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Death in Games

Play/Write Student Journal
Vol. 1

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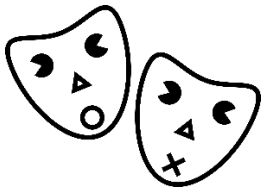
February 2022, Klagenfurt



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Editorial

Rachel Gorden & Benjamin Hanussek

We are proud to present the very first issue of the *Play/Write Student Journal* with the special topic Death in Games.

The journal has been formed in 2021 as an effort of students of the Game Studies and Engineering master's program at the Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt, Austria. It constitutes part of the critical outlet of the student-run Klagenfurt Critical Game Lab.

Our student journal offers the opportunity to both review and publish student's written works in the field of Game Studies. Our aim is to bring together different perspectives on topics in Game Studies from people with differing (scholarly) backgrounds on a student level, to foster skills of critical analysis and writing, and to promote the visibility of students who aim to find their footing in Game Studies.

This being said, the publication of this very first issue would not have been possible without the dedication and work of the editorial team, the artists who created the logo and the cover design of this issue, and of course the students whose works we are proud to present in this issue. We would like to thank everyone for their contributions! Special thanks go out to Dr. Felix Schniz for his guidance and support.

In this issue, our authors explore the topic of death in games. The idea of death in games originates, arguably, in the mechanics of completion and elimination. Already the ancient Egyptian board game *Senet*, which means "passage", was about completing your journey to the afterlife. Once your figures would reach the end of the board, they would transcend beyond it. Moreover, strategic games such as *Go* or *Chess* are fundamentally grounded in the mechanic of eliminating your opponents' figures and counters. Again, the physical presence on the board, in-game, is removed. It does not take much pondering to recognize the associations we immediately draw between being in-game, to being alive and being removed from the game, being dead. Why else would trading card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* call their discard piles graveyards?

Death, for us humans, is a fundamental way to understand the departure of a thing from this world, or in games from their magic circles. It is at the same time the reason for a thing to not act for or against us anymore. In *Space Invaders*, we eliminate the alien armada, ship by ship. Every ship destroyed is one ship less acting against us. When our companions - or we - are eliminated, like in various *Super Mario* titles, we lose our agency in-game. Death

becomes, thus, a tool to manipulate our environment. We remove the things that are a threat to us, while the environment tries to remove us as a threat to them with its agents. Here, death seems not just as a random event but a necessity for change and certainly, progress. A necessity, achieved by the act of killing.

Games such as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* titles give us a license to kill. Death becomes the desired event for which we are rewarded with medals of honor and in-game progress. Our pretext is war. *All's fair in love and war*, as they say.

But death is not always desirable, especially if it means the death of our loved ones. In de-mechanizing death by story-driven passages, game franchises such as *The Walking Dead* or *The Last of Us* exposes players to the emotional pain that death can cause when it does not even strike us. Is this the loophole in Epicurian philosophy that claims that death is none of our business as long as we are alive? What do we do if death takes away the ones we care for?

Games provide us with a safe environment to play with death, experience it, simulate it, fear and fight it. Death appears in many shapes and forms in the vast landscapes of (video)games out there, and it is for us to discover it as a multifarious event that can cause us pain occasionally and satisfaction eventually.

Our issue begins with a comparative take on death in games. In "Representations of Death in Video Games", Ahmad Kalatiani offers a comparison of different representations of death and how these are implemented as game mechanics. He furthermore shows how these different representations mirror understandings of death from primary reality.

Moving towards a more philosophical approach, in "The Impermanence of Death in Videogames," Tom Tuček examines the incorporation of death into recent single-player videogames through the lens of the philosophical concept of impermanence (or *anicca*). The essay analyses how an understanding of death as impermanent is weaved into different game designs and how this can both reflect and influence our perception of death in primary reality.

In his essay "Permadeath in Action Role-Playing Videogames," Alin-Lucian Brebulet analyses the effects of permadeath as a game mechanic on players on the examples of *Path of Exile* and *Diablo II*. He shows that permadeath can enhance player's experiences in contrast to the frequent implementation of death as a mere experience of failure in videogames.

