Gaming Addiction

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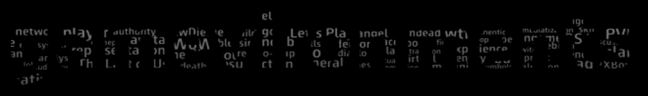

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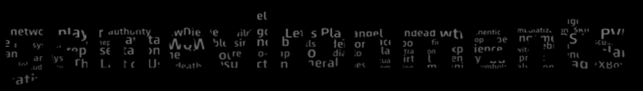

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Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games

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Abstract
Ludologically, the death of the game's protagonist (also known as *player's death* of *avatar death*) is one of the most prominent feedback systems of almost all digital games. It communicates to the player his or her (in)ability to achieve the positive goals that the game has set. While some games penalize failure by removing points, lowering character levels, and/or stripping gear away from the avatar, in-game death is usually no more than a temporal sign of failure, punished by a minor setback. Intrinsically, death seems to have little or no meaning. Some games, like *Bioshock* (2007), *Prince of Persia* (2008), *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) and *The Talos Principle* (2014), and game series like the *Assassin's Creed* (2007-2017) and *Borderlands* (2009-2014), try to provide a narratologically credible embedding for the death of the avatar within the logic of their fictional world and lore (death narrative), but the majority of games simply refrain from any such embedding. In this article, I will propose a typology of narratological embeddings of player's death in digital games. The first type takes the concept of in-game death seriously: the player's avatar dies, but the continuity of play is narratologically guaranteed by work-arounds like cloning or copying of the avatar, or otherwise finding a suitable stand-in for the original avatar. The second type, however, circumvents the actual death of the avatar/player by introducing other work-arounds like simulation or external help. The third type does not feature any explicit narratological embedding at all, independent of the player's progress being saved or not (permadeath). Nonetheless, the death of the avatar is not without implicit narratological meaning within the context of this type of game.
Keywords: Ludology-narratology, player's death, permadeath, gamevironments

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> "Hyperion hopes your death was a learning experience, but wouldn't mind if you made the same mistake just a few more times just to be sure. Hyperion suggests that you do not think about the fact that this is only a digital reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you respawned. Do NOT think about this! Thanks for using this Hyperion New-U station! Please die again!" (*Borderlands*)

The quotation above is a compilation of three phrases uttered by the artificial intelligence of one of the many New-U Stations that are scattered across the alien world of Pandora. Every time the player dies, he/she is respawned at the nearest *NUS* at the cost of 7% of their avatar's money. When the player has $ 7 left or less, the price is waived. The stations' A.I. never tire of explaining what actually happens to the player's avatar – he/she is digitally copied/cloned – and at the same time mock the triviality of in-game death, as is apparent from the above compilation of quotes. The *Borderlands* series is only one of many examples of player's death (also known as the avatar's death) in modern-day digital games. However, the relatively rare quality of this particular game lies not in the player's death itself (which is almost unavoidable in modern digital games), but in the efforts the game puts into delivering a believable, lore-fitting, and more or less logical narratological embedding for this game mechanism (a quality known as skeuomorphism elsewhere in gaming).

Most games do not incorporate the ludological concept of player's death into the larger narratological framework of the game. But when games do feature such a death narrative, they usually do this quite imaginatively and creatively. The *Assassin's Creed* series, for example, uses the concept of in-game simulation to explain the infinite numbers of retries available to the player. The *Borderline* series suggests that a genetically identical clone is created every time the original avatar is killed. *Prince of Persia* introduces a non-playable character who comes to the rescue when the player proves unable to cope with the game mechanics. Many other examples could be

given.

In this article, I want to answer the following question: what different kind of death narratives are used in modern video games? To answer that question, I want to propose a typology of narratological embeddings of the player's death in digital games (section 3). I will differentiate between three main types of death narratives, which are divided in two or three subtypes: (1) embeddings in which death is narratologically present (but is solved by cloning/copying the avatar, introducing a replacement from another reality/dimension, or playing the next available avatar); (2) embeddings in which death is narratologically circumvented (either through the idea of simulation or external help); and (3) games without an explicit narratological embedding. All subtypes, seven in total, will be illustrated by one (or more) games. The selection of games is based on my own – extensive – experience as a video game player and researcher.

I will start, however, with a short discussion of the notion of player's death from a ludological point of view (section 1), with special attention to the identification between the player and the player's avatar. Then I will present a short history of video games with particular regard to the concept and (ludological) consequences of the death of the player (section 2). I will conclude the article with some final thoughts and philosophical repercussions (section 4).

A few words on methodology. In this article, I will consider games to be "digital (interactive), playable (narrative) texts" (Bosman 2016a, 30). As a text, a video game can be an object of interpretation. As a narrative, it can be conceived as communicating meaning. As a game, it is playable. And as a digital medium, it is interactive. Treating video games as playable texts and using a gamer-immanent

approach (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015, Bosman 2016a) in this article, I will use close reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video games themselves, as well as secondary sources, i.e. material provided by critics and scholars discussing the same game. Close reading of the video games and game series is performed by playing the games, with special attention to the death narratives of these games. I used the PC version of the games for this article. Any emotional and/or psychological effects of the narratological embeddings of the player's death in these games are *not* considered in this article.

