Press F to Pay Respects: Moves of Mourning and Alienated Death in RPG Videogames

Heather Maycock | *University of Dundee*

Abstract

In Global North societies ruled by informational-capitalism, death is exiled from public and domestic spheres through necropolitical processes of abstract alienation. The dead are othered; no longer participants in the accumulative-consumptive practices of exchange. As such the dead are reduced to nullity, a process that has necropolitical implications for those whose lives are squandered and go unmarked, thus are relegated to inhumanity. This paper examines the capacities of single-player RPG (role-playing game) video games to foster death-aware grief experiences which encounter death in its fullness of difference. Reflecting on intersections between grief and interpassivity, as theorised by Slavoj Žižek and Robert Pfaller, this paper proposes that grammarised video game moves of and around mourning can be read through this alienation which outsources complex encounters with death and grief onto the game itself through mechanisation. The prioritisation of (hetero)normative "fun" in player experience works to persist in othering the dead, reintegrating them into exchange and so diminishing their death-aware potential. Asking how to counter this impulse towards fun, I offer player moves which deny player mastery as one way to side-step these tendencies, considering how player complicity in game design may offer insight into how affective player experiences may be used in a move towards un-othering the dead This ultimately culminates in analysis of game design in *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017). While *Night in the Woods* has little to offer regarding death or grief moves specifically, moves around the player-character deteriorating wellbeing feature participatory moves which may prove insightful into how games may invite player death-awareness beyond passive delegation.

Keywords

Death, interpassivity, grief, grammarisation, game analysis, fun, complicity

Introduction: Alienated Death

In the modern Global North, death is exiled from public and domestic spheres through necropolitical processes of abstract alienation. The dead are cast out from living communities; no longer worthy equal partners in symbolic exchange (Baudrillard, 1993: 126). This means that the dead cannot participate in the symbolic practices of accumulation and consumption upon which value is indexed and around which modern life is organised. Death cannot be accumulated or consumed, and it is therefore without equivalence; the dead 'thrown out of the groups symbolic circulation' as having nothing to offer to the communities of the living (Baudrillard, 1993: 126; 164). Exile from symbolic exchange affects a similar material or physical removal of the dead: the bodies of the dead are sequestered away from public and domestic spheres that were once inseparable from it. This is reflected in practices which seek to hide or obscure the dead body by sequestering the body away from the home within specialist institutions such as in hospitals or mortuaries; or through disguising techniques through which the body is given the appearance of life (Moisseeff, 2021: 187; Gorer, 1955: 51). The physical removal that sees the dead or dying person out of the home and into the

hospital, the hospice, the clinic, or the mortuary is part of the exile that Baudrillard identifies as a process of othering in which the dead are excluded from narrow and discriminatory definition of humanness and designated as 'radically inferior' (1993: 168). In order to uphold and progress hierarchical notions of culture and humanity there must be exclusion, a capacity to designate and denigrate an "other" (Berardi, 2018: 89). The creation of this category to reject and exile culminates in a relegation of the dead to inhumanity or nullity: no longer worthy partners in exchange, the dead are no longer indexed with value in the symbolic practices around which human life is organised. Death has been exiled to a category of otherness to a point at which it is almost completely off limits for many. It has been placed firmly within the domain of medical and clinical institutions in which the process of dying itself is made into a 'cessation of care': a series of technical events in the realm of medical technoscience: 'dissected, cut into bits by a series of little steps' (Ariès, 1976: 88-89). Such mechanical configurations echo Bichat's remarks that life consists of 'the sum of the functions by which death is resisted' (1827:10). The 'little steps', such as loss of brain activity or turning off life support machinery, make death into a series of fragmented technical mechanics.

I argue that death moves are mediatised through these mechanical modes of perception in digital games. This paper asks how videogames configure representations of death; pointing out that even in its thematization, death in games is rarely invited out beyond this veil of alienation. First, I will describe how the alienation of death serves a wider order of necropolitical governance in which a failure to mark the deaths of the subjugated furthers their dehumanisation. This paper goes on to describe how this alienation pervades in videogames, and how an interpassive mode of engaging with death through technical mechanic limits the potential of games to encounter death on personal or cultural levels. I argue that the potential for these encounters will remain limited so long as prioritisation of (hetero)normative "fun" in game design sensibilities prevails. I close this discussion by asking how games might turn to frustrating denials of figuration as mechanics to eschew typical "fun" notions of mastery in favour of an engagement with death beyond alienation.

