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UWS-62A: Video Games, Gamers, and Gaming Styles

December 16, 2022

Death, Game Experience, and Gameplay: Another Possibility of Video Games

Introduction

The discourse on death has been a timeless philosophical topic that has been explored by many artists, writers, and scholars. From the sacred sacrifice of Jesus to the existential musings of Sartre, people have long grappled with the meaning and boundaries of death. In recent years, the development of video games has allowed players to experience virtual lives through narrative and gameplay, and death has become an integral part of many games, whether in multiplayer online games or single-player games. Despite its frequent inclusion in video games, death is a crucial element or component that is often overlooked to consider. Few game companies delve into the mechanics and rationale behind a game character's death while playing. In fact, innovations in revelations of death in video games can have a profound and dramatic impact on gameplay and players. There is a high potential to think about the connection between death and gameplay, not merely about death as failure and punishment in the game but focusing on more meaningful aspects which can also intensify players' commitment to overcoming in-game obstacles. So far, the introduction of *Sub Mission (1986)*, *Braid (2009)*, and *Dark Souls Series (2011~2018)* into the video game canon may help players re-evaluate the role of death and enhance

the depth of video games. This paper aims to inspire game developers and players to consider the relationship between in-game death and real life, and to explore new game mechanics that are more meaningful and enrich the gaming experience. To do so, this paper will study three specific gameplays from *Sub Mission* (permadeath), *Braid* (immortality), and *Dark Souls Series* (balance between mortality salience and narrative) to evaluate the benefits of different approaches to death in games and discuss how in-game death affects gameplay.

In order to have a quick glance at game death, first understanding what a video game is helps further to discuss the relationship between players and game experience. Ostensibly, Scott Rogers defines a video game as "a game that is played on a video screen" (182). Here, a video screen seems like a limitation or boundary separating games and players. In other words, the content inside games cannot happen on or affect players. This relates to Johan Huizinga's idea on game studies. He proposes "the magic circles," which becomes a commonly-used term in future ludology, as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10). The magic circle indicates a fictive play with essential elements, such as rules, environments, and characters. But all these elements are only inside a world of play. Players accept those special rules in the magic circle while playing but those are insignificant in reality. Hence, video games have an unreachable threshold toward players' real life, which is quite empirical. However, due to the instinctive fright of death and emotional connection with avatars, some video games are creating a new experience of playing. As described by west et al.,

players can “derive both hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications from playing digital games” (182). Death, as an indispensable part of video games, symbolizes game over or failure in the most common circumstance. West et al. conclude that in-game death can be characterized as an unpleasant eudaimonic game experience that engenders meanings cognitively from the previous study (183). Concurring with other researchers, they mention a significant concept of the mechanics of death in video games. That is, permadeath (West et al. 182; Melnic and Melnic 31), which implies permanent death. West et al. also describe the conventional form of in-game death as “play–die–resurrect–repeat (PDRR)” (182). Through conducting a survey of 400 experiment candidates by recollecting game experience of permadeath and PDRR, they argue that permadeath can “foster meaningful gameplay through experiences of grief” (193) as the consequence of intensifying emotional attachment to the avatar. However, the word “meaningful” is ambiguous and not clearly identified. What is more, their study also proposes the mental gap between a character’s death and the players’, in which players slightly perform empathy to death in real life. This finding corresponds with the dilemma of game design questioned by Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic. They contemplate that although permadeath emphasizes the entire loss of certain property and strong emotion within the game, the concept of it is just another harsh punishment or obstacle from the game with nothing to do with the reflection of players themselves (32). Thus, their research discusses two ways to make death in video games more meaningful for evocative reflection on mortality. One is the unique revelation of death mechanics and game narrative in *Dark Souls III*, and the other is

increasing the importance of players' in-game choices (36). Both of them address the storytelling of a video game, suggesting that a meaningful game plot can function with players' emotions while confronting a character's death. But, still, the detailed functioning process is too general and unclear.

***Sub Mission*: Permadeath**

Sub Mission (1986) is an old game with permadeath. However, not many companies or game developers will try this death mechanics in concern of market performance and profit. In this game, players need to pilot a submarine to find a kidnapped non-playable character by using sonar and bring them back successfully. Peter and Sigourny are the two only NPCs in this game, reminding players of their available chances. The game also offers as many chances as possible for simulations with a robot because the game's floppy disk will automatically erase data and lock down itself if players fail in the real action. The only way to restart the game is to mail the floppy disk to the game company Mindscape.Inc. and wait. As Chang et al. describe in their research, such a form of self-destruction in a video game refers to "material permadeath" (111). *Sub Mission* will not only erase the data of an NPC if players fail to rescue him or her but also make physical game assets unusable. Most of the time, if game characters die, they will not disappear. Players can choose to restart the game as if their death several seconds ago was a dispensable dream. But in *Sub Mission*, death detaches from a game character that occurs in an abstract concept (the magic circle) and becomes an event that is set to happen. During the game, players are

not competing with the time, they also need to compete with an AI submarine. The AI is so intelligent that it will occupy important in-game resources. When AI appears and crushes players' submarine, the game will play a special plot. Sigourny, one of the NPCs, will contact you and recounter her story in order to encourage players to try hard:

"In the bubble, there are no feelings, no clothes. Nobody to touch. A nurse and a guard actually touched me my first day out in the infirmary. I love being on this sub. And I trust you. You have to trust your pilot."