The broader context of this research into death narratives in video games is the interrelationship between death and religion, especially in its monotheistic, Western forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Paul Tillich claimed that "the anxiety of fate and death is the most basic, most universal, and inescapable" one (1952, 40). More sharply, the anthropologist Malinowski formulated that "[d]eath, which of all human events is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man's calculations, is perhaps the main source of religious belief" (1965, 71).

Besides that death, or rather the overcoming of death, could be regarded as (institutionalized) religions' unique selling point, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, death is also connected to the concept of sin (Hood et al. 2009, 184-185). Traditionally, Romans 5:12 is quoted as Scriptural basis for the concept of original sin: "Therefore, just as through one-man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned". Forgiveness of sins, retribution, salvation, justification, judgement and eternal life: all these important religious and theological notions are inescapable intertwined with the concept of death. Investigating the numerous narratological ways in which the concept of player's death is executed in modern video games, sheds more light on the broader

cultural impact of death, the different way people are coping with its inevitability, and its religious connotations.

"You died, try again." The Concept of *Player's Death*

Ludologically, the player's death is one of the most prominent feedback systems of almost all digital games. It communicates to the player his or her (in)ability to achieve the positive goals that the game has set (Aarseth 1997). While some games penalize failure by removing points, lowering character levels, and/or stripping away gear from the avatar, in-game death is usually no more than a temporal sign of failure, punished by a minor set-back. Intrinsically, the death seems to have little or no meaning. "In-game death is functional in games, rather than sublime," as Krzywinska (2015, 34) has formulated, "it is simply another feedback mechanism" (ibid.).

Jesper Juul has differentiated between the states of apora and epiphany. The state of apora is when the player is confronted with an in-game obstacle, either a puzzle, a parcours or one or more NPCs, it "must be overcome by some unknown combination of actions" (Juul 1999, 56). When the player succeeds in overcoming the obstacle, the state is changed to epiphany, "a sudden, often unexpected solution to the impasse of the event space" (ibid.). Player's death is a device that stimulates the transition between apora and epiphany in the player to allow him or her to progress in the game.

The choice of framing failure in terms of death and dying could be considered a rather dark design choice, as Flynn-Jones (2015, 50) has observed. In real life, death is defined by the fact that it robs the human being of precisely the possibility to learn anything at all. Death as a punishment for failure itself reminds us more of pre-

modern times and customs, or as an element in modern discussions on the moral acceptability or social desirability of capital punishment, that is, legal execution.

Player's death, as a concept, is also known as avatar's death. The phrase *avatar's death* is strictly speaking more accurate: it is not the player who drops dead behind his console or PC screen, but the player's digital manifestation in the game. On the other hand, the avatar is an "affective conduit for the player" (Owen 2017, 23) with which the player can interact with the digital environment of the game, and to which (or even to *whom*) the player can become emotionally attached up to the point of severe emotional identification.

The player is both "the initiator of the performance action [the played game] through an avatar and also the audience or critical witness to that action" (Owen 2017, 2). This identification between the player, who exclaims "I died!" and the player's avatar, who is actually dead, is based on control, or the (temporal) loss of control over the avatar by the player who has failed to perform within the positive parameters of the game. (McDonald 2013, 116). As Flynn-Jones has formulated:

> "At the moment of avatar death, the game is temporary over and the player has control taken away from him/her while another screen loads, but the avatar respawns, play is restored, control returned (agency) to the payer, and the player has another turn (repetition) to beat the scenario that bested them previously (mastery)." (2015, 52)

In this article, I use the expressions *player's death*' and *avatar's death* as synonyms, partly because of the strong identification between player and avatar (as demonstrated above), but also because the former is the more usual in gamer culture.

"What is your password?" History of *Player's Death* in Digital Games

The development of death narratives and the possibility of having them at all, was heavily influenced by the technological development of games and game consoles, including PCs (Stanton 2015, Hanson 2012, Kent 2010, Wolf 2008). When games were still arcade games (roughly from 1972 to 1982), the amount of tries a typical player received for his or her coin was usually limited to three. The games were too primitive to feature any kind of narratological layer worthy of the name, let alone a death narrative. If the player failed the positive goals set by the game, he or she just lost and was forced to either quit playing or insert another coin. The reasons for this mechanism were both financial (to stimulate the player to keep spending money on the machine) and technological (arcade machines were not able to save progress).

When home consoles hit the shelves in the 1980s, technology gradually evolved into a stage, which could feature rudimentary forms of narrative, but the continuing absence of non-volatile memory capacity limited the number of lives of the typical player, without the possibility of maintaining progress after the avatar's death or after the console had been switched off.

The only possibility to play beyond the grave was the use of passwords, pre-set sequences of seemingly random letters, numbers, and other punctuation marks linked to certain achievements, possessions, or progress in the game. The player was able to continue an infinite number of times, even when the system had been switched off and on again. Technically, this is not saving, as we know it now, since the player is only using a database in which all possibilities are coded.

The NES 8 revolutionized gaming by using the first so called real saving opportunity in the history of home console gaming. *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) featured a battery-backed RAM on the game cartridge itself, enabling the player's progress to be saved after switching off the console. Soon other consoles followed that used external memory banks like external memory cards and internal hard drives.

The technological development created space for more elaborate narratives and story-telling in video games, in which the player was able to save at any time while playing (like for example in *Doom*, 1993), or in which the player's progress was automatically saved when he or she arrived at some prescribed point (called a checkpoint) in the game narrative (like for example *Far Cry 5*, 2018). The latter system of automatic saving is dominant in present-day gaming, since it frees the player from constantly having to remember to save his or her progress (or to suffer the consequence of losing some or all progress).

