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Untitled. Photographer: Pawel Kadysz (<https://stocksnap.io/photo/OZ4IBMDS8E>).

Special Issue

# Video Gaming and Death

edited by

John W. Borchert

## Issue 09 (2018)

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# Introduction To A Special Issue On Video Gaming And Death

John W. Borchert

## Abstract:

A critical abstract of the special issue of *gamevironments* focused on religion, video gaming and death.

**Keywords:** religion, gaming, death, ritual, embodiment, play, virtual reality, materiality, gameenvironments

**To cite this article:** Borchert, J.W., 2018. Introduction to a Special Issue on Video Gaming and Death. *gamevironments* 9, 1-11. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Spawn, Die, Respawn, Repeat: this is the life cycle of a game body. Death has been an imminent threat to gamers since the earliest cabinet arcade games, lurking at game's edges and directing negotiations of narrative and play. Health bars, 1Ups, invincibility, potions, spells, shields, countdowns, and armor all defer imminent death. No death-runs, speed-runs, cheats and god-modes all deny it. *You Died, Dead and Wasted* textualize death as event, and respawns respond. Video games demand repeated death and demand repeated failure. Video games in one way are about the constant presence of death, as defining the boundaries of play. After death, games ask players to try again – video games then, in another way, are about overcoming death. Games allow human beings to navigate and negotiate death and dying as and at play by bringing death close. So, what can video games tell us about death?

Any approach to this question entangles three fields – death studies, games studies, and religious studies. Each is interdisciplinary, each expanding their territory along with the digital increasingly embedded in the quotidian. Death studies invests in materiality, subjectivity, and interrelations between the living and the dead to pose

questions about the limits of human being through the ritualizations, narratives, and practices of death and dying (for emerging work in death studies see Cann 2014, Davies 2017, Garces-Foley 2005, Hockey et al. 2010, Harris 2008, Moreman and Lewis 2014, Sidaway 2016). Game studies can locate such analysis. Emerging alongside new media studies, game studies examines both the particularities of digital mediations of games and larger implications for play and gaming, by understanding the systemic, and playful possibilities for digital games to change modes of thought and relation (for foundational and emergent game studies see Bogost 2007, Galloway 2006, Isbister 2016, Jorgensen and Karlsen 2018, Keogh 2018, Tekinbaş and Zimmerman 2006, Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004). The final landmark for this special issue within the larger field of religious studies is the emergent study of religion and video gaming. Within broader folds of a turn to religion and new media, the explicit turn to video games broadly breaks into four categories: religion in gaming, religion as gaming, gaming as religion and gaming in religion (cf. Wagner in Campbell et al. 2016). These approaches hold true in the following issue, with a particular emphasis on the gaming as religion, or religion being *at play*, with death in games creating questions and problems around valuations of death, the place of death in relation to the body, mediations and remediations of death, the particularities of digital media for understanding death, interacting with and through death, and death as a fundamentally human predicament.

Investments in these questions represent the growing field of religion and video-gaming scholarship stewarded by this journal. The hope in curating this collection was to forward work with a shared goal – not solely to understand the religious in relation to video gaming, but to demonstrate how the study of video-gaming and religion can ground itself in a common thematic and further itself through this investment. In other words, the aim of this issue is not only exploratory, but

foundational – to place keystones for further work. Research articles explore killing, dying, the afterlife, resurrections, theologies and narratives of dying, video game death in popular culture, embodying digital death and haunted media. A scholarly interview sheds light on Buddhism, play, and death, and a gamer report narrates illness, dying, and hope. All aim to ground the study of religion and video gaming in once place – death.

This issue engages sociological, anthropological, philosophical, theological, and narratological approaches to religion, death, and video gaming – hallmarks of an interdisciplinary religious studies. Beyond this inherent interdisciplinarity is the particular *gamevironments* approach (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014) developed through this eponymous journal. Gameenvironments theorizes games as playing out through, in, and as a part of broader material and social worlds. Working through a gameenvironments methodology means accounting not only for game content and game actors but those encountering game content and game actors, and the game itself as a material and cultural object. The gameenvironmental model foregrounds games as a nexus for understanding religious and social forces (Radde-Antweiler 2018). By understanding games beyond the screen and beyond the narrative, gameenvironmental thinking reveals games as spaces where death is contested, an object of play, and subject to playfulness. Death becomes a limit – tested and exceeded in ways only possible through the ludic and liminal spaces of play. The contingent relationship between death, games, and religion is evident too in more explicitly religious narratives of death and in the ways *religion* as a concept is depicted, narrativized, or occluded.