It seems Sigourny is talking to the avatar, she is begging the players directly as well. Here, the fear of death transfers from the moment of death into the one "before and after the instant of death" (Mcallister and Ruggill 92). The death in *Sub Mission* is no longer a figurative projection of fear. On the contrary, it becomes a sense of guilt and disappointment in players and pushes them into gameplay with seriousness and caution. Such a strong emotional attachment makes its permadeath regrettable and meaningful after playing though *Sub Mission* does not deal with the actual death of players. Just like what Mcallister and Ruggill maintain, *Sub Mission* "approaches the zero line of real mortality…yet never cross it" (89). Since the magic circle provided by *Sub Mission* is just a part of players' real life, this game does change something. Although video games do not "encroach upon life" (Mcallister and Ruggill 93), *Sub Mission* still makes players sacrifice the game disk as a significant attempt at

innovation in permadeath.

Braid: Immortality

Unlike the permeant death of *Sub Mission*, *Braid (2009)* does not feature a death mechanic, meaning that the player's avatar never dies. It is a platform-jumping game that tells the story of rescuing a princess, featuring a unique mechanic in which players can manipulate time to solve physical puzzles through the game. In *Braid*, time functions as a fourth dimension, allowing players to rewind events and actions in order to acquire a reincarnation or to change the progress or outcome of certain events. Usually, implementing immortality to the avatar can potentially remove some of the challenge and sense of accomplishment that players may feel while playing, which will provoke players to give up. Therefore, typical representations of immortality, for instance, time rewind, are used to increase the in-game mistake tolerance while facing a high level of difficulty. However, the time manipulation mechanic and the puzzle-solving elements of *Braid* provide their own challenges and opportunities for player achievement.

Braid employs time control as its core mechanical to represent the concept of immortality. There are five game levels in *Braid* corresponding with five different mechanics of time control. The first level is called “World II” where players can reverse time and correct mistakes. Then players will learn certain game objects, specifically those that are shining, will not be affected when the player uses the time-reversal mechanic in “World III” of the game. In “World IV”, the avatar becomes a

dimension of time. In other words, if the avatar moves to the right side of the video screen, time forwards; if the avatar moves to the left side of the video screen, time backwards. More interestingly, the avatar can leave with a figure shadow after rewinding time in “World V” and let him act on what the avatar did before. In the meantime, the avatar can do something else to help solve the physical puzzles. In “World VI”, the avatar can use a ring to produce a circle field that slows down the speed of time. The closer to the origin of the circle, the slower the time will be. Although the mechanics of time control in the game *Braid* may create the illusion of immortality for the avatar since he never dies, what makes the game unique is the way it incorporates this element into the game narrative. In *Braid*, the ability to manipulate time is not just a gameplay mechanic, but also a key aspect of the game's plot and theme in which players need to find the hidden narrative of the game.

Superficially, players need to rescue a princess using these time control mechanics. When players start playing the final level of the game, which is “World I”, a princess will appear on the upper platform after getting rid of the constraint of a knight. Players and the princess need to help each other to escape from the knight and this breaking world by controlling different machines. However, at the end of this physical puzzle, the princess comes back to the castle and sleeps on her bed. It is highly confusing and strange to see this happen as an ending, but this is also the most intriguing and fascinating part of the game. If players keep reversing time at this moment until the scene that avatar first enters “World I”, the game will finally tell the true story. In fact, reversing is the reality. Players’ avatar is the bad guy and the

princess is running away from the avatar. The avatar is not rescuing the princess. On the contrary, he is chasing her until the prince is rescued by the knight appeared in the previous gameplay. All the perceptions gained from the previous gameplay turn out to be wrong at the end of this game. This is why the last level of the game is labelled with “World I”, which also indicates that the game tells the story from end.

Braid combines time reversal as a representation of immortality with game narratives, resulting in a mirrored and braiding world. Enemies in the game are not obstacles to the player's progress but are stepping stones to help players chase the princess. It breaks the limitation of immortality and expands its advantages to the storytelling part, constructing a fantastic gameplay that narrates from the end. Additionally, the inspiration beneath such game design is also thoughtful. Although there is no guides or instructions set carefully for players in the game, players can successfully progress through controlling time back and forth, solving difficult and morbid puzzles. The whole system composed of immortality runs automatically without too much guidance and allow players to fulfill the mission of self-exploring and narrating in *Braid*. While many games today focus on detailed game progression systems and user interfaces to guide players, *Braid* stands out by taking a different approach and demonstrating the excellence of its game design. Instead of relying on explicit goals and objectives, *Braid* allows players to discover the purpose of the game and their actions through exploration and experimentation. This unique design creates a more immersive and engaging experience for players, and showcases the ingenuity and creativity of the game designers.

