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***SAVED GAMES AND RESPAWN TIMERS:
THE DILEMMA OF REPRESENTING DEATH IN
VIDEO GAMES***

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Abstract: *Beginning with the late 20th century, video games have been studied as cultural artefacts that are both influenced by and influential towards the societies that produce and receive them. Like other cultural productions, video games are partly concerned with representation. Even though it might seem that the often fantastic worlds they generate have little to do with what would be referred to as “the real world,” many of the great questions of human literature and arts are nevertheless present. Death is no exception, but unlike other themes, its depiction has always presented video game producers with a certain dilemma. How might one properly render the sense of loss associated with death, for example, when one must also offer the player the possibility to turn back in time and resume their gameplay as if the event had never taken place? Indeed, when the only consequence of death consists in a temporary removal from the game world, followed by an almost immediate reintegration, how meaningful might the event be? Furthermore, considering that a number of scholars define video games as series of rules and obstacles to be overcome, death being nothing more than one such obstacle, can mortality be at all represented in this novel media? The aim of the present paper is to explore the conflicting relation between the representation of death in video games and basic game mechanics, as well as to examine some notable titles and their attempts to render death more faithfully. Ultimately, we question what remains of death and its “traditional” connotations when placed in the relatively new media of video games.*

In 1997, Janet Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and became one of the first researchers to draw attention to the potential of the computer as a storyteller that would “reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (10). At the time, she focused on two main characteristics of video games – immersion and interactivity – in order to expand on her thesis, thereby contending that in light of the latter two traits, the emerging media for artistic expression could create meaningful emotional and aesthetic experiences for the player. Since then, Murray’s hypothesis has been confirmed both by the rapidly evolving industry, with its increasingly engaging titles and impressive technological capabilities, and by academic research, which has focused not only on the definition and evolution of the media itself, but also on the manner in which certain timeless questions of human existence are depicted within it. Of the latter, death is certainly

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no exception. Moreover, given the ever-growing capacity of video games to immerse players into engrossing stories, reflections broaching the subject of human mortality should feel more at home here than in any film or written narrative. However, this is certainly not the case at present. Unlike a number of themes that have found an excellent representation in video games, death presents video game developers with a peculiar dilemma. One must consider, in this regard, that in the view of several scholars of the field, video games are defined, on a basic level, as a series of rules and obstacles to be overcome by the player. The failure to do so often results in the death of the player character or avatar, which means that, by definition, the player must find a way to avoid or to surmount her in-game demise. An inherent contradiction is established between the preventable, escapable in-game death and the inevitability associated with 'real' death, which is precisely the crux of the game developer's dilemma and the primary concern of the present paper. Our intention, therefore, is to explore this incongruity between game mechanics and the representation of death in video games, while keeping an eye out for titles with unique approaches that make a noteworthy contribution to overcoming the latter. By discussing these titles, our aim is to resolve that a more faithful rendering of mortality is possible in video games, and that such a representation can engender meaningful, even cathartic reflections on the part of the player.

Coupled with the empowered role of the player of video games, who is an involved, active agent of the narrative, rather than a passive reader, the immersive quality of the media instils the experience of gameplay with "emotions, from fierce to mild in their intensity, and from persistent to fleeting in their temporality" (Järvinen 87-88). Indeed, according to Karin Wenz, video games

simulate real-life experiences in many respects even though the environments in which we play are often based in a fantasy world, a science fiction world or a historical setting. Games can be used as a laboratory for experiences, some we will never encounter in real life, and some we have to face in the future. (310)

In theory, suffering is one of the emotions that can be experienced within the virtual 'laboratory,' especially in connection to existential pains, such as the fear of death (Järvinen 103). In the case of avatar-based video games, the player may repeatedly experience and be involved in the death of her own avatar and in the death of others (Wenz 310), which seems to suggest that reflections on mortality are prompted frequently throughout the duration of gameplay. To understand why this is not commonly the case, however, we must first turn to the elusive definition of a video game, which according to the MDA model, encompasses the three dimensions of mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 38). The aspect concerning a video game's mechanics, "the rules and basic code of a game" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 38), is of particular interest for us. Indeed, a number of scholars studying video games agree that although a video game might comprise elements in addition to its rules, the latter take precedence in terms of importance (Juul, *Half Real* 1). In other words, video games are often described as "an environment specifically constructed as an obstacle to success. . . and designed to impede the player's progress" (Furze 144), thereby offering the latter a noteworthy

