

GAME OVER?

For decades, game developers have used death as the central mechanism for motivating players. This mechanism is used so extensively that it often dominates the gaming experience and becomes a primary topic of critique. And in computer games' short-lived history, hundreds of ingenious ways of reinventing this mechanism have been employed in games. Whether they are games as simple as Tetris or Minesweeper where the concept of death is more abstract or whether they are games that use avatars as a representation of the player, the idea of prolonging or evading death is often the main experience of play. As a result, the goal of "having fun" sits squarely at the top of many game designers' priorities. This tradition has become so prevalent that for something to be even called a 'game', the utilization of the mechanism is expected.

And it is this mechanism that I want to challenge. I believe that by removing this mechanism that is so often realized through death, we can also remove the prescribed experience of "fun" and find deeper meaning in games. Although not necessarily mutually exclusive, I think that removing death can transform the game into a platform more readily suited for aesthetic, intellectual or emotional exploration. Subsequently, by removing death, games, which are typically used as an escape from reality or a way to kill time, can engage in a more profound activity; that is the augmentation or commentary of reality and the stopping of time. And it is for this reason that I believe the separation of art and games exists in such stark contrast. That is not to say the mechanisms used to create fun is not a worthwhile pursuit. Instead, I want to entertain the idea that games can reach a wider audience and be less narrow in its goal.

In my opinion, this direction in the development of gaming is analogous to the modernist progression of painting as a depiction of deep space to an embrace of flat space. Up till the modernist discourse, much of western painting employed deep/logical space as a stylistic default. But in the late 19th and early 20th century, painters such as Picasso, Cezanne, and Matisse dismissed that tradition in order to explore other intellectual ideas. As a result, ideas about spatial fragmentation and the use of non-local expressive colors were

thoroughly explored. Similarly, by letting go of this concept of death, new facets of what the medium is capable of can be investigated. On a more general level, I think that this analogy can be further extended to talk about the evolution of other creative industries.

Consequently, the result is a more diverse exploration in the respective medium instead of the one-track mind that game developers seem to have.

While the technology for game development is continually improving and becoming more accessible, independent game developers not only find themselves armed with more tools but also dramatically lowered expenses. In fact, the costs to develop games have dropped virtually to just needing a laptop. This change in the industry has allowed more experimentation at less opportunity cost, resulting in games that are more experimental and games that bypass the tradition of death as a mechanism for gameplay. *The Artist is Present* by Pippin Barr or *dys.4.ia* by Anna Anthropy are two such examples. In *The Artist is Present*, Pippin Barr caricatures Marina Abramovic's performance at the MoMA where the central event of the game is the wait in line to sit across the pixelated Abramovic. In *dys.4.ia*, Anthropy uses an assortment of shorter games to illustrate her problems as a transgender female. In both these games, the desire of winning is taken away – the notion of death is neither expected nor realized. Instead, the complexities of interactive story telling become the primary focus.

However, I believe that it is still crucial that these games are understood first as games and then as interactive stories. Without a recognizable gaming language, these games would lack the specific context that is requisite for having sufficient investment with the interactive experience. Understanding these as games establishes the time commitment one must make and involves players with the degree and quality of interactivity that the games traditionally exhibit. And to me, this issue speaks explicitly about the difference between games that exist in gallery/museum settings and games that are unable to exist in that market (art-games vs game-art). Unlike *The Artist is Present* or *dys.4.ia*, "art-games" use the context of games differently. Instead of reinventing the traditions of gameplay (such as removing death as a mechanism for gameplay), "art-games" leave gameplay traditions relatively untouched and instead uses untraditional content to create meaning. Also, unlike

“game-art”, we understand “art-games” first and foremost as a piece of art tailored to the fine-arts industry – an industry geared towards the tradition of object-making. By exhibiting a game in the context of a museum, it transforms the game into an art-object, consequently discouraging its interactive experience. However, in terms of the evolution of the art market, putting a game in a museum can have (and has had) profound impact. It not only raises questions about the nature of something’s objecthood but also challenges the implications of the art-object and the white wall gallery space in a new way that seems to challenge the contemplative and holy aura of the gallery space that the art-industry prizes.