Recent years have seen the revival of the idea of permadeath, "the permanent loss of a player's character in a video game" (Mazzeo and Schall 2014). Superficially, this resembles the old idea of the slot machines in the arcade era when technology was not able to save the player's progress, but on a deeper level, it is a response by game developers to demands, especially from hard-core players, who want a challenging game environment in which every decision counts (Griffin 2014). While games as *Spelunky* (2008) and *The Binding of Isaac* (2014) feature permadeath prominently, other games, especially in the role-playing genre, like *Diablo 2* and *Diablo 3* offer "an optional, extra-difficult mode" (Frome 2016, 160) featuring permadeath.

Death Narratives. A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death

When examining the different forms and types of death narratives in digital games, a number of traits and patterns can be distinguished that are used by several games to narratologically embed the player's death. I differentiate between three types of narratological embeddings, based on the realness of the in-game death of the player's avatar (see table 1).

The first type takes the concept of in-game death seriously: the player's avatar dies, but the continuity of play is narratologically guaranteed by work-arounds like cloning or copying of the avatar, or otherwise finding a suitable stand-in for the original avatar. The second type circumvents the actual death of the avatar/player by using other work-arounds like simulation or external help. The third type does not feature any explicit narratological embedding at all, irrespective of whether the player's progress is saved or not. Nonetheless, the death of the avatar is not without implicit narratological meaning within the context of this type of game.

Each type of death narrative has subdivisions based on the narrative patterns.

Type	Description	Primary example(s)
1	***Embedding: Actual death.***	
A.	The player's avatar is replicated by cloning or copying.	*Borderlands* series (2009-2014)
B.	The player's avatar is replaced by an avatar from a parallel universe.	*Bioshock Infinite* (2013)
C.	The player's avatar is replaced by a new avatar.	*Zombi* (2012)
2	***Embedding: Death avoided.***	
A.	The player's avatar is placed within a simulation context.	*Assassin's Creed* series (2007-18)
B.	The player's avatar is saved by an external force at the last second.	*Prince of Persia* (2008)
3	***No explicit narratological embedding.***	
A.	The player's progress through the game is preserved for next try.	*Watch Dogs* (2014)
B.	The player's progress through the game is lost.	*The Binding of Isaac* (2014)

Table 1. A typology of narratological embeddings of player's death in digital games.

Type 1. Actual Death

The first type of death narrative occurs when the player's avatar actually dies within the game, but the player is allowed to continue playing with it by a process of recreation through (A) cloning/copying, (B) replacement by an avatar from a parallel universe, or (C) the use of a stand-in avatar.

Type 1A. Cloning/copying

The first subtype of actual death narratives is the process of cloning or copying the player's avatar, enabling him/her to resume the game without narratological discontinuities or other disadvantages. I will give one primary (*Borderlands*) and two secondary examples (*Bioshock* and *Ghost 1.0*).

The *Borderlands* series consist of three different instalments, which all take place on or around the alien planet of Pandora. Characterized as an action role-playing shooter, the game series gives the player control over a vault hunter, who competes

with other hunters, violent gangs, and several interstellar commercial companies over the possession of a mysterious supply chamber filled with incredibly powerful weapons and technology. The player's progress is automatically saved by walking past New-U Stations scattered across the surface of Pandora. The stations also act as respawn points for the player's avatar.

In the *Borderlands* series, when the life counter of the player's avatar drops to zero, the camera zooms out from a first to a third-person perspective, showing the avatar falling to his/her knee(s). A second later, the first-person perspective is reinstated and a new gauge is shown with the words "Fight for your life. Get a kill to revive." If the player succeeds in killing an enemy while being heavily impeded by the life-threatening condition of his avatar (difficulty walking, limited movement of the head, no possibility of changing weapons), he is rewarded with a second wind: the avatar's health is fully restored, and he or she ready for a second, and hopefully more successful attempt. The number of chances of getting a second wind is endless: one very lethal enemy combined with multiple smaller ones can trigger more than a dozen winds.

If the player is unsuccessful in securing a second wind (or gives up by holding the appropriate button), the camera zooms out again, but now much wider, giving a top-down view of the battlefield and the dying avatar collapsing to the ground. The visible weapons the avatar carries are destroyed. A few seconds later, in a flash of light, the body of the avatar disintegrates into white and blue cubicle particles. Then a large blue and white tube appears, suggesting that the player and/or avatar glides through this. The tube slides downwards and then straight on, ending in a flash of bright white light.

The blue and white particles are then shown as they are being collected by the antenna of the last New-U Station the player has visited before dying. The particles are guided through the rest of the station, and exit out of a tall pole with a camera almost at the top, with the antenna towering above. The particles roll from the pole to a particular place in front of the station. In a whirlwind of blue and white lights, the particles are then re-formed into the new avatar's body, complete with physical characteristics, gear and items.

The newly created avatar then hovers in the air just above the ground, chest extended, limbs bent slightly backwards. When the assembly process is concluded, the avatar gives slightly in as if released from invisible restraints, grabbing his or her primary weapon, ready to continue the fight. The camera then swiftly zooms in, going from third-person perspective back to the initial first-person perspective in which the majority of the game is played.