challenge that “must require non-trivial effort” to be conquered (Newman 17). In the economy of a video game’s mechanics, death is merely one such challenge, inherently designed in order to be overcome. When the player character dies, most commonly due to the failure of the player to surmount an obstacle, he or she is not actually dead. Instead, depending on the mechanics of each game, the player can, in one way or another, return to a previous moment of gameplay, where the player character is very much alive. To facilitate the bettering of the player and her progression within the storyline, a pattern of trial and error is employed, often through the player’s possibility to save the game at any moment and to return to this save upon the death of the avatar. Theoretically, this is a positive aspect of video game mechanics, as it allows the player to explore the virtual world in an environment of relative safety. However, in the context of representing death, saved games tend “to trivialize player’s choices” leading up to the character’s demise and to prevent the player from genuinely experiencing the implications of these choices (Newman 86). Because the player can always return to a previous save or, in the case of massively multiplayer online (MMO) video games, simply stand by for the “respawn timer” to run out, death becomes nothing more than an additional obstacle to be overcome. At most, the death of the player character is a loss of the player’s time and in-game resources, both of which “are annoying, rather than a reason for mourning” (Wenz 314). Even scholars who choose to focus on the narrative aspect of video games in the detriment of game mechanics observe the manner in which “trial and error interrupt narrative progression, forcing the player to spend more time focusing on a game’s rules than on its fiction” (Tocci 191). As such, the player experiences death on a ludic level, with a “didactic function” (Wenz 313), rather than on the level of the narrative, where it would, perhaps, generate an emotional or contemplative response.

On the other hand, several studies show that video games are not enjoyable for players if they are not sufficiently challenging, which is to say that in order to be successful, these games must be neither too difficult, nor too trivial (Juul, “Fear of Failing?” 248-250). This has led video game developers to the creation of new ways to make death, the primary punishment for failure within the virtual world, more meaningful. In some cases and especially with MMO video games such as Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft*, NCsoft’s *Lineage*, Joymax’s *Silkroad* or CCP Games’ *EVE Online*, additional losses are incurred upon death, which might include the loss of certain items or character levels and strength. In the case of single-player video games, several titles do away with saved games, either when played at the strongest difficulty or altogether. Within the universe of MuHa Games’ *Thea: The Awakening*, for example, saved games are banned on “Godlike” difficulty settings, and even though the game automatically saves once every five turns, each saved game overwrites the previous one, thereby making it nearly impossible to return to a previous, more advantageous moment if one of the characters under the player’s command dies. There is even a special category of video games that employ the mechanics of ‘permadeath,’ whereby when a player character dies, their death is permanent, and the player must restart the entire gameplay from scratch. In some instances, such as with Bohemia Interactive’s open world survival game *DayZ*, which allows players to test their skills both against the artificial intelligence (AI)

and against one another, the addition of permadeath has led to several intriguing consequences, including the intensification of social interaction within the virtual world and the engendering of genuine moral dilemmas with respect to the player's decision to engage with and kill another player's avatar (Carter et al. 3). Similar implications may be observed in the behaviour of players of Robot Loves Kitty's *Upsilon Circuit*, a video game that takes permadeath even further and gives players only one chance at gameplay, which is to say that a player who has died in the game can never play again. Even in the case of single-player games such as Mojang's *Minecraft*, the prospect of permadeath determines the player to become "more empathetic to the concerns of the character's mortality" (Keogh 1), with significant consequences on the manner in which the game is played. Certainly, then, the harsher punishment of death in video games draws the player's attention to the avatar's vulnerability, bringing about a careful, rather than experimental attitude towards play. Indeed, especially in the case of permadeath, the player may even experience a strong sense of loss upon the death of the avatar, as well as significant anxiety throughout the duration of play, both of which are evocative of the sentiments engendered by death itself. However, the question remains whether the emotions felt by the player of such video games compel the latter to reflect on real death or merely on their in-game experience, defeat and further improvement. More likely, these enhanced mechanics of death are "experienced as a penalty and treated as such", merely adding new rules to the gameplay without extending the player's rumination towards 'real-life' mortality (Wenz 315). Under the circumstances, is a meaningful representation of death at all possible within the media of video games?