Turning to narrative, Samuele Balduzzi's essay "Death as a Meta-Narrative Tool in *Undertale*" addresses the inherent un-naturality of death in videogames and the loss of meaning associated with this. The essay shows how meaning can be re-introduced by meta-narratively acknowledging death on the example of *Undertale*.

With the focus remaining on narrative and innovative game design, Mohammad Aldehayat goes into a closer analysis of the rogue-lite *Hades* in "Death as a Narrative Device in *Hades*". His essay shows how death as a game mechanic can evolve from a signification of failure to a creative tool used to integrate narrative and gameplay.

Finally, Manuel Günther's essay "Savegames are a Connection into the Realm of the Dead," scrutinizes the connection between intradiegetic manifestations of death and the underlying technology of videogames. In looking at different metaphors for death that are created where game-worlds and savegames intersect, the essay highlights the exceptional status of videogames between technological artifact and virtual world.

Representations of Death in Videogames

Ahmad Kalatiani

There are different understandings of death in the world, and depending on that understanding, it has different meanings. In video games however, death has a simpler definition. In *Saved Games and Respawn Timers: The Dilemma of Representing Death in Video Games*, Melnic and Melnic argue that death is the result of the failure to overcome the rules and obstacles that define video games (Melnic and Melnic 2018, 30). That being said, how death is reflected in the mechanics varies from game to game and depending on who the game is intended for. Throughout this article, I am going to look into different representations of death in video games.

Almost every game is targeted towards a specific group of people, and depending on these targets, their mechanics of death are implemented differently. Some games are meant to be easy and less tense. In these kinds of games, death is either non-existing or not punishing. In *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft 2008) the player-character cannot die, no matter what. If you jump down a cliff, or if you just stand still in front of an enemy, you never die. Every time that death is near, the prince is saved by Elika, the guardian of the Tree of Life and the God of Light. In the game *Sheep, Dog n' Wolf* (Atari SA 2001), Wile E. Coyote's mission is to find a way to steal a sheep from the herd that is guarded by the dog. While the game can get challenging at some levels, the "death" animations are cheerful and non-punishing. If the player-character is caught by the dog, it is usually punched back to the closest safest platform. If it got caught up on a high cliff, the coyote waves hands nervously into the camera and falls afterwards, going back to the closest safe platform again. It can be argued that these are representations of death that do not follow the usual "game over" screen and a restart button, but they are not punishing either. Games like these always allow you to continue forward from right where you were before you died.

Some games have taken a more religious approach in their way of representing death. In *Sea of Thieves* (Rare 2018), whenever dead, the player's soul escapes from their body and the player is taken into a ghost ship. There, in the afterlife, they must wait for a while before the deck door opens and they can walk to the light to go back to their body (respawn). In *Phasmophobia* (Kinetic Games 2020), whenever players are killed by a ghost, they become a ghost themselves and end up wandering in the game map, able to interact with static objects

and throw them around as well as being able to hear other player's voices inside the game. Living players cannot see the ones who have died.

Figure 1. The dog captured the cayote and punches him in the head (Sheep, Dog'n Wolf, Atari SA 2001). (Image from https://www.gamewatcher.com/games/sheep-raider/screens/41078).

As opposed to the games mentioned above, there also exist games that punish you for dying. In *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996), death includes a horrifying scene of being eaten by zombies and monsters, and afterwards the player is sent back to main menu, having to continue from their last saved location. In *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017), dying spreads the main characters' sickness (visible as a black mold on her hand), and if the sickness reaches her head, her memories are lost and with it, the player's savegame is deleted. In other games such as *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware Inc 2011), every time the player-character dies, they lose all collected souls (the main currency of the game) as well as some parts of their max HP, making death very punishing and frustrating – something the player wants to avoid. In *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami 1998), the "game over" scene includes radio calls from Snake's friends and coworkers, shouting out his name and being sad for their loss. This death screen is not as punishing to the player themselves, but it's a representation of the mourning and pain the people around the deceased go through.