Delegating Death

Games which mechanise death through grammarised moves in should be assessed for the cultural implications of the perceptions that they afford players in the wider cultural context of death alienation. As Manovich points out, computational media is structured by and organised around particular *ways of seeing* and specific forms of knowledge (2001: 26; 72) meaning that the grammarisation of death in games – how it is formalised through game structures, mechanics, and moves – is subject to the design objectives of game makers, and so death moves and procedures should be read in the context of cultural conditions. How players to play encounter death in play experience is an important consideration in a wider global context that instruments death as political project and squanders life overtly and covertly as a necropolitical tool of governance. Butler (2004) points to the failure to mark the lives and deaths of those at stake as further dehumanising populations, reducing their lives to bare life and increasing the acceptability of their deaths (34-35). Categorised by Agamben as "bare life" (1998: 8) and by Mbembe as "living dead", (2019: 67; 92), the deaths of these subjugated populations going unmarked and therefore being deprived of meaning both diminishes the humanity of those at stake and removes the impetus to prevent further suffering. The prolonged alienation that can be rehearsed in grammarised gameplay performance resonates with the real world necropolitical horizon and the real suffering of people and populations.

Interpassivity concerns the delegation of enjoyment or consumption through the other. Examples include a person who prints or photocopies texts rather than reading them, or canned laughter on television through which the TV programme reacts to itself (Pfaller, 2017: 1; Žižek, 1997: 149). While interactive and participatory artworks require an element of audience intervention to complete the work, interpassive media not only completes itself but *observes itself,* 'relieving the observers of this

task (or pleasure)' (Pfaller, 2017: 19). In their discussions of religious rituals, Pfaller (2017: 61) and Žižek (1997: 142) both interpret the ritual (such as the use of a Tibetan prayer wheel) as able to signify spiritual allegiance in place of the worshipper. I contend that like rituals, grammarisation risks diminishing the capacity of gameplay from to recognise and encounter death beyond alienation. While players interact with computer/console hardware in the execution of moves, they can retain distance as the game takes on reflective and affectively complex aspects of, in the case of the games analysed in this paper, death, grief and mourning. This is exemplified, perhaps most notoriously after its subsequent virality as a meme, in the mechanical mourning of *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (Sledgehammer Games 2014). *Advanced Warfare* has been memeified for its approach to gameplay in which the player-character, a solider in a fictional war taking place in a speculative not-too-distant future, attends a funeral for Private Will Irons, a fellow soldier and comrade of the player-character, and is instructed to push a button on their keyboard or controller to 'pay respects' (figure 1).

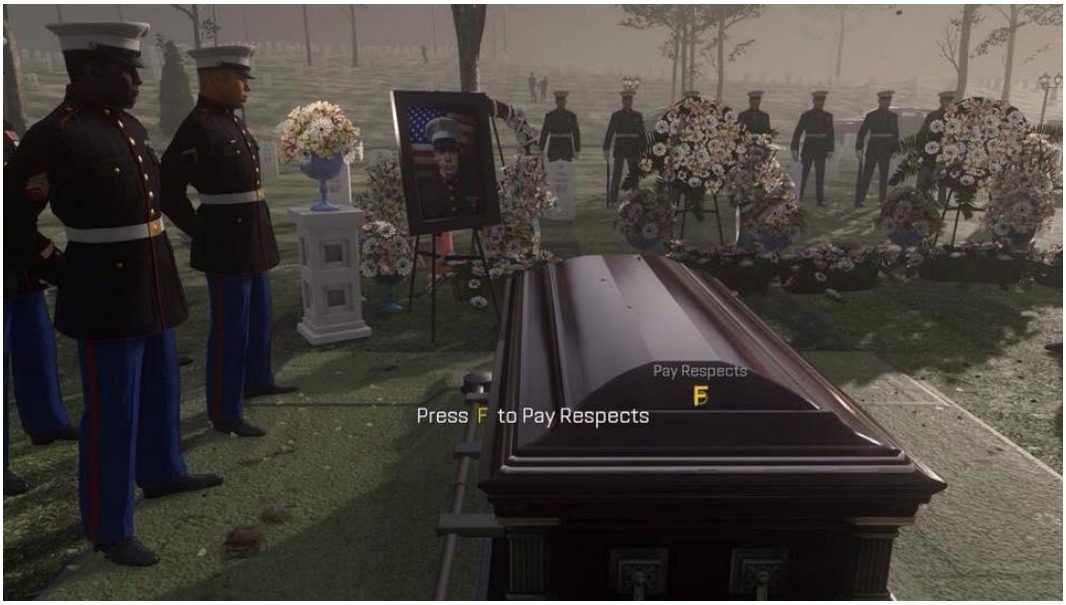

Figure 1: Players are constructed to push a button on their games console to participate in a funeral during one gameplay sequence in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*.