A special instance, noteworthy for discussion, is that of FromSoftware's *Dark Souls III*, an action role-playing video game that was released in 2016 as the fourth and final instalment in a long-lasting series. From the very beginning, the series was marketed by means of the subtitle "Prepare to Die", which quickly became its trademark. Today, the *Dark Souls* series is hailed as a collection of the most difficult role-playing games (RPGs) ever developed, a title that is closely connected with the game's death mechanics. Indeed, part of the difficulty of playing *Dark Souls III*, for example, has to do with the game engine and the highly powerful AI, which makes each opponent 'smarter', better synchronized and much more challenging to defeat. However, what makes the game truly onerous is the manner in which it deals with the death of the player. More precisely, in order for the player character to become stronger and for the player to advance in the game, the latter must accumulate 'sovereignless souls', a form of currency that is obtained when defeating opponents. Rather than simply gaining experience and levels when defeating opponents or achieving objectives, the player must spend these 'sovereignless souls' for levels at a special vendor, located in a remote, safe area, 'the Firelink Shrine'. If the player fails to reach the Firelink Shrine and the player character dies, all the accumulated 'souls' are removed from her inventory and placed on the ground, at the location of death. The player character then respawns at the nearest 'bonfire', or save point, and has the possibility to recover the lost souls if she is able to reach them safely. If, on the other hand, the player character dies once again before recovering the souls, the latter are permanently lost. Naturally, manually saved games are not allowed and progress is constantly recorded, so that

the player can never return to a previous moment as the result of a costly mistake. The consequence is that without sufficient currency to strengthen the player character, the player cannot advance in the game, which creates a genuine sense of loss upon the death of the avatar and an oppressive sense of anxiety throughout the duration of play, especially since opponents are particularly difficult to overcome and death is likely to take place in each encounter. Nevertheless, unlike in the case of video games that operate with 'permadeath,' the player character in *Dark Souls III* never really dies, which means that as soon as the player becomes proficient enough to defeat her opponents, she can gather the necessary 'sovereignless souls' to continue her progression. What makes the title noteworthy for the present discussion, then, is not necessarily or not solely its mechanics of death.

Instead, we would like to focus on the unique universe created by the video game, both on a sensorial level and through its storyline. In *Dark Souls III*, the player is immersed into the world of Lothric, which functions in virtue of a cyclical pattern represented by the kindling and extinguishing of a 'First Flame.' As far as the player can piece together from the fragmentary bits of 'lore,' at a distant moment in the past, the First Flame was spontaneously kindled, bringing about light and life, and putting an end to the age of darkness. However, the new age drew close to its end when the First Flame began to falter, which is why, in a desperate attempt to prevent another age of darkness, a ruler of the time sacrificed his body and mind in order to 'relink' the flame. A series of such sacrifices followed, instituting a cycle of violence and a lineage of 'Lords of Cinder,' both of which are later broken by Prince Lothric, who refuses to relink the flame. As a result, the world decays into darkness, death and madness, while the player character, an undead figure, is awakened as a final attempt to return the 'Lords of Cinder' to their thrones and to use their power to relink the First Flame. At the time when the player enters the world of Lothric, the idea of death is omnipresent, while most of the non-player characters (NPCs) and opponents are undead, decrepit or insane, and the decorum is made up of derelict medieval towns, cathedrals, dungeons and castles. Most importantly, by the conclusion of the storyline, although multiple endings are possible, the player realizes that regardless of her choice of action, the destructive cycle of the First Flame will nevertheless continue its course. If she chooses to sacrifice herself to relink the flame, she does so with the knowledge that another will be required to do the same in the future. If, on the contrary, she chooses to let the flame die out and usher in an age of darkness, one of the non-player characters suggests that embers will inevitably remain and will likely spark another flame in the future. Several meaningful themes emerge from such a narrative, including the senselessness and confusion of existence, the precarious illusion of human agency and the dissolution of a stable identity, all of which are closely related to real-life mortality. Thus, even though it functions in basis of fantastic rules and through fantastic characters, the universe surrounding the player throughout the duration of play is one that represents death on a more profound level than is initially apparent. In turn, this makes it likelier that, when the player does experience the death of her avatar, the event and all of its associated emotions and thoughts drift into the sphere of real death, outside of the game environment. This would also explain why, even though the game does not employ the mechanics of 'permadeath', nor any typical 'scare