***Dark Souls Series*: Balance between Mortality Salience and Narrative**

Since *Braid* combines immortality with narrative and self-exploration, *Dark Souls Series (2011~2018)* creates another possibility. As the pioneer of soul-like RPG games, *Dark Souls Series* is famous for its level of difficulty. Inside the setting and story of *Dark Souls Series*, the avatar is an Undead, which is a victim reanimated after death under the curse of Gwyn who is the Lord of Cinda. The Undead will no longer die in order to serve and support the lords if someone fails to link the fire. Linking the fire is the most important mission in the perspective of *Dark Souls Series* because fire symbolizes order, hope, and light of the world. Therefore, the goal of the games is to step on the journey to link the fire by defeating enemies that block the way. According to Simon Parkin, Hidetaka Miyazaki, the game designer of *Dark Souls Series,* aims to make in-game death more enjoyable and meaningful, in contrast to the real death seen as a horrible event (Parkin). He also argues that Miyazaki projects the games “in shame, in failure, even in death” and “brought fictional challenges closer to life” (Parkin). Since *Dark Souls Series* cannot directly break the "magic circle" to affect real life, it lets players' emotions do the rest of the work. *Dark Souls Series* offers three stages to facilitate players with in-game exploration. Stage I is experiencing death – cannot beat bosses or insidious in-game creatures, where players first find it difficult. However, *Dark Souls Series* challenges “the gaming hegemony that to die was to fail” (Theodorou 84). Hidetaka Miyazaki utilizes game narratives to solve the problem of reincarnations of the Undead, which is different from permadeath and immortality. This ensures that it is reasonable for the avatar as a member of the

Undead to have unlimited respawns. Then due to the tough and tricky combat experience, players learn to know the penalty of in-game death, wandering around the boundary of giving up. This is different from most video games because normal ones are designed to please users. Nevertheless, Dark Souls Series are designed to test players both mentally and physically. After understanding the death mechanics of *Dark Souls Series*, players come to Stage II, which is tragic narratives – fragmented/nested storytelling where players gradually understand what had sadly happened in this world. The storytelling of *Dark Souls Series* is a tragic-style narrative, just like walking on spiral-down stairs. The integral tendency is descending albeit to transient advance at some points. But within Stage II, players do not touch the truth of linking the fire. Finally, players come to Stage III, which is endowing death with meanings. Under this context, however, Miyazaki conveys a meaningless death to his players after they figure out the truth of linking the fire. From *Dark Souls* to *Dark Souls III*, it is apparent to see that life in Lothric is decaying, and that place is forsaken and almost not livable. The color is dimmer than *Dark Souls's*, because of darkness spreading. Despite previous lords sacrificing themselves to link the fire, it makes no difference. Now, players are just repeating this process over and over again, without any real purpose or meaning. In some way, *Dark Souls Series* has revolutionized video game storytelling in a unique way. Players take ordinary and mundane characters without powerful background, and must fight against enemies with magnificent strength. No matter whether players come or leave, succeed or fail, the world continues as usual. Such helplessness and powerlessness root into players'

hearts deeply and firmly. This is also completely different from the typical game's logic of entertainment: the game serves as an escape from reality. *Dark Souls Series* choose to stand in the opposite of others, playing as a sharp knife that tears the illusion of escapism, peeking and pointing at player' real life as they are also vulnerable individuals within this world. As Simon Parker reveals in an interview, current traditional games "often flatter their players with childish power fantasies, but Miyazaki's work relies on the virtues of failure, patience, and hard-earned precision." Therefore, *Dark Souls Series* reaches a mysterious balance between death mechanics and its storytelling at a narrative level within three stages, breaking a new trend that attracts many other game developers to imitate.

Conclusion

This paper discusses three examples of video games that innovate death mechanics, including permadeath, immortality, and balance between mortality salience and narrative. Such innovations in the representation of death in video games can significantly affect gameplay and players, impacting intensively on the gaming experience. *Sub Mission*, as an extremely old game released in 1986, steps out the first to implement the concept of permadeath and compile players to pay for the failure in reality. *Braid* and *Dark Souls Series* somehow both intertwin the death of avatar and the game narratives. *Braid* succeeds in realizing players' self-exploration by emphasizing time control as a consequence of utilizing immortality; *Dark Souls Series* focus on the emotional effect and the abstraction of death as it relates to reality.

All of them re-position death in video games and create new gameplay and experience for players. It is interesting to note that some video games with innovative death mechanics, such as *Sub Mission*, do not perform well in the market. To further explore this issue, the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (2017)* could be used as a case study. This game uses the concept of permadeath as a marketing strategy, but does not actually implement it in the game. Many game developers may be hesitant to design games in this way. However, *Sub Mission*, *Braid*, and the *Dark Souls Series* are brave enough to refresh people's understanding of video games by introducing innovative death mechanics, adding another dimension to the gaming experience.

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