I posit that the humour found in this moment of play comes from the strange disconnect between the intended seriousness of the scene the triviality of the button pushing, after which the player will notified 'Objective Completed', rewarding them with an empty gesture towards achievement for their brief engagement with the deadliness of war. As a solider, Irons' death and the achievement won speaks to the militaristic tendencies of necropolitical projects in which lives lost in military conflict are reconstituted as exchange: expenditure that is consumed as progress for necropolitical machinery (see Mbembe, 2019: 3-4). In *Advanced Warfare*, Irons' death is reintegrated into exchange by the completion of game objectives through which gamic goals can emerge. Through the lens of mechropolitics, the achievement earned in *Advanced Warfare* can be read as a reconstitution of death which refuses an encounter outside of the realm of exchange, thus instrumentalising it as an achievement-oriented mechanic.

Important to Pfaller's analysis is intention as a key element of the interpassive act: 'The one who ritually causes this act is the one for whom the medium reads, observes, laughs, eats, and so on' (2017: 57). The performance of staging the act of consumption or enjoyment is necessary for the subject to experience the affective qualities of delegation. In *Advanced Warfare* the invitation for interaction through a single button push may theoretically allow players to believe that they are participating in mourning because they have staged and thus can own the act. Yet, death remains alienated, and mourning becomes a technical mechanic. These moves alienate death and reduce it to a technical mechanic even while death is thematised. Applying interpassivity to game studies, Fizek points out that interpassive moments allow the player 'momentary escape from the

responsibility of active play, and as a result, a disidentification with the player's primary role as an active agent' (2018: 142). This escape is certainly visible in *Advanced Warfare* as the uncomplicated button push could not be much further from the complexities associated with attending a funeral service for a soldier killed in and consumed by the same military conflict that you, as the player-character, continue to participate in. Likewise, in *GRIS* (Nomada Studio, 2018), players are relieved from their role not as an active gameplayer, but as an active *interpreter*. A 2-D puzzle-platformer which emphasises exploration of the game environment over technical expertise, *GRIS* follows an unnamed player-character through the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) as represented in player moves. As the game progresses the player-character accumulates skills based on the stages. For example, during the 'anger' stage she develops the ability to stomp in such a way that is destructive to her surroundings. By asking the player to respond to the game with actions appropriate to the five stages, *GRIS* allows the player to delegate any complex ideas around death and grief onto the game which, in turn, configures death onto a singular linear model. This can be read as an interpassive mode of engaging with themes around death. Discussing interpassivity, Žižek gives the example of canned laughter which he argues serves the purpose of allowing an interpassive viewer to believe that it was them who had the reaction: 'you think you enjoyed the show, but the Other did it for you. The gesture of criticism is that, no, it was not you who laughed, it was the Other (the TV set) who did it' (1997: 149). The laughter relieves the watcher of their role as someone who reacts to and interprets the television programme, this is delegated onto the programme, which reacts to itself. *GRIS* follows this but rather than interpreting humour, *GRIS* interprets its own themes of grief, meaning that the player can interact with grief, but the interpretive task of death-awareness is delegated to game mechanics, limiting the game's re-familiarising potential.

Just for Fun?

