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A Literature Review of Player Death in Video Games

Yee spent some time discussing death in MMOs and concluded that harsh consequences for death led to greater social cooperation: “It is this shared understanding of the pervasive specter of death that contributed to a higher level of willingness of players to help each other” (Yee 181). This provides a brief perspective from one game, but I wanted to see how far this theory extends. I wanted to research the impact of death in MMOs, but I couldn’t find enough sources on death in MMOs, so this paper has a broader focus on death in video games in general. Death in video games can be stressful in that it reminds players of their own mortality, and death in video games can also be enjoyable in that this stress heightens arousal and the pain of death motivates players to do better. In multiplayer games, social interaction is shaped by the consequences the game implements for death, and in any game the players want death (or lack thereof) to be meaningful.

Several sources use a theory called Terror Management Theory to explain the effect of player death in video games on the player. Terror Management Theory says we have psychological defense mechanisms to keep us from acknowledging the reality of death because acknowledging the reality of death is terrifying (McAllister and Ruggill 88). There are several components of Terror Management Theory. Mortality Salience is “a state in which someone is made aware of their inevitable death” (Parker 126). Another part of Terror Management Theory is the Death Thought Accessibility hypothesis, which “suggests that we are motivated to avoid thoughts about death and that self-esteem insulates individuals from experiencing death anxiety” (Parker 126). We have two kinds of defense mechanisms to avoid the terror of death: proximal defenses, which “[distract] players with immediate tasks”, and distal defenses, which “[habituate] players to a predictable to vision of death that swaps playful engagement for grave apprehension” (McAllister and Ruggill 95-96). Reminders of death are ingrained in video games; e.g., game over screens, statistics on health and damage, limited resources, survival goals, etc. However, video game death is different from real death: it is “predictable, controllable, reasonable, and ultimately benign”. Experiencing video game death distracts us from real world death, which is much more unpleasant: this is a distal defense.

This watered down version of video game death can bore players, so some games make death more serious, which increases mortality salience and thus increases stress. One way to do this is through a feature called permadeath, which is a general team for incurring major losses as a result of death. These are some common kinds of permadeath: having to start over from the beginning after death because “death causes a player to lose all progress and resources”, “permanent loss of a resource or team member”, games that you cannot play any more after you die, or a self-imposed rule (Chang et. al 104). There are also games that mitigate the pain of permadeath by allowing some progress (generally in the form of unlocked content) to persist even after death (Parker 137). This mitigation is usually done to make the game accessible to a wider audience who might not be willing to play a game that is too harsh with the way it handles death (Parker 136). However the game implements permadeath, it provides a significant cost to death that makes players more afraid of dying. The intense negative emotions that permadeath creates form a heightened state of arousal that can make the positive experiences more impactful: the strong negative emotions become associated with something positive and thus become strong positive emotions (Carter and Allison 23). This effect is called *excitation transfer* (Carter and Allison 23). As an example, a player from a zombie survival MMO first-person-shooter called DayZ says that the game’s permadeath makes them “Anxious, tense, freaking out at the smallest noises/movements. It’s frickin’ awesome” (Carter and Allison 10). Another player notes that the permadeath increases immersion: “When your character is in danger you feel in danger” (Carter and Allison 11). The stress from the danger of death translates into adrenaline and enjoyment.

When player death in a video game has consequences, that motivates players to improve. One genre that often features permadeath is roguelikes. In roguelikes, players are used to taking their death as an opportunity to learn: “permadeath is pedagogical in that its intent is to produce better players and also more committed members of the community” (Parker 127). Roguelikes are expected to be challenging endeavors that the players must try over and over again, learning from their past mistakes in order to succeed, so “for players that are already familiar with the genre, permadeath isn’t an index of their impending mortality but rather a metric of game difficulty and player mastery” (Parker 127). In this way, we could see the expectation of death in roguelikes as another distal defense: instead of seeing death as a terrible thing similar to death in real life, players see it as another teachable moment.