Death is dealt with differently in every game. While some games represent death in playful manners or don't include death at all (similar to *Prince of Persia* as mentioned earlier), some take religion or primary life as a source of inspiration for their death scenes (*Sea of*

Thieves and *Metal Gear Solid* as examples, respectively). At the end, death mechanics always come down to the choice of the developer and the audience the game targets.

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The Impermanence of Death in Videogames

Tom Tuček

This essay aims to discuss the idea and recent trends of death in single-player videogames, by utilizing the concept of *anicca* (impermanence). In the process of doing so, various games that use death as a gameplay mechanic in differing ways are introduced and investigated.

In many Eastern philosophies and religions, the concept of *anicca* (also *anitya,* or 無常 *mujō*) is considered to be an essential insight to achieve an end to one's own suffering; especially in Buddhism, as it is one of the fundamental three marks of existence (see Hanh 1998, chap. 18). *Anicca* describes the insight that everything is transient, or impermanent; everything passes. In early Western philosophy, this idea can also be found in the teachings of Heraclitus (see Burnet 1930, 145-146) or in Pyrrhonism (see Beckwith 2015, 28). Everything is in a constant state of flux, and death is an important part of it, as it serves as both a transitory state within the cycle, but also as the main reason why humans fail to accept *anicca*. Death is often seen as the absolute endpoint, at which everything is lost.

Contemporary videogames, however, commonly manage to defy this aspect of death – it is usually nothing more than a temporary setback. The classic idea of a "Game over"-screen signaling that all one's progress has been lost and one has to start the game anew, has lost traction in recent years. Consumer demands and new game design insights (see Johns 2017, and Game Maker's Toolkit 2015) have turned death into a game mechanic that does not always cause loss, and in some cases is even necessary to progress through the game. This is especially apparent in the genre of *rogue-lites* – games that are usually played over the course of multiple attempts and feature a meta-progression system; meaning that even if a single run results in failure, some overall progress towards the end goal of finishing the game can be made. This meta-progression system is often considered the main attribute to separate *rogue-lites* from *rogue-likes*, such as the eponymous game *Rogue* (A.I. Design 1980), in which death and the following game-over truly equal the loss of all progress and a start from zero.

Rogue-lites like *Binding of Isaac* (McMillen 2011) or *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) allow for progression even if the player character dies – through unlocks of items and characters for subsequent runs in case of the former, and also by further empowering the player characters attributes in case of the latter. Some of these games show how death in videogames has potentially transformed from an extradiegetic mechanic into an intradiegetic one. Especially games like *Hades*, *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011), or *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*

(Monolith Productions. 2014) utilize characters that are unable to truly die due to the setting of the game, thus allowing for incorporating player character deaths into their overall narrative. Similarly, *Rogue Legacy* (Cellar Door Games 2013), in addition to its meta-progression system, also seamlessly integrates death into its story, as with each new attempt, the player controls a genetic successor of the previously deceased player character. *Dark Souls* and its sequels are also examples of games that take away progression on death, but give players a chance to regain what was lost by reaching the place they died previously once again, a game mechanic similar to corpse-running in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). These design decisions allow for death to be less of a punishment, and turn it into an almost inevitable part of the game experience. It could be considered that players get more accepting of their deaths if they know that they have made overall progress anyway, either by being able to retrieve something that was lost, or by unlocking permanent upgrades. Unfortunately, by tying this acceptance of death to a permanent progression system, *anicca*-like insight into the concept of impermanence might be lost.

Furthermore, some modern videogames exemplify a general aversion of death and loss, as dying is made impossible through game mechanics, such as in *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft Montreal 2008) or, to a lesser extent, *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013). Some strategy-game series, like *Fire Emblem*, originally famous for the possible permanent death of almost every playable character, now feature the option to turn off perma-death and thus allow characters to withdraw from battle instead of dying, as in its latest installment, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems. 2019).

While videogames try to reduce frustrations associated with dying in various ways, death in some videogames has progressed to a point where it exemplifies that it is nothing but a transient state and part of the impermanence of everything. Studying this concept can lead us to insight into even what we consider our primary reality. Denying death, and meta-progression systems, on the other hand, could ironically represent the human want for permanence and denial of futility. If progress is made even in failure, success becomes an inevitability; and if acceptance of death is bound to worldly progress, suffering will not be overcome.