Having addressed the interpassive tendencies of games that mechanise grief through staged interaction with game interface or device hardware, I progress this discussion by considering normative design impulses around fun. As Ruberg points out, an emphasis on fun structures game design around (hetero)normative sensibilities around affect (2015: 115). A 'fun first' design principle that promises a "good time" to players above all limits the death-aware potential of games. Moreover, an emphasis on fun goes further than videogames: death as an end to fun sees death not as an alternative form of being but as a lesser form of life from which opportunities for fun and happiness are absent (Lushetich, 2018: 1; Nagle, 1991: 1-10). In achievement-oriented cultures, like those of the capitalist Global-North, death and failure are intimately intertwined (see Berardi, 2015; Han, 2015), and so perhaps a failure to be fun could allow games to a closer look at death than they would otherwise be able. Intervening from a queer game studies perspective, Ruberg argues that the requirement for fun means that videogames are limited in the experiences that they can offer and that moving beyond or rejecting fun is a queer and disruptive practice that 'opens up whole new genres of possibilities' that resist normative prioritisation of certain states of being (2015: 122). If gameplay is designed to be "fun" and death is "not fun" then it becomes clearer how awkward, clunky engagements with death like that of the funeral scene in *Advanced Warfare* come to be; a moment of button pushing as play inserted as an appeal to fun during a point in the narrative anxiously presented as not fun.

Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus, 2020) is a game in which death is reintegrated into exchange for the purpose of fun. The player-character, Stella, takes over from the Charon, the Greek mythologic character who ferries souls to the underworld. Stella is tasked with picking up characters on her boat, helping these characters finish business they had in life, and then, once the character is at peace, taking them to the Everdoor where they will pass on to death as peaceful non-existence. The game text is interested in death related themes and as Stella, players are able to stage an engagement with these themes, configuring them into their experiences and understanding of death. However, much of *Spiritfarer*'s actual gameplay consists of expanding Stella's boat – purchasing additions like

an on-board metal forge and then cultivating these additions into a currency-making project so that more additions can be bought to make even more money. Figures 2 and 3 exemplify how Stella's boat may look at the start of the game compared to the end. When Stella brings her passengers to the Everdoor they leave her a Spirt Flower, another form of currency that unlocks essential add-ons for game progression, and so meditative death moments are integrated into systems of material progression and exchange. A prevailing prioritisation of fun means that death in *Spiritfarer* is wrapped up in a capitalist system of exchange, accumulation, and consumption. Ferrying the dead is simply another task in the pursuit of lively fun in which Stella must have the biggest and most efficient boat on which the player can play the game to its fullest fun potential. Only with the big boat can the player explore the entire gameworld, play all the minigames, and, ultimately, complete (or "beat") the game.

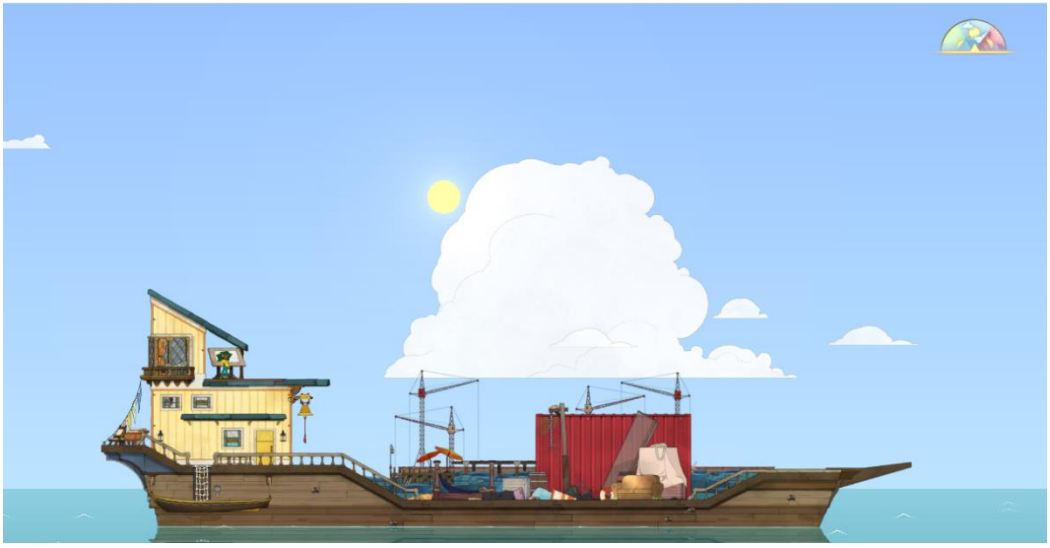

Figure 2: Stella's boat at the beginning of *Spiritfarer* is small and bare.