Slightly different forms of stations can be found throughout the game series, but they all operate in the same way. All items are restored upon respawning, except for an appropriate ratio of seven percent of the player's in-game money, a so-called respawn fee so to speak. When the player is down to seven dollars or less the fee is waived, whereupon the station comments, "We at Hyperion value your existence. Please accept this complimentary reconstruction. Take care of the New-U." All such stations are built by Hyperion, one of the in-game large commercial organizations on Pandora, with the exception of certain areas in *Pre-Sequel* where they are called Medvacs, built by Hyperion's competitor Dahl.

The whole concept of the New-U Stations is based on mocking the concept of in-game death and the player itself (Tremblay 2017). The name of the station is the first

pun: New-U as in a new you. This new *you* has to be taken rather strictly, as in a new version of yourself. The stations automatically store the avatar's DNA against "accidental death or dismemberment" (another pun) and provide "digital reconstruction of your original body", referred to in-game as "digistruction" (a neologism). The player's avatars are cloned, not revived or resurrected. As the station observes in an audio message: "Greetings, clone-of-the-recently-deceased! Good luck in your future endeavors!"

In *Borderlands 2* and *Pre-Sequel*, the station emits a random audio message when it is used. The majority of the quotes also mock the player. To give a few examples:

> "Oh, hey, you're back.
> So, how was the dying?
> Awww, again?
> By using this New-U station, you have forfeited your right to reproduce.
> Pandora needs you! Stop dying so much."

Some other quotes mock the (religious) idea of a transcendent afterlife:

> "Do not worry about the afterlife, Hyperion customer! Hell is reserved exclusively for pedophiles.
> The Hyperion corporation wishes to clarify that the bright light you saw after death was our digistruct technology, and not a higher power. Not higher than Hyperion, anyway.
> Resurrection!"

And other quotes even directly mock the concept of permadeath (as discussed above):

> "Respawn! Because permadeath runs are for weirdos.
> Permanent death? Schmermanent…schmeath."

There are other examples of cloning/copying as a death narrative. In the first two *Bioshock* games, the player's avatar is revived through a system of "vita chambers" (*vita* is Latin for life). When the player's avatar dies, Jack is brought back to life through a process of cloning based on automatically scanned DNA by the same vita chambers. The avatar is "re-corporealized" (Call 2012, 148) including all items and other possessions.

Ghost 1.0 elaborates the whole concept of cloning/copying an avatar by introducing an extra narratological layer. The player controls an unknown female entity called "Ghost", either an artificial intelligence or a human being, which/who in turn controls the actual game's avatar, a gynoid called Chassis. Every time Chassis dies, Ghost retakes control of a copy of Chassis, who is printed on demand in the nearest 3D printer facility.

The process of cloning/copying can take many forms: the first avatar can be cloned (*Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*), be digitally reconstructed (*Borderlands*) or even reprinted (*Ghost 1.0*) to produce a new, identical avatar. The practical result is the same: while the initial avatar is truly dead (narratologically), the appearance, statistics, and possessions of the second avatar are (almost) exactly the same (sometimes the game inflicts some small penalty like the loss of certain items or money). The identification between gamer and avatar is therefore virtually unbroken. The player is able to ignore the fact that he or she is not playing with the same avatar per se, but with a clone or copy of the original one. The New-U Stations from the *Borderlands* series even mockingly remind the player of this unsettling insight (as has been quoted above): "Hyperion suggests that you do not think about the fact that this is only a digital reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you

respawned."

Type 1B. Multiverse/Parallel Worlds

The second subtype of actual death narratives is a particular variant of the process of cloning or copying the player's avatar (type 1A): the avatar dies, but the player is given control over the avatar's counterpart from another dimension within the multiverse. Examples are *Bioshock Infinite* and *Valley* (2016).

The idea of the multiverse, also known as parallel universes, other universes, or alternative universes is a scientific, but heavily debated hypothesis on the existence of multiple universes, of which our universe is only one, and in which physical constants may vary (Carr 2007). The notion of the multiverse has been used in numerous fields, like history, political science, social psychology, philosophy, mathematics, narrative theory and the arts, including video games (Front 2015).

Particularly the theoretical possibility of time travel within (a certain interpretation of) the concept of the multiverse has made this theory very popular in the modern cultural domain (Wittenberg 2016). To circumvent the "grandfather paradox" – back in time to kill one's grandfather, which would make the existence of the murderous grandchild impossible (Al-Khalili 2012) - time travel would have to be reinterpreted as shifting from one parallel universe to another.

Multiple games feature this idea of the multiverse, for example the *Half-Life* series (1998-2007) or *Singularity* (2010), while other games also use this theory in the context of their death narratives. In *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) for example, the idea of the multiverse is used to give the player an infinite number of retries whenever the avatar dies. *Bioshock Infinite* takes place in an alternative reality (also conceived

within the larger conceptual framework of the multiverse) including three shifting and intertwining timelines (Bosman 2017a).

In an alternative year 1912, the booze-loving private detective Booker DeWitt is charged with the rescue of a mysterious child, Elisabeth Comstock, alleged daughter of the Prophet Comstock. Comstock runs a private religion – a deranged mix of Christianity and American exceptionalism (Wysocki 2018) – on a man-made city called Columbia, which flies in the skies above the United States of America. The game actually features two different death narratives, one before rescuing Elizabeth and one after her rescue. The second death narrative is an example of type 2B (external help) and will be discussed later on in this article.