Even for games that don’t have permadeath, the consequences of death can motivate players to do better. World of Warcraft has an inconvenience attached to player character death that players call the “death penalty”: the character loses XP and has damaged equipment (so this requires grinding to get the character back to its original state), and the player has to get all the way back to their dead body before they can continue the game (Klastrup 146). Data for Klastrup’s article was collected through an online survey where players could share their experiences of in-game death. The article also draws examples from online forums and player-created videos of their own character’s death. Most of the death stories fit into several categories, one of which was “stories about death as a lesson (the result of unsuccessful group play or personal blunders)”. One example of this was a player who ran on ahead, drawing the attention of more monsters than the group could handle. That player had run ahead to a safe space but failed to communicate this to the group, so the rest of the group died as a result. The lesson here is that communication is important for teamwork. A similar story of learning from death is the story of a player called Leeroy Jenkins. Leeroy missed the group discussion of strategy, so he ran ahead into the dungeon and the rest of the group followed. This drew the attention of more monsters than the group could handle, so everyone died as a result. The lesson here is to not rush ahead because then you may have more attackers than you can handle.

In multiplayer games, social interaction is shaped by the consequences the game implements for death. Both DayZ and World of Warcraft allow players to kill each other. Players of DayZ described social rules about where such killing is acceptable. Killing in the area where new players start is frowned upon because players don’t have any resources to be stolen or to be used to fight back (Carter and Allison 20). However, other locations, such as the military base, are fair game for player killing because “Most players who have made it this far have good gear, can fight back, and are valuable targets” (Carter and Allison 20). A frustrating behavior that players can do in both DayZ and World of Warcraft is “camping”: a player waits in one location where players are likely to be so that they can get multiple kills. In World of Warcraft, the death penalty system (players must back to their corpse to regain their life) allows “corpse camping”: a player will wait near body of the player they just killed so that when their victim gets their body back, they can just kill them again. This antisocial behavior does not always go unpunished, however. One of the World of Warcraft death stories is about a new player who was killed by players from a group called Horde. The new player’s high-level friend then called on allies to fight back against her killers. The new player’s behavior changed as a result of this experience: “I now go out of my way to kill horde for honor” (Klastrup 158). Player killing is not the only kind of player death that has social consequences: if a player causes the death of others due to poor playing, they may face social isolation as people refuse to group up with the player because they don’t trust them (Klastrup 158-159).

Permanent character death can be a good or a bad experience, and the main difference between a good death and a bad death is “meaningfulness” (Carter and Allison 3). Carter and Allsion provide this definition for meaningfulness in terms of player death: “the player must feel that their character’s death was properly integrated into the game context, that it had a discernable and appropriate cause, and that it was congruent with both the game’s imaginary and the player’s own narrativizing of their experience” (Carter and Allison 3). “Overwhelmingly, the main kinds of ‘bad deaths’ were those in which players were either ‘sniped’ (being killed, generally in one shot, by a distant player with a sniper rifle), killed due to game crashes or bugs, or (to a lesser extent), when ‘killed on sight’ by other players who had no intention of interacting socially (‘KOS players’)” (Carter and Alison 18). World of Warcraft players also complained about player killing, particularly when the killers are much higher in level/skill than the victims because “it puts the player in a situation where she is completely disempowered” (Klastrup 158).

To provide a different perspective, consider the concept of permalife. Permalife is the opposite of permadeath: “permalife games set themselves apart by making the inability to die a central theme and/or core gameplay mechanic” (Ruberg 159). To set up the contrast, it helps to note that permadeath (also called “hardcore” or “ironman”) is often considered a kind of hardcore gaming which is often seen as highly masculine: “To play a game on ‘hardcore’ or ‘ironman’ difficulty, these games imply, is to demonstrate the unbreakable ‘hardness’ that lies at one’s, presumably male, ‘core’ and the elemental ‘iron’ that makes a man undeniably a ‘man’” (Chang et. al 114). This excessive masculinity can lead to harassment of women: “stories circulate of women players in DayZ being systematically hunted down or worse” (Chang et. al 114). In contrast to this hyper-masculinity associated with permadeath, permalife games are being designed by “LGBTQ game-makers who are building small-scale, zine-like video games that directly address queer experiences and perspectives” (Ruberg 160). Though these games don’t have death, death is meaningful in its absence. For example, in Mainichi you play the same day over and over again as a trans woman of color (Ruberg 161). Having to deal with the same difficult experiences of marginalization over and over again reflects the real-world experience of a trans woman of color. The lack of death means you have to keep on living, and continuing to live in a hostile world is its own meaningful challenge.

Player character death in video games has a profound effect on both the individual player and, in multiplayer games, the social dynamics. There is still lots of room for future research. Do people help each other more when the consequences of death are more severe, which was the idea Yee suggested? How does the ability of player characters to resurrect other player characters affect social dynamics in multiplayer games? These are questions that I would love to have answered, but could not find sufficient research for. Regardless, it is important to be aware that your gameplay experience will be shaped by what death is like in the game.

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