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Perma-Death in Action Role-Playing Videogames

Alin-Lucian Brebulet

Perma-death is a game mechanic used in both tabletop and video games in which player characters who lose all their health are declared dead and cannot be resurrected. This essay examines the topic of perma-death in videogames in light of Hugh Ruddy's thesis that "gamers embrace failure since it enables them to learn" (Ruddy 2014, 1), and aims to look at how perma-death affects the entertainment and challenge aspects of action role-playing videogames. The goal is to provide insights into why players enjoy perma-death action role-playing videogames, and how they can be challenged by them.

This essay will focus on two action role-playing videogames that utilize perma-death as a core mechanic: *Path of Exile* (Grinding Gear Games 2013), and *Diablo II* (Blizzard Entertainment 2000).

From narratives and mechanics to aesthetics and the titles, these games depict different facets of what signifies perma-death. They embody disaster, disempowerment, and scarcity. The world is decaying, and humanity is struggling to survive.

In *Path of Exile*, avatar's mental health is called into question via multiple conversation. For example, a character named Zana asks every time she meets the player, "Still sane, Exile?" (Grinding Gear Games 2013). Everything, from the scenery to the NPCs' behavior and appearance, represents the ephemerality of existence and the world's impending destruction.

Everything mentioned above reinforces the idea that death has a significant and permanent effect. The main character is not the chosen one, but their desire and resolve set them on a course to rescue the world or perish trying. The trek is perilous, and there is no certainty that they will successfully restore everything to normal.

Because the player must be careful while playing the game, this phenomenon aids in the development of a stronger bond between the player and their character. Both *Diablo II* and *Path of Exile* allow players to customize their characters through various armors and weapons or costumes, as well as distinct gameplay styles (playing an archer, a mage or a berserker). The avatar becomes an extension of the player over time, and while death can destroy this bond, the player must immerse themselves deeper in the action to avoid death at all costs.

Various aspects of the game mean a lot more since the player is taking risks, and not many people will jeopardize their progress. When dying, the character gets deleted or

transferred to another server. In *Path of Exile*, if you die on a hardcore server, which has the perma-death feature enabled, your character is relocated to standard server. In this circumstance, every decision the player makes carries the risk of losing their character. The player must decide whether to take risks. Making the right decisions and progressing through the game without dying can provide the player with a sense of relief and accomplishment.

The ability to choose between taking a gamble with the possibility of losing everything or not risking anything at all, plays a significant part in the configuration of each player's gameplay experience. Events and new pieces of information that emerge as a consequence of the courage of unwavering players also serve as vital keys, having a greater impact on games' communities and directly influencing the configuration of each participant. This can for instance be observed in the amount of content found in online forums (see Path of Exile Forum 2021).

These games are designed to create fight-or-flight scenarios, which cause adrenaline rushes in players.

> Playing a game with the constant threat of permadeath over the player's head enhances the feelings a player gets when playing video games. The joy of surviving an event is much more intense when the player knows that if they hadn't survived, their game would have been finished forever, as well as the player's fear of this happening being heightened. (Ruddy 2014, 22)

The player is aware from the beginning that their character will most likely die; the game also informs them of this possibility. Nonetheless, it makes no difference to the player; the only aim they have in mind is to complete the task they've set on (finishing the story, reaching maximum level, acquiring a piece of equipment, etc.), even if it means restarting the game numerous times. This game mode's main objective is to conquer obstacles that others would not dare attempt.

> Then, if a mistake is made and the avatar dies, the player knows the reasons behind the failure and can adjust their strategies the next time they play. Juul also concluded that winning after a failure is what players really want from games, and Permadeath games offer the player plenty of chances to fail, meaning that achieving a win feels even better for players. (Ruddy 2014, 22)

Overcoming problems with perseverance allows the player to feel even more fulfilled; every try strengthens their eventual victory; they fail and must restart.

The occurrences mentioned above in light of Hugh Ruddy's idea illustrate why some games may considerably benefit from including perma-death, and show that perma-death

would be best suited for target audiences that seek challenge and risk-taking. This also shows that perma-death can potentially become a genre of its own.

