between the player and the system is of a particular kind, so that all the reactions of the system to the player’s input have deviating affects and effects, since, in my view, the subjectivity expounded upon earlier does not occur, or if it does it is of a multiple nature and therefore lessened impact.

In any case, death is from the beginning elusive in its depiction, even in its conception. Specifically, representing death constitutes an illusion. That is why portraying death in digital games is important for our understanding of its elusiveness. Games can offer the perfect scene for staging this illusion, because what is an illusion if not a state of *in ludere*, in playing. In the case of digital games, as a result, we have a prolific condition where representation can function awkwardly; that is, instead of life providing the paradigm for representation, representation now provides the paradigm for death. After all, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, ‘whatever constitutes a simulacrum of death, any loss of self, can sometimes reassure us against death and help us to stare it in the face’.³²

³⁰ Espen J. Aarseth, ‘Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games’, in *Proceedings of the 6th DAC Conference*, 59-62 (p. 59, 61).

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 60.

³² Blanchot, ‘Glances From Beyond the Grave’, p. 159.

Conclusion

As we have seen, death constitutes a highly problematic endeavour when it comes to understanding it and subsequently representing it. It is a category refuting approach, because we cannot truly experience death and have the ability to comprehend and analyse it before we die ourselves, an event after which we lose the consciousness needed for its understanding; even if we keep it, then it is a different consciousness that cannot be compared with our previous one—the one we had before the grave. Therefore, trying to examine death before its time—or, more importantly, showing the results of such an experience—constitutes a paradox at best and a futile attempt at worst.

This applies to media representations as well, since the experience of death is that of a mere witness, not unlike what happens in real life in terms of phenomenology. In digital games, however, death representations sometimes function in an interesting and original manner precisely because they constitute something more than simple representation. They are simulations of death. Death therefore can be more fully experienced in digital games as close as possible to its true finality, since when dying inside a game the simulation system, together with the double consciousness we form with our avatars, help us realise the end that death brings as well as the new beginning, while at the same time preserving our knowledge before and after the grave.

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