Bioshock Infinite's first death narrative is an appropriate example of type 1B (multiverse). When a fatal blow is dealt to Booker (or some other fatal accident befalls him), he collapses, while the screen fades to white and all sounds fade out. Booker then finds himself in a strange version of his detective office. The only possibility for him is to look at his front door from the inside in, while the screen is opaque and unfocused. The player can read the inversed words on the door: "Booker DeWitt, investigations into matters both public and private". A brief ludological message appears on screen:

> "When your life is saved, you will be partially healed, but so will your enemies. You will also lose some money. [button] open the door."

Since there is literally no other option, the player lets his or her avatar Booker open the door, only to find himself a short distance away from his former location of death, ready to continue his mission. When Booker turns around (is turned around by

the player), the office and the door through which he just came have vanished without a trace. When Booker, clearly frightened, exclaims "what just happened?" the panicking music swells for a few seconds.

The narrative of *Bioshock Infinite* is predicated on the assumption not only that the multiverse exists, but that it is possible to travel from one universe to another through tears, portals through such travel is possible (Laas 2015). In the complex narrative of the game – Bookers from different parallel universes are mixed up (Bosman 2017a) – the detective office plays a decisive role. It is in this office that Booker (#1) sells his infant daughter (Elizabeth) to the Prophet Comstock, who is an alternative Booker (#2) from another dimension. Riddled with guilt, Booker #1 gets the chance to redeem himself by traveling to the other dimension (#2) and rescue his now grown-up daughter from his alter ego.

Both the sale of Elizabeth and the offering of a chance of redemption are executed in Booker's office by two brilliant scientists, Robert and Rosalind Lutece. The two act as if they were twins, but they are actually two versions of the same person from two different universes. When Booker #1 is brought into reality #2 by the Luteces, his memories is corrupted, so that he cannot remember the true nature of his identity and mission (and the player is consequently left in the dark about this too).

Given the game's reliance on the multiverse and the centrality of Booker's office in the unwinding of the plot, *Bioshock Infinite*'s death narrative seems to be the swapping of one version of Booker for another one from an alternative (but narratively very closely related) universe. This would explain why the new Booker is only slightly suppressed: he does not remember his death (which would have triggered a bigger reaction), but he suddenly finds himself in his own office. The real

surprise occurs only after he opens the door: the sudden disappearance of the door and his office.

This multiverse interpretation of the game's death narrative is backed by two meetings with the Lutece twins. When Booker is traveling through Columbia at the beginning of the game, he is stopped in his way by Robert and Rosalind. Robert is wearing a billboard with a chalkboard on it. The board is divided into two columns: heads and tails. The heads column has twelve stripes, the tails column has none. Rosalind is holding a tray with a coin on it.

When Booker is provoked to flip the coin, he throws heads. This happens in *every* playthrough. While Rosalind draws another stripe on her brother's chalkboard, he says to her: "I never find that as satisfying as I'd imagined", to which she replies: "Chin up, there is always next time." When the twins walk away, Booker (and the player) can see the back of the board. It has the same division between heads and tails as the front, but here the score is 110 for heads, and none for tails.

The second meeting with the Luteces occurs when Elizabeth is freed from Comstock's imprisonment. The twins approach Elizabeth and offer her a free medallion, either of a cage (by Rosalind) or of a bird (by Robert), both references to Elizabeth's former predicament. She lets Booker decide which one to choose. Once the choice has been made, she will wear the chosen medallion around her neck for the rest of the game. The twins then walk away. The losing twin mutters that he/she suspected that Elizabeth would choose the other option. The winning twin answers: "If you are going to be a sore loser, then I shan't do this again."

Both instances – the flipping of the coin and the choosing of the medallion – both

indicate that the current situation is not the first of its kind. The twins have seen at least 124 earlier attempts by Booker to free Elizabeth and perhaps an equal number times that a medallion had to be chosen. Both instances strengthen the idea that the player's avatar – Booker – has not been revived but has been swapped by another Booker from parallel universe. This next Booker is brought from the safety and familiarity of his office (in parallel universe X) to the frontline of reality #2, where the former Booker just passed away. The technology to do this, swapping persons from universe to universe, and to and from any place within that universe, is in the hands of the Luteces, as becomes clear as the narrative of *Bioshock Infinite* unfolds.

Another example of a game that features a 1B type of death narrative, although it is not as elaborate as in *Bioshock Infinite*, is *Valley*, a first-person action adventure. The player takes control of a nameless male or female avatar, who is exploring a hidden valley somewhere in the United States (aesthetically the location resembles the Rocky Mountains) in search for a mythical artefact, the "seed of life." The player finds remnants of American military expeditions and experimentations from World War II, including a L.E.A.F. suit, an acronym for Leap Effortlessly through Air Functionality, which enables the player to run faster and leap higher.

The suit also has the capacity to extract energy from animal and vegetable life forms (while killing them in the process), and to restore this (thus reviving them). When the player's avatar dies, usually by miscalculating a large leap and/or by contact with water, the screen turns black. A pictogram of a branch with several leaves is shown, and two leaves fall off, symbolizing the decrease of life energy in the ecosystem of the valley itself. A white, black, and blue whirl of colors appears, and then the gamer is back, a few seconds before the last fatality. The leaves can be restored by reviving dead animals and/or trees in the valley. As the game explains to the player:

> "The L.E.A.F. suit's Quantum Death functionality allows the user to return to life after dying. (…) But life must be traded for life. The more you die, the more the valley will die around you until it is fully deadened. Without enough life in the valley, you cannot be revived."

