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Issue 09 (2018)

articles

Introduction to a Special Issue on Video Gaming and Death

by John W. Borchert, 1

Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games

by Frank G. Bosman, 12

No Sympathy for Devils: What Christian Video Games Can Teach Us About Violence in Family-Friendly Entertainment

by Vincent Gonzalez, 53

Perilous and Peril-Less Gaming: Representations of Death with Nintendo's Wolf Link Amiibo

by Rex Barnes, 107

"You Shouldn't Have Done That": "Ben Drowned" and the Uncanny Horror of the Haunted Cartridge

by John Sanders, 135

Win to Exit: Perma-Death and Resurrection in Sword Art Online and Log Horizon

by David McConeghy, 170

Death, Fabulation, and Virtual Reality Gaming

by Jordan Brady Loewen, 202

Graveyard Keeper. A Review

Kathrin Trattner

Abstract

Review of the game *Graveyard Keeper*.

Keywords: *Graveyard Keeper*, indie gaming, management simulation, death, postmortality, capitalism, gameenvironments

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There is a strange satisfaction of hidden bourgeois desires in playing management simulation games. The joy of cleaning up a rundown farm, tile-by-tile, producing and selling goods, constructing new buildings and machines to optimize workflow, improving one's skills and developing new and better technologies – these pursuits are all part of progress – which, in the end, primarily revolves around finding ways to earn money more efficiently. On 15 August 2018, indie game publisher Tinybuild released *Graveyard Keeper* (2018), a management simulation/RPG-crossover, advertised as “the most inaccurate medieval cemetery management sim of the year” (Lazy Bear Games 2018). What the gaming press soon declared to be a dark-humored *Stardew Valley* (2016) with corpses (Mc 2018), however, turned out to be infinitely more complex than its cheerful counterpart was. While Russian-based indie developers Lazy Bear clearly did build upon the success of farming simulator RPGs like *Stardew Valley*, *Graveyard Keeper* transcends genre boundaries even further, expanding the RPG- and story-driven elements, on the one hand, and incorporating complex tech-tree systems more similar to those found in 4X strategy games, on the other. As Jeff Ramos of *Polygon* magazine points out, another peculiarity about the game is that, “the extensive to-do list is tied directly to different storylines” (Ramos

2018). The relative centrality of the story with the prospect of an end point is arguably rare within this type of genre-crossover.



Figure 1. The church and the graveyard.

Graveyard Keeper's story starts out in the present. In a comic-like, gloomy cut-scene, the player's avatar is hit by a car, and then finds himself in a dark and foggy empty space, where a mysterious figure with a black hat tells him that he is now a graveyard keeper. The main objective of the game is clear at this point, namely, to find one's way back home. Whether that means back to the world of the living, back to the future, or back to another dimension remains unclear. After this short intro, the confused protagonist wakes up in a creepy medieval world where he is instructed by Gerry, a talking skull, who not only suffers from memory loss, but also appears to have a drinking problem. One of the player's main responsibilities, as the title of the game suggests, is to tend to the local graveyard. At first, this mostly means cleaning it up and fixing broken gravestones and fences. However, these are not the only task the player is assigned. The surprisingly large and dynamic game world is inhabited by a

variety of NPCs that have quests for the player, such as the inquisitor, who would like flyers and a buffet tent for the local witch burnings, the bishop, who instructs the player to upgrade the church to make it more lucrative, and a ghost, who requests that the protagonist “evict” his neighbor from the graveyard, that is, exhume the body and toss it in the river.