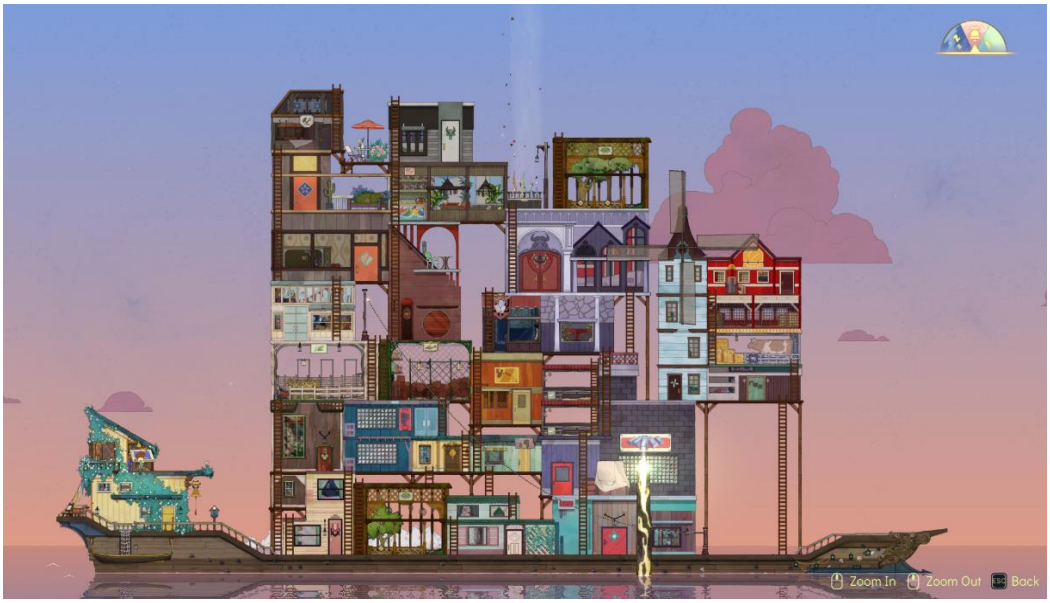

Figure 3: Stella's boat at the end of *Spiritfarer* has seen various upgrades which are made available to the player as rewards for ferrying deceased souls to the afterlife.

Approaching Death-Awareness in Games

I use death-awareness to mean a conscious and intentional engagement with death beyond abstraction and death-aware games to refer to games that, through game moves, introduce the player to a new field of death-aware possibilities. Death-aware games may allow play that constitutes what Schwartz terms an 'encounter' with death which 'acknowledges alterity without assimilating it' (2015: 103). These encounters present one strategy to facilitate re-familiarisation with death and dying on individual and cultural levels in ways that accept death in its 'fullness of difference' (Schwartz, 2015: 104). Any death-aware games and all acts of death-aware play are, I contend, acts of disidentification from the current necropolitical horizon which can, even in small ways, side-step the dominant culture. Death-aware play and its allowances for disidentification mean that it can be a form of resistance that functions without necessitating great upheaval or overthrowing of existing conditions (see Lushetich, 2022). Muños explains the potency of disidentification as a mode of dealing with dominant ideology that works on and against it to expose it as sustained by inequalities of power (1999: 62). Re-familiarising death has the potential to disrupt normative accounts that presently limit access to it. Death-aware games could contribute to resistive practices and inform suggestions as to how death procedures could be re-familiarising in ways that encourage an approach to mortality which anticipates, responds to, and communes with death.

Participatory requirements in gameplay, that is, the ways in which games function with the actions and inputs of a player, position games as persuasive experience-objects which foster player engagement through interaction with game mechanics. While I have argued about that interactional mechanisms are part of interpassive gameplay in which the player stages their engagement with death but delegates its more complex aspects onto the game itself, I maintain that it is possible for these mechanics to spur reflection. This is the basis on which Bogost forms the category of 'educational games', games which use procedural rhetorics to 'spur consideration about the aspects of the world they represent' (2007: 264). The fungible representations that games can offer of abstract processes can reveal the frameworks of rhetoric by simulating them as material and embodied processes in play. Sicart appeals to the player as leader of the experience in a (limited) space of possibility with various conveyed meanings, calling game design 'architecture for the possible lives of players' (2013: 15). Game design and its affordances ultimately frame and articulate player performance, but scholars also recognise that game design becomes a scaffold for an ultimately player-owned experience through affordances for performative multiplicities (see Gee, 2006; Hergenrader, 2016; Robson and Meskin, 2016). The capacity of gameplay to offer personal experiences is cited as a component in complicity; the notion that players are opened to an emotional heightening in response to in game events when their actions as player are enlisted in representing the event in question. For example, the amputation of a character's limb in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) is made more visceral when the player is in control of the movement of the saw (Smethurst and Craps, 2015: 285). Participatory engagement with the game allows players to become a moving part in its processes through what Aarseth identifies as ergodic actions to imply 'non-trivial efforts of … individuals and mechanisms' (1997: 94). This relationship between player and game allows for games to establish re-familiarising moves that could help players to re-familiarise death through ergodic action. In conducting these non-trivial moves there is, borrowing a term from Higgins' description of participatory Fluxus art, an 'interpenetration of consciousness' with game mechanisms (2002: 31).