The notion of "quantum death functionality" suggests that an alternate version of the avatar is brought in from another parallel universe once the first avatars dies. The energy used for this shift is drawn from the natural collective energy of the valley itself. When the energy is not restored before the avatar dies (again) by reviving animals and/or trees in the valley, the player is forced to start again from the beginning of the level.

In both cases – *Bioshock Infinite* and *Valley* – the avatar perishes but is then swapped with another version of itself from parallel universe. While the new avatar is almost identical to the former avatar in form, shape, and possessions, death itself is not prevented. Just like type 1A (copying/cloning), type 1B does not revive the player's avatar, but swaps it for a copy. The difference between types 1A and 1B lies in the origin of the technological replacement: from within our known universe or from outside it.

Type 1C. Playing the next avatar

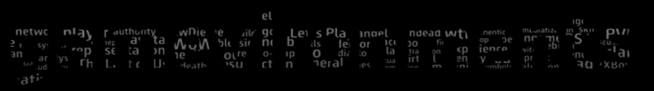
The third variant of the death narratives in which the avatar actually dies is type 1C, in which the player is simply given control over another avatar. This variant is narratologically very close to the former two subtypes, but its essence is that no copy/clone/parallel entity is made or brought in from a parallel dimension, but the new avatar has been part of the game universe all along. Before the death of avatar #1, avatar #2 was already (naratologically) present in the game in the form of a non-

playable character. With the death of the first avatar, the player simply shifts from controlling the first to controlling the second avatar, and so on.

An example of this type of death narrative can be found in the game *Zombi* (2012), a zombie-apocalyptic survival game, set in London in an alternative 2012. The game story's apocalypse is explicitly based on the visions of the historical English mathematician and Hermetic philosopher John Dee (1527 – 1608), who is said to have had great influence on both Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth I (Clulee 1988, Harkness 2006). After a zombie outbreak, the player is directed to a safe house, which was built and is monitored by a mysterious Prepper (an individual who is making preparations in order to survive an upcoming catastrophe).

The game is played from a first-person perspective: the player has control over a randomly generated London survivor. When this avatar dies, sometimes as the result of environmental hazards, but usually because he or she is infected with the zombie virus through the bite of a zombie or through contact with zombie saliva or vomit, the first-person perspective is abandoned in favor of a third-person perspective, which shows the avatar infected or dead. The player is then given control over another randomly generated survivor in the Prepper's safe house. To obtain all the loot from the former avatar, the player has to find this former avatar-turned-zombie and kill him or her. If the former avatar died of other causes, the player only has to discover and loot the body.

If the player's avatar dies, and that happens a lot in *Zombi*, the avatar's statistics are shown: time survived, infected, killed, survivor score, and personal best score. At the same time some the screen displays some random comments connected to the fact that the avatar just died, like:



> "You have been infected. <name character> is one of THEM now…
> <name character> knows there are no second chances.
> You are dead! And won't get back up again."

In the background, the Prepper's voice can be heard, usually mocking the avatar and/or player for not doing a very good job. For example:

> "O for Christ's sake, why'd you go and die on me.
> I prepared you better than that!
> Hats off to you. I didn't think you'd last this long."

While both the developers and game reviewers contend that this game features permadeath, I disagree. Since permadeath ludologically means the destruction of the player's progress as well as all the player's items and possessions beyond any means of recovery, the death of the player's avatar in *Zombi* only constitutes a temporary setback for the player, who is perfectly able, and is even stimulated by the game's narrator and mechanics, to find and retake his or her possessions. In addition, the regions already discovered by the player remain open for fast travel.

It could be argued that *Zombi* features a *narratological* permadeath, but again I disagree. The game simply uses a variant of the actual death narrative, as do *Borderlands* (type 1A) and *Bioshock Infinite* (1B). *Zombi* swaps one virtually meaningless and randomly generated avatar for the next, a process that is narratologically very close to both the copying/cloning mechanism and the multiverse. In *Zombi*, the player's avatar is more or less a copy of the former avatar, especially after the former avatar has been looted, since the sequence of avatars that hold the player's possessions is a greater guarantee of continuity, also narratologically, than the avatars are themselves: they become hollow shells with

whom the player can only identify in a superficial way.

The only difference between copying (1A) and alternative universe (1B) is that the avatars are no copies or alternative versions from another dimensions, but new characters. Death is not avoided, but – again – rendered meaningless, and this in a game that is trying to make dying a key innovative game mechanism.

Type 2. Death Avoided

The second type of death narrative occurs when the player's avatar should have died in a certain in-game situation, but the death is prevented at the last instance by either (A) suggesting simulation, or (B) by the deployment of external help. In this type, the phrases *player's death* or *avatar's death* lose their meaning in the strict sense as since death is avoided altogether.

Type 2A. Simulation

The first death-avoiding narrative can be found in games that feature an in-game simulation device, like the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007-2017) or *The Talos Principle* (2014).