tactics', players characterize their *Dark Souls III* gameplay by referring to a distinct feeling of oppressiveness and anxiety, more so than in the case of 'traditional' survival-horror games. In this respect, however, the *Dark Souls* series is fairly unique.

On the other hand, a more widely employed means of successfully representing death in video games has less to do with the death of the player's avatar and more to do with the death of surrounding non-player characters. A noteworthy example in this regard is CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, an action role-playing video game released in 2015, wherein the player impersonates Geralt of Rivia, a notorious witcher or monster hunter who is engaged in several personal and political plots and subplots as he attempts to save his protégé, Ciri. The title features traditional 'save game' and death mechanics, which means that the death of the player character is almost always meaningless on a narrative level, even on the highest difficulty settings. Unlike the *Dark Souls* series, *The Witcher 3* is not acclaimed for its difficulty, but rather for its role-playing possibilities, for its enthralling, meticulously detailed world and for player immersion. One of the consequences of this is that although death is a trivial mechanic within the game world, player choice is not. During the course of nearly all in-game interactions, Geralt is faced with difficult decisions, often embrangled in moral ambiguity and resulting in significant consequences. As such, the player is frequently involved in the death or survival of others, with some non-player characters better developed than others. Most importantly, the implications of the player's choices are, more often than not, hidden until a much later moment in the game, which makes it very unlikely that the player will choose to load a previous save and replay a large portion of the game in order to prevent the death of a significant NPC. Ciri, for instance, is a very well developed character within the game world, forming a close relationship with Geralt, who is like an adoptive father to her, and simultaneously eliciting the player's sympathy, especially since, at certain moments in the game, the player views the world from her perspective. Without taking into account its two expansions, the basic game requires an average of one hundred hours of gameplay in order to complete, while the fate of Ciri, which is revealed in the conclusion of the game, hinges on several decisions made by player beginning with the first ten hours of play. Essentially, the basic game is a search for Ciri and an attempt to defeat The Wild Hunt, the cavalcade of dark elves looking to harness her power for evil purposes. Three possible endings exist for Ciri, depending on the player's later actions throughout the game – her death, her crowning as empress and her inauguration as a witcher. If and when Ciri does die in the conclusion of the game, the final cinematic suggests that, unable to cope with his loss, Geralt is swarmed by a horde of monsters and dies. This is a crushing event and a profoundly emotional experience for the player, especially since it becomes obvious that some of her well-intended, but overprotective choices have led to the death of both characters. Because these choices were made very early in the game, undoing them is not merely a matter of loading a previous saved game. Rather, the experience of Ciri's death and the emotional response it engenders is a fairly potent representation of genuine grief and the lack of agency often associated with it by the bereaved, likely to provoke a meaningful contemplation on behalf of the player. It is also noteworthy

that Ciri's demise is only one example of such events taking place in *The Witcher 3*, albeit the most relevant one. Like in *Dark Souls III*, death is omnipresent in Geralt's amoral world, and several of the game's subplots are suggestive of not only the human, but also the social, cultural and political implications of death. Thus, although the title does not focus on rendering the death of the character meaningful, it does nevertheless successfully represent the death of another and a wide range of emotions potentially linked with it.