In considering how games may manage to engage with death in moves that reach towards death-aware refamiliarization, I propose *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) as a game that may prove insightful into how games could invite player death-awareness beyond passive delegation. *Night in the Woods* follows player-character Mae, a young adult depicted as an anthropomorphic cat, who has dropped out of college and returns to her hometown where she tries to rekindle old friendships. Throughout the game, Mae struggles with what is suggested to be a dissociative disorder, and this sees her struggle to relate to her loved ones (also depicted as animals). *Night in the Woods* has little

to offer in terms of meaningful death moves, but nonetheless I argue that gameplay which disrupts the player and player-character relationship to convey Mae's deteriorating wellbeing offers a compelling player experience. Johnson conceptualises gameplay moments such as these as frustrating denials of figuration – the link between player intention and character performance that 'feels immersive and approaches a sense of transparency' (2015: 597). This disrupts the sense of agency that games frequently appear to strive to create through figuration. One gameplay moment that consists of selecting dialogue options in order to participate in a four-way conversation does not present an opportunity to master discernment or social skills, but only has one conclusion: to leave another party in the conversation, Mae's estranged friend Bea, embarrassed and upset by revealing personal details about her life. Bea's distress is obvious throughout and the players can do nothing to stop the inevitable fallout, yet they are continually asked to provide input to progress the game. This conversation and the interactive mechanisms that require players to participate in it, force players to confront how Mae's difficulties around boundaries lead to neglected interpersonal relationships and an inability to empathise with friends. Bogost identifies such confrontations with frustration as valuable because they are well suited to elicit empathy in narratives concerning feebleness and weakness – ones in which domination is less achievable or even unachievable (2011: 18-24). By moving beyond typical "fun" design priorities for player power over the game system, rules, or environment, player moves in *Night in the Woods* are far more effective in fostering an understanding of Mae's inability to relate to her peers. I propose that this move may also offer death-aware game design insight into the opportunities that look past fun or player power as a guiding design principle. Games that insist on offering players a fun experience with failures as mere stepping stones to eventual epiphany are unlikely to be death-aware because they often take on the complex task of interpreting death, leaving players only with the execution of technical mechanics.

Conclusion: Inviting Death to Play

Grammarised death moves in RPG videogames may present insightful suggestions as to how death procedures could be configured in ways that re-familiarise death and encourage death-aware encounters. However, as this discussion has sought to outline, this grammarisation, with an insistence of fun and which ignores normative fun's cultural specificity, also risks delegating death-awareness away from the player. This leaves the deaths represented hollow of meaning and, in the pursuit of fun, any possibility of catharsis or deepened understanding of death as a state of being otherwise is denied. Unless it is reintegrated into exchange, death continues to be exiled as having nothing to offer to communities of the living. By turning death into a mechanic that can be exchanged, accumulated, or consumed videogames cannot realise its ultimate otherness, and as such, the games assessed in this paper invite death-interactivity but not death-awareness. Considering how the living may relate to the dead, Schwartz writes, 'The dead are very much departed; we cannot see or touch them in the same ways we once did. This fact in itself is sorrowful and baffling, but without the space to encounter it as real, to ritually prepare for it, we cannot then find other ways to see and touch, other kinds of commune-ication with the dead' (2015: 104). Searching for these modes of commune-ication can be in itself a mode of resistance that marks death beyond the order of exchange. The disruptive potential of play should not be ignored in these efforts. Moving beyond fun may allow for videogames to engage with death in ways that does not delegate its affectively complex aspects onto the game itself. These games could be seized upon as avenues into new modes of thinking, seeing, and being which can be embodied and rehearsed through play.

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