Consequently, even though games that include perma-death are an incredibly challenging form of play, they favorably and delightfully enhance the experience of players willing to overcome the frustration of imminent death and emphasize achievement through repetition. From increasing the player's immersion and encouraging them to take risks to creating precious memories for the player or the community and making success even more joyful, the option of perma-death has the potential to enhance gaming experiences in various ways.

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Death as a Meta-Narrative Tool in *Undertale*

Samuele Balduzzi

Undertale is a popular video game which has some RPG characteristics, was developed by Toby Fox in 2015, and is well-known for its parodic and meta-narrative elements. The player controls a human child fallen into a seemingly dangerous world inhabited by monsters from which they try to escape. It is soon clear that most of the enemies are actually kind and harmless, if not even terrified by the protagonist. The whole game narrative can change drastically, depending on whether the player decides to spare all of the monsters (in what the players' community calls the "pacifist route"), kill them all ("genocide route"), or eliminate only some of them ("neutral route"). The game's rhetoric explicitly directs the player towards the least use of violence possible from the very beginning, through the mentorship of the motherly Toriel. Following the genocide route thus enables the player to experience a ludonarrative dissonance (see Hocking 2007, see Seraphine 2016), namely a gap between what the narrative tells and what the gameplay imposes or allows. With this paper, I want to show how death in *Undertale*, especially in its genocide route, is a key meta-narrative tool for its rhetoric.

Since the save functionality has become available in video games, the player's experience has drastically changed: a game can now be played in multiple sessions without losing progress, and failure does not mean restarting the game from the beginning anymore. However, this revolution has come at a price: the meaning of the player's failure has been widely reduced. As Melnic and Melnic state:

> 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 game plays 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? (Melnic and Melnic 2017, 29)

This has had a great impact on the narrative of those games in which the player's failure is associated with the death of the character they impersonate, since it is no longer permanent. Tocci also stresses how narrative in games often suffers from this issue:

> The way that videogames have dealt with failure, primarily through protagonist death and trial-and-error, has generally been more concerned with games as rule sets than with games as narratives. As a result, games which appear to tell stories often become incoherent, bringing narrative progression to a halt, eliciting frustration with gameplay rather than engagement with fiction. (Tocci 2008, 198)

Some popular games have found a way to legitimize the death and rebirth of their main character in their narrative (in the *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) series the undead main character becomes "hollow" instead of dying and can revert this decaying by restoring their humanity in campfires; in the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) series the player's defeat consists in a "desynchronization" with the memories of the character they are impersonating), but these explanations hardly ever manage to avoid the fall of suspension of disbelief triggered by the protagonist's actual rebirth; at least, we can affirm that they completely change the meaning of irreversibility of death. Thus, the main character's fake demise in video games almost always represents a halt to narration, a break of immersion, or an exit from the magic circle (see Huizinga 1955). Ensslin argues that the rebirth and respawn cycle is one of the impossibilities that make video games narratives inherently unnatural (Ensslin 2015, 54). However, she also argues that:

> (…) some games are more "unnatural" (in a Richardsonian sense of aesthetically "more estranging") than others because they deliberately violate the ludo-narrative conventions of their genre and the medium itself in order to evoke meta-ludic and meta-fictional reflections in the player – as well as other types of philosophical and critical processes. (Ensslin 2015, 55)

Undertale acknowledges the game world's inherent metalepsis, namely the transgression of the boundary between the real and fictional world (see Ryan 2004), and hence its unnatural narrative. This acknowledgment is made by non-playable characters in first person, especially during the genocide route: like many other enemies, Sans, a friendly skeleton turning into the final boss in the genocide route, remembers how many times he has already defeated the player ("*hmm. that expression…/ that is the expression of someone who's died eight times in a row*" (Fox 2015)); Flowey, the main antagonist of the game, claims to be the only other entity able to save and reload the game and therefore seems to know exactly what the player did in previous runs, such as if they spared or killed certain characters ("*You murdered her* [Toriel]/ *And then you went back, because you regretted it*" (Fox 2015)).