The Long March: Restart by Feng Mengbo is one such example of a game that successfully exists in the fine art industry. This highly pixilated retro game copies the gameplay elements of a standard platformer game. But instead of playing as the hero who saves the princess, you play as one of Mao’s Red Army soldiers in a battle against capitalism. The game was realized as an 80-foot long projection on two massive screens in MoMA P.S.1. Evidently, Feng Mengbo uses the medium of a game not to investigate gaming problems, but instead to draw from the traditions of gaming to articulate a certain political attitude towards the Chinese government. He replaces what originally would’ve been Mario or Zelda with politically charged subject matter. In this way, he is not unlike many of his Chinese contemporaries whose work is also embedded with strong political undertones. Hence, the actual gaming mechanisms play entirely different roles. Instead of experiencing these mechanisms in a new and creative way, Feng Mengbo uses these traditions for conceptual backing. As a player, winning (defeating capitalism) is the only goal. Feng Mengbo manipulates this goal to symbolize the state of mind of peasants involved in the communist regime. Consequently, interaction in this game is not about creative gameplay, but is instead about a metaphor analogy used to create content. As a result, no actual interaction with the game (except for one person who is playing the game) is required to fully engage with the piece.

In contrast to the fine art industry, the game industry already facilitates a high degree of investment in interaction. This means that the implications of calling something a game gives it a context that is conducive for its interaction. On top of that, it also informs people

about the kind of time commitment required. In comparison to other interactive platforms such as websites, the level of investment in interactivity that games have is unmatched. Unlike games, there is less obligation for a website to exhaust interactive possibilities. And in my opinion, this is the reason why games should be exploited for its interactive power. This brings me back to the original thesis of this essay which is to eliminate death as a gaming mechanism and show that gaming can be more than just about escaping death. Instead, it can be about interactive storytelling and engaging in virtual interactive worlds at the degree, complexity and quality that games employ.

The Tower Game (SPOILER)

The Tower Game's content is paradoxically about the concept of death and how it has been traditionally used in other games. The game is centered around the idea that the player has died before and is currently playing on his n^{th} life. But unlike your typical platformer, the player is unable to die in the conventional gaming sense and is consequently unable to lose.

One of the main goals for the game was to use a gaming language to establish the expectation of death, at least on conventional gaming terms. The player is able to lose in a battle, pick up items to aid him on his adventure and learn skills, which are all suggestive of the need to improve the player's ability to survive and make it to the top. Furthermore, each ghost you encounter cryptically tells you a little bit about how he's died and how you can successfully get to the top. But as you progress through the game, you soon realize that these game elements are in fact irrelevant to gameplay or to the player's mortality. Instead, you realize that what seemed to be the primary motivator of the game now has a Dadaist role. Regardless of what decisions you make in the game, you will achieve the simple, prescribed goal of making it to the top. What is left is a critique on the constraints of such mechanisms in an interactive space.

The realization of being on your n^{th} life also appends to this idea. Initially, each death gives the game's virtual world an apparent 'gameness', making it clear that this game is a game about games. It is also used to underscore the duality between the gamer's finite

experience of the game and the player's life. Typical in platformer games, once the gamer exhausts the max number of lives, the game is over and all previous check-points are cleared. But in The Tower Game, each death the player encounters questions the lifespan of the game, forcing the player to ask, "has this game had a life outside of my experience with it?"

On another level, we also see that with each successive death that the player encounters, the player learns something about his mortality. At first, these deaths are suggestive of the importance of death in the game. But later on, you realize that each death seemed to have died in a way that could only have happened beyond the boundaries of the established gameplay. Subsequently, the idea of death is ridiculed and each death functions better as a device that contributes to the general humor of the game. As a result, each time a previous death is encountered, it becomes a reminder of its own absurdity.