In the *Assassin's Creed* series, the history of our world is radically reimagined and reinterpreted as an ongoing battle between two powerful political factions over the possession of incredibly powerful artefacts, left by a now extinct pre-human race (Bosman 2016b). The Assassin Brotherhood and the Templar Order, loosely based on the historical Nazari Isma'ilites and the order of the Knights Templar (Bosman 2016c) respectively, both strive for world domination but with different means and motives. The Order is dictatorial and elitist in nature and wants to keep the masses ignorant and obedient, while the Brotherhood is egalitarian in nature and hopes to educate

the masses into taking responsibility for their own actions and, ultimately, their own freedom (Bosman 2017b).

The narratological structure of the series is quite elaborate, ranging from one to three narrative layers, some of which merge to form new layers (Bosman 2017c). Usually, the set-up is as follows: a contemporary Assassin Brother is placed in a device called the Animus (a virtual reality chair), by which the user can relive the lives of ancestors with whom her or she shares DNA. This means that the player through his or her out-of-game gaming device (PC, Xbox or PS) controls the contemporary Assassin (or sometimes Templar) who through the in-game device (the Animus) controls his or her ancestor.

Ludologically, both the contemporary Assassin and the historical ancestor are controlled by the actual gamer, but narratologically, the process of interaction between Assassin and ancestor is not one of control but of mimicking. If the modern-day Assassin in the Animus (and through him the actual gamer) fails to copy, within certain parameters, his ancestor's historical behavior and decisions, the system aborts the simulation, a situation known in-game as "desynchronization."

I will give an example from *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) which is set in Renaissance Italy. The contemporary Assassin is Desmond Miles (1987-2012), who controls/mimics the past life of his ancestor Ezio Auditore da Firenze (1459-1524) through the Animus. Since Ezio's (fictional) life is already set in stone (as history), Desmond (and the player) can do no more than follow the path Ezio took in his life as best they can (called synchronization). While there is some room for interpretation and variations, most of Ezio's life path has to be followed, or Desmond/the player will be desynchronized. The same system ensure that Ezio can never leave the mission area

(in-mission) or the edges of the in-game map.

If Ezio dies prematurely by the hand of his enemies, or by environmental hazards, or if Desmond/the player do not succeed in mimicking Ezio's actions closely enough (for example by killing enemies instead of avoiding them as Ezio did), the in-game simulation ends. A red block with white letters appears: "desynchronized." The camera zooms out, losing its normal focus on Ezio. White lines appear, showing the outlines of the three-dimensional cubes from which the simulation was built.

After the screen turns to white, the memory corridor is shown, ludologically an interactive loading screen, but narratologically the moment in which the contemporary and historical Assassin are synchronized with one each other. Movement is possible in the corridor, but since the rest of the environment consists of the same white three-dimensional building blocks, there is nowhere to run or walk. After some moments, the original setting – houses, roads, animals, people – is rebuilt again out of the same mathematical blocks in a process that is visible to the player. The simulation is up and running again.

The same idea, on a somewhat humbler narratological scale, is used in the game *The Talos Principle*. Actually, as a first puzzle game, the idea of *Talos* is that of (dis)obedience to a higher power. When the game starts, the player is given control over an unknown android who is placed in a garden-like setting. A bodiless voice from above, which identifies itself as EL0HIM (a reference to the Hebrew word for gods in the Old Testament), instructs the avatar/player to follow his instructions (that is: to solve the puzzles). If the player obeys the voice, he is brought into a kind of heavenly environment, only to be released again at the beginning of the game. Only if the player disobeys the voice from above by climbing a forbidden tower (a

reference to the biblical Tower of Babel from Genesis 11,1-9), the player understands the true nature of the avatar's existence. The whole game was a virtual reality simulation, run by an artificial Administrator (EL0HIM), to create the perfect artificial intelligence. This perfectness exists in the capacity to disobey orders. When the android, designated as a child within the game, dies by gun fire, floating bombs, or other some other cause, the android falls down on its side. The game is instantly rewound, including the sounds of the game, bringing the android back to the beginning of the puzzle. A message appears on screen written in a stereotypical program font: "Correcting for errors…Done. Reloading child program…Done." This suggests that the whole experience is only virtual within the simulation run within the game itself.

This subtype of death narrative avoids the actual death of the avatar, since it constructs an in-game simulation that will end when the avatar meets his end. As has been seen, ludologically, the avatar's death is a feedback system that informs the gamer that he has not yet qualified to proceed further with the game: first he has to learn, improve his skills, reflexes and so forth. In this subtype, this narratological principle – death is a learning experience, a notion already mocked by the New-U Station of the *Borderlands* series – is now narratologically translated. The simulation will run as many times as the player requires to attain a certain degree of knowledge and skill to progress in the game.

Type 2B. External Help

Another kind of death narrative in which the actual death of the avatar is avoided is when external help is called in. The avatar's death is averted because of a last-second intervention by a non-playable character. Examples of such narrative devices are *Prince of Persia* and, again, *Bioshock Infinite*.