In conclusion, *Undertale* manages to exploit the unnatural impossibility of death and rebirth in games by meta-narratively acknowledging it, with the purpose of triggering a

reflection in the player about morality and its role in the fictional world. A study by Seraphine (Seraphine 2018) has shown how players were deeply involved in and intrigued by the in-game choices and ethical issues, and this goal could not have been achieved without the implementation of death as a meta-narrative tool that capitalizes on the metalepsis typical of video-ludic narratives, rather than being passively subject to it.

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Death as a Narrative Device in *Hades*

Mohammad Aldehayat

In his paper "*You Are Dead. Continue?*": *Conflicts and Complements in Game Rules and Fiction*, Tocci explains how dying in a game can harm how the player experiences the narrative. He writes: "Death and failure may be problematic in story-oriented games for a couple basic reasons. For one, trial and error interrupt narrative progression, forcing the player to spend more time focusing on a game's rules than on its fiction" (Tocci 2008, 190). He argues that engagement in the story can be broken by hard sections of a game where you will die many times, or even the absence of a diegetic reason for why the player is reincarnated every time they die (Tocci 2008, 190). This is where *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) differs from other games, as it uses death not only as an indication of failure to the player but also as a tool to progress the game's story. What I will show here is how *Hades* integrates the story with the gameplay in an unobtrusive way.

In *Hades,* you play as the son of Hades, the Greek god of the dead, Zagreus who is trying to escape the underworld. To escape, he must go through multiple levels of the underworld, each filled with its own set of challenges. Each time he dies he is sent back to the underworld to attempt his escape once again. The game relies heavily on its narrative which is based on Greek mythology with many liberties taken in its representation.

When you take a look at *Hades* in comparison to what Tocci said, it does not face the problem of breaking the player's engagement with the narrative. It does this by treating death as part of the story. Whenever the player loses and Zagreus dies, he is sent back home. This is because his father - Lord Hades - wants to stop him from escaping his realm by attempting to kill him throughout his journey. In this way, Supergiant Games have given the players a reason consistent with the story as to why they must repeat their escape attempt every time they are killed. This helps give the player the impression that every escape attempt is a new one and they are not just repeating the same attempt until they win. However, this does not mean the player is not frustrated when they die, but, rather than just the player being frustrated, this feeling is mirrored by Zagreus in-game who, when he respawns and emerges from the Pool of Styx, shows his dissatisfaction with being unable to escape. This makes Zagreus easier to relate to for the player and immerses the player more in the game.

Another way *Hades* prevents death from detracting the player from the story is by revealing more of the game every time Zagreus dies. Each time Zagreus emerges from the

Pool of Styx, there is something new to be found; this can be in the form of a change in the environment, an NPC having a new dialogue or even a new NPC showing up around the house. Some of these changes serve to advance the overall narrative of the game, but most are dependent on what happened in your last attempt or a combination of circumstances from all your previous attempts. For example, after defeating Megaera, you can find her in the lounge looking disappointed about being defeated by you. This way, when the player dies, they are never taken out of the game by the frustration of defeat but are rather eager to see how the world has evolved and what others have to say in relation to their progress so far.

While according to Tocci, the narrative is interrupted when games use the model of trial-and-error (Tocci 2008, 190), *Hades* proves this can be done in a manner that is compelling to the player and does not break the player's immersion. Supergiant Games have integrated narrative and gameplay in a way where they use death as a means to tell the story rather than it being a hindrance. Therefore, *Hades* can be looked at as an example for games in the future looking to engage players with both gameplay and narrative without having to sacrifice the latter. A possible problem with this approach that should, however, be kept in mind, is that it is very resource-intensive and developers have to be able to fill games with enough interesting content that will keep players engaged.

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Savegames are a Connection into the Realm of the Dead

Manuel Günther

A floppy disc symbolizes "Save game, abandon game, exit game" in the zBase graphics set for the managerial simulation OpenTTD.