Furthermore, unlike in the case of *Dark Souls III*, the representation of death in *The Witcher 3* is not unique to the title. BioWare's *Mass Effect* series and Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* series, to give only a few examples, feature similar role-playing video games wherein player choice can lead to the death of significant non-player characters. At times, NPCs may be removed from the series regardless of gameplay, intensifying even further the sense of loss experienced by the players. This was, for instance, the case with the death of Aerith Gainsborough in *Final Fantasy VII*, a carefully crafted moment with a powerful, highly emotional effect that is considered to have defined not only the rest of the series, but the history of video game storytelling altogether. What is more, such memorable deaths carrying the potential to engender meaningful reflection on real-life grief and mourning are not restricted to the genre of RPGs. Firaxis Games' *X-COM* was designed as a strategy video game wherein the player took control of an elite team tasked with countering alien invasions of Earth, but with a special twist. Unlike other similar titles, *X-COM* was created in such a manner as to facilitate the emotional attachment of the player to the soldiers under his command. The latter could be named by the player and, with the *X-COM: Enemy Within* expansion of the basic game, thoroughly customized in terms of appearance and personality. In addition, following the expansion, the player could award medals that she herself named to members of her team that were personally selected by her as the result of certain missions. Special missions designed to tighten the bond between team members and their captain were also implemented. The result was an impressive one in the sense that *X-COM* became one of the first strategy games wherein soldiers overcame the status of mere generic 'pawns' and held genuine emotional sway over the player. By means of this, their deaths would also become meaningful ones.

Finally, a peculiar case situated on the boundary between representing the death of the self and representing the death of the other is that of EA Maxis' *The Sims* series of life simulation video games, wherein the player takes control of virtual people (Sims), customizes them, designs homes for them and performs real-life quotidian activities. Although it has been argued that a transfer of personality and values does exist between the player of *The Sims* and the Sims she creates (Griebel, "Self-Portrayal in a Simulated Life"), the present title is different from an RPG in the sense that the player embodies a kind of 'puppet master', rather than one particular character. Some players might choose to name and design Sims after themselves, families or friends, while others might choose to create Sims very much unlike their real selves. As such, in many cases, the generated Sims are, at the same time, a virtual representation of the self and of another. Certainly, as they are designed to represent real human beings, the Sims are very much bound by mortality – due to natural causes or due to tragic, accidental causes. A platform for life

simulation, *The Sims* series serves as a sandbox for “experimentation with settings and variables” (Giddings 265), but what is particularly intriguing about it from the perspective of the present paper is the manner in which its players choose to experiment with death. Indeed, the death of Sims and the multiple, sometimes creative ways in which it can be provoked by the user is considered to be a core feature of the game within its surrounding, online community. Although, at present, insufficient research exists on the matter and the reasons put forth to explain this type of morbid (or ludic?) player behaviour are merely speculative, the case of representing death in *The Sims* is certainly worth further attention. For the time being, we will only draw attention to EA Maxis’ notorious series as a singular sample of the manner in which video games can tackle death in a meaningful way. Whether this serves as a way for the gamer to experiment with the otherwise frightful concept of death in a ludic environment, an outlet for the human being’s hidden or repressed desire to behave destructively towards others or simply an exploration of the boundaries of the video game itself remains to be investigated in the future.

Ultimately, bearing in mind the examples above and several others not mentioned here, it can be argued that while video games may have been closely linked to their mechanics to begin with, this is not necessarily the case at present. Certainly, death has been and remains a frequently employed means to signal the failure of the player to overcome the obstacles of the game. As such, death in itself is rarely relevant on a narrative level when depicted in the virtual environment, even when difficulty mechanics such as ‘permadeath’ are introduced. Nonetheless, several video game developers have come up with new ways to represent death in a meaningful way, which are ingenious precisely because they function in spite of the dilemma described earlier in our paper. Thus, in some instances, a combination of death mechanics and a deeply foreboding virtual world can provoke real contemplation on the topic of mortality on behalf of the player, while in other cases, the death of the other and the concepts of bereavement, grief and mourning are problematized through complex in-game characters, plotlines and player choices. Perhaps most importantly, what this trajectory of the aesthetic representation of death in video games seems to suggest is that, at present, the media itself is manoeuvring away from its definition as a system of rules and challenges and progressing towards an emphasis on narrativity, storytelling and artistic innovation. In other words, the fact that game developers struggle to make in-game death, amongst other things, a subject for real-life contemplation may be a symptom of an upcoming shift in the larger picture of video game culture, wherein producers and their audiences currently prioritize meaningful emotional experiences even in the detriment of ludic satisfaction.

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