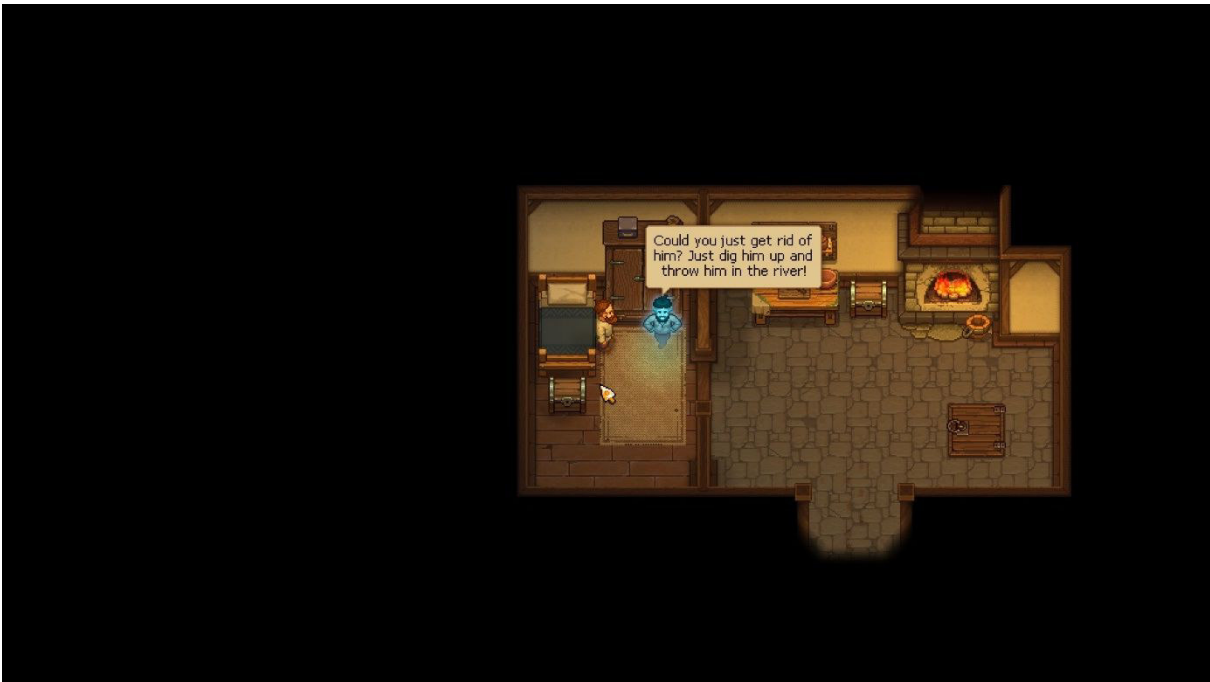


Figure 2. Yorick, the ghost, is not fond of his neighbor.

Graveyard Keeper basically comprises the entire range of stereotypical medieval stock characters, painted in an exaggeratedly dark-humored manner. The deliberate historical inaccuracies of this portrayal – emphasized by the game's designers as part of their advertising strategy – are part of the game's humor. In general, the historical setting and the stereotypical connotations that come with it are vital to the game on various levels, despite the deliberate inaccuracies: The popular associations of medieval times with both the omnipresence of death and the absolute power of the church provide the cornerstones that define the world of *Graveyard Keeper*. The ways in which religion structures and governs every aspect of life is reflected in the way it is

implemented in the game's rule system. For instance, there is a special theology tech-tree that allows the player to craft new sermons, unlock new improvements for the church, such as benches or confessionals, and thereby improve its quality, which is important for the player's progress through the story. While holding successful sermons, the player receives Faith points, which are necessary to do research on certain objects and to craft new and more effective sermons, for example.



Figure 3. The bishop explains the relevance of Faith Points.

One area of analysis deserving of particular attention is the multilayered representation of death and postmortality in *Graveyard Keeper*. I suggest two categories into which these portrayals can be distinguished: there are the physical, body-centered aspects of death, on the one hand, and the metaphysical portrayals of (post-)mortality, on the other. The morgue is one of the places where the player is often confronted with very physical aspects of death and impermanence. Under the watchful eyes of Gerry the skull, the player must perform autopsies on the bodies delivered to the morgue, before burying them in the graveyard. Time is of the



Figure 5. Zombies can be created at the resurrection table.

Overall, *Graveyard Keeper* is an exceptional genre crossover. The complexity of its rule system and the logic of the detailed virtual world behind it make the game an interesting and fruitful object of analysis, particularly with regard to its multilayered portrayal of death and postmortality. While this complexity opens up research questions from various angles, it also has an obvious impact on the gaming experience. Players will realize that it is virtually impossible to play *Graveyard Keeper* without repeatedly consulting its extensive Wiki (Curse, Inc. 2018) early on in the game. The complex causalities involved in producing goods, building things, developing technologies, and thereby furthering the narrative, often do not appear obvious or even logical to the player, and were therefore a frequently mentioned point of criticism in the gaming press. Reviews with titles like “*Graveyard Keeper* Feels Like A Job” (Alexandra 2018) were the rule rather than an exception. And despite all of my admiration for the game’s highly specific details and often-trenchant dark humor, that statement does ring true to a certain point.