Since the point where computer games got access to re-writable storage space, they found ways to retain a game state once reached, ready to be reinstated as commanded. But what is saving digital data like to a computer? Saving is a fundamentally technical writing process which needs no human mind or hand to work. Therefore, we shall take it as "the play between type and its Other, completely removed from subjects," (Kittler 1990, 195) or briefly, as inscription. What a computer writes down for restoration at a later time is thence "not human products but rather expressions of the machines themselves, functions of their very mediatic logic (…)." (Ernst 2011, 242) Since "media in the mode of archaeography make their time-critical nature perceptible and thus become (…) archaeologists of themselves" (translated from Hiller and Höltgen 2019, 10) and computer games as a particular kind of software create virtual worlds in a way no other type of software does, they may help us explore how storing data is a stretch into the Otherworld.

For this *media archaeology* of the saved file we shall compare several games with a focus on the way they present the act of saving and restoring game states as a message. Most games offer a savegame menu as barely enlightening as those in office software: Menu items like "File → Save" or simple icons like a floppy disk which we can click on tell us that saving is access to data storage. Some computer games incorporate saving into the game world so that its population can perceive its symbolization and interact with it. However, heroic game protagonists who die and then continue to commit heroic deeds are something uncanny, so this diegesis of retention frequently features as something otherworldly.

In *Soul Reaver 2*, (Crystal Dynamics 2001) the undead main character Raziel, unable to actually die, can entrust his soul into shrines to preserve his progress. Likewise, the later *Castlevania* games have savepoints in rooms with a statue of Mary or an angel, linking savegames to the godly beyond. In the first in this series with such a "save room," however, not a Christian vampire hunter, but Dracula's son is the protagonist (Konami 1997). His savepoints are therefore coffins, from which he emerges in an animation during loading.

The iconic platformer hero Mario can access saved progress for the first time (Super Mario Wiki 2021b) in *Super Mario World*, (Nintendo EAD 1990) following the

successful completion of specific levels. However, saving at the end of a level that has been beaten before is only possible if it is one of the ghost castles (Super Mario Wiki 2021a).

The horror adventures *Mad Father* (Sen 2012) and *The Witch's House* (Fummy 2012) respectively have crows and a black cat provide savegame access. The former are ghosts, the latter turns out to be a demon.

Like the film of the same name, the point-and-click adventure *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Lucasfilm Games 1989) sends its title character on a quest for the Holy Grail. Since "the cup that holds the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord" promises eternal life, the unique diegesis of unretention holds sway here. A sign at the entrance to the final location announces it to the adventurer: "If thou thinkest life is but a game, be warned: beyond this point, THOU CANST NOT BE SAVED!" Indeed, this is the last place where the savegame menu is still available, ex negativo linking it to mortality.

In the extreme case, the savepoint itself is deadly, and instead of saving the main character's life, it tries to end it. That extreme case is called *I Wanna Be The Guy* (O'Reilly 2007) and is notorious for being ridiculously difficult. Its difficulty levels differ in gameplay only in that fewer and fewer savepoints are available. These are boxes generally labeled "SAVE" which must be shot in order to create a savegame. The only savepoint that exists in all difficulty levels – i.e. the only one at all for an "impossible" run – doesn't react to this shooting like all others do, but turns out to be an enemy that returns the attack. Only when this penultimate battle of the game has been survived can the game be saved there.

Virtual interfaces to data storage as the ones in this smattering of examples are inscriptions themselves. These computer games poke through the separation between virtual world and blunt savegame interface. Heroes and villains, life and death, triumph and failure have been elements in films and literature before there were computers. Yet here we have something only found in computer games accessing re-writable storage media. In these *media archaeographies*, the computer game symbolizes what the underlying technology, the universal turing machine, carries out.

Storing a reached game state into an enduring data carrier is literally a saving act. Powered off, a computer is out of runtime and thus no longer a medium – but these "signs o' the times of digital materiality" (Hiller 2015, 164) remain. No matter how many processing cycles could have happened during this nonexistence, how much time has not passed in the computer: When the machine revives, data from its previous existence is restorable, as if a person could hear voices from the beyond. Computer games produce metaphors as these

examined here because this connection into the realm of the dead is what saving entails: The machine writes down the state of affairs to have it outlast death.

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