Assembling this issue, I sought pieces demonstrating these divergent ways games reveal death. My aim is to not only forward new scholarship on religion and video-

gaming but offer pieces that construct firm theoretical ground with the hopes of maintaining sustained conversations around shared sets of concerns, with commonly held understandings and consistent theoretical models. Many of these pieces evidence not only phenomena of death in games, but also forward theoretical or methodological models for understanding relations between video gaming and death, and each piece offers the hope of sustaining and generative work.

Frank Bosman offers a typology of narratological deaths in gaming, along with a survey of deaths within games and their consequences for the game, how it is played, and for death more broadly as a phenomena of games. His typological model offers a new vocabulary and theoretical framework for shared conversations around death and gaming. Bosman argues for three over-arching narratological game deaths – the first taking the avatars’ death as an in-game event, the second circumnavigates avatar death, and the third occludes this death altogether. This typological work, and the conceptual charting and level of articulation that Bosman brings to it, can be reference and used in further discussions of death and video gaming, with Bosman’s typology becoming the kind of reference point needed in this expanding field of study.

Vincent Gonzalez offers a similar survey approach, turning his lens to perceptions of violence and non-violence and how they form between concepts of the enemy and the gamer. Using a vast archive of explicitly Christian games, Gonzalez argues that the family-friendly or non-violent game takes shape in direct relation to formations of the human or non-human enemy. Gonzalez demonstrates the impact of a shared quantitative and qualitative analysis of video games through this analysis of Christian games and violence, citing who can and cannot be killed, what deaths matter and what do not.



Rex Barnes examines material and narrative interactions between a figurine and digital game, arguing that divisions between game and non-game worlds are porous, and the figure as ritualized object navigates these channels. These ritualizations and their consequences are all tangled up and negotiated through what Barnes argues is the unique approach to death offered by this game prosthetic, this peripheral. Barnes effectively demonstrates the multivalent approach endorsed by the journal, giving us three ways to read his analysis of gaming and death: through game studies, ritual theory, and narratology. As he goes on to demonstrate, like the in/out game division, these approaches too are not so divided.

John Sanders approaches a case of death and haunting in the material and fan cultures of gaming. Sanders argues that haunted media-objects reveal human fears of uncanny media forms and their incorporeality. Picking up the narrative of a haunted game cartridge, this essay spans psychoanalysis and new media studies, drawing on the strength of Sanders narratological analysis to depict a compelling world of online storytelling, hauntings, and their implications for how we conceptualize the power media objects have to narrate divisions between life and death, embodiment and disembodiment.

David McConeghy reflects on depictions of gaming death in popular culture and what they signal about conceptual relations between religion and secularism. Turning to two anime television shows, McConeghy argues that virtual/digital aesthetics have largely replaced explicitly religious Japanese motifs for reflection on death and dying. This folds into a broader conversation regarding the currency of terms like 'religious' and 'secular' in not only Japanese contexts, but in the study of religion, pop culture, and gaming. McConeghy extends the gameenvironmental model by picking up

representations of video-game death in popular culture, offering some critical and cultural distance.

Jordan Brady Loewen, in focusing on virtual reality and affect, points to new technologies as reformatting relationships between bodies, play, and death. Adapting philosophies of the virtual to scientific understandings of virtual realities and embodiments, Loewen argues that it is the ability to trigger out-of-body-experiences specifically that can augment how we understand death in video games. Changing perceptions of the body, he goes on to say, will have yet unknown consequences for moral and political receptions and reformations of the body in relation to things like religion. Death and dying here serve as a hinge for understanding the particularities of embodiment in the face of new technologies, and Loewen’s theoretical work creates concepts for thinking on the edge of new mediations.

Joshua Wise offers an eschatological take on of death and games. Presenting Christian theological formations of body continuity and identity across the gap of death, Wise then applies these theories to game bodies and their own continuity across in game death and between game sessions. Wise argues that game-bodies and their continuation across this gap of death is largely tied to human identity, human being, and human continuity. Wise, through his theological work, demonstrates how games offer places not only to think beyond perceived boundaries of what it is to be human, but offer new opportunities to understand how we think of ourselves as such.

Kathrin Trattner offers a critical review of a simulation game based around managing a graveyard, pointing to its indulgence in bourgeois desires of the commodification of death, where medieval motifs and dark humor cloak another instance of managing







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