The narrative of *Prince of Persia* evolves around retelling, set in a medieval setting somewhere in the Middle East, of the Zoroastrian origin story (Skjaervo 2011, Rose 2011). This story, ascribed to the teachings of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), centers on the cosmic dual between the twins Ahura Mazda, also known as Ormazd (the principle of good and order), and Angra Mainyu, also known as Ahriman (the principle of evil and chaos). In the game's narrative, Ahriman is freed from the Tree of Life in which he had been imprisoned by his brother Ormazd, eons ago. Ormazd's people, the Ahura, were tasked with guarding Ahriman in his tree. At the beginning of the game, the Ahura leader has become corrupted due to grief when his beloved wife died. He cuts down Ahriman's tree in exchange for his wife's life (but to no avail). The daughter of the Ahura leader, Elika, remains faithful to Ormazd's calling, causing animosity between her and her father and her people. On her escape, Elika bumps into the game's nameless hero, the eponymous prince of Persia. The two forge an uneasy alliance to re-capture Ahriman. Elika accompanies the prince on his adventures, giving him advice about the history of her people and their world. She also functions as the prince's last resort. Elika intervenes whenever the prince is about to be killed by an enemy or fails to make the right jump. The third-person perspective is abandoned while the prince calls for help. Elika is shown with her hands raised in prayer, while praying to Ormazd in Farsi. Blue and white lines shoot out of her hands and arms, while she stops the enemy just before he is able to kill the prince, or she jumps after him, pulling him back to safety.

The same kind of mechanism can be found in *Bioshock Infinite*, a game that features two death narratives, as we have seen above. The game features a 1B type of death narrative (multiverse) at the beginning of the game, but as soon as Booker succeeds in rescuing Elizabeth, she becomes his last resort, like Elika was for her prince. When

he is killed, Booker falls to his knees, his body bending backwards. His eyes blink as he fights against death. Since the player looks through Booker's eyes, only fragments of what is happening can be seen, though it is not difficult to realize what is going on. The player sees Elizabeth standing over Booker's dying body, screaming at him: "Booker, don't die on me" or similar words. In the second instance Elizabeth can be seen ticking against a syringe with green substance as if she is about to inject the fluid into Booker's bloodstream. And in the third instance, Elizabeth helps Booker to stand up again, fully recovered from his injuries.

Type 2B avoids the actual death of the avatar by resorting to last-instance external help, usually with the assistance of an in-game companion who is, conveniently, close by at any time to administer the help required.

Type 3. No Explicit Narratological Embedding

The third and last category is somewhat paradoxical: it consists of games that do not feature any death narrative. As I have argued before, this category is a lot larger than the other two. But even games whose developers have put no effort into any narratological embedding of the death of the game's avatar, or games which have no possibility of saving the player's progress at all (permadeath), do – in fact – have a narrative, although it is highly implicit.

Type 3A. Death is Void

Games that do not feature any explicit death narrative but enable the player to save his or her progress, can be classified as a type 3A. In a typical game of this kind, for example *Watchdogs*, when the player's avatar is killed, either by an enemy or by some environmental hazard, the avatar can be seen. The camera zooms out; the screen turns reddish. A message is usually shown, along the lines of "game over" or

"you have died." The player is then given control over the same avatar again, usually only a few removed from the location of the death. A penalty is sometimes imposed, for instance the loss of possessions or money, but nothing that is more than a minor annoyance to the player, a minimal encouragement to the player to avoid another avatar's death.

The implicit death narrative of such games is that dying is utterly meaningless. The in-game death has lost all connections with its real-world counterpart. Whereas in real life, death can be considered as one of the biggest, if not the biggest, rupture in a person's continuity, even for those who believe in a form of life after death, the death of the avatar in the game is reduced to a potentially endless sequence of retries with no lasting consequences.

Type 3B. Permadeath

The other game subtype without an explicit narratological embedding of the avatar's death involves the concept of permadeath, as has already been discussed ludologically above. Games of this kind, like *The Binding of Isaac* (2014) for example, give the player a very limited number of retries (for example three), after which the player is forced to replay the game from the very beginning. When the avatar Isaac dies in *The Binding of Isaac*, the player is confronted with an image, supposedly from Isaac, describing his own death (which is in itself rather paradoxical and humorous).

> "Dear diary, today I died. I was killed by this thing [a drawing of the enemy that killed Isaac] in some [the name of the level]. I leave all that I own to my cat Guppy [a drawing of the head of a stuffed toy animal with its eyes sown closed]. Goodbye, cruel world. XOXO [emoticons for kiss and hug twice] Isaac."

The game deals with the biblical narrative known as “the binding of Isaac” from Genesis 22, and retells the story in a modern-day context, suggesting all kinds of family problems, including divorce and child abuse (Bosman and Van Wieringen 2017). Ludologically, it features permadeath, but narratologically it mocks the concept of the avatar’s death by suggesting that a deceased in-game character could write a log about this occurrence. *The Binding* suggests only the player is able to produce a written record of the avatar’s death, since he knows he can restart the game again and again for another try, narratologically to fill in just another page of his diary.

In this subtype death is far from meaningless, since the avatar’s death forces the player to restart the entire game. The implicit narrative, however, is a double one: on the one hand, the player has to deal with the severe consequences of in-game death; but on the other, an endless amount of retries is still available at the beginning of the game. In real life, death is far more permanent than in-game permadeath.

Death is Dying. Final Thoughts

If we return to the question stated in the beginning of this article - What different kind of death narratives are used in modern video games? - it is possible to differentiate between three types: the avatar dies but is replaced by a copy; the avatar survives the immanent death; or the game in question does not feature an explicit death narrative at all. All three types (and subtypes) negotiate the real-life notion of death with the ludological notion of player’s death, either in an explicit narratological embedding (types 1 and 2), or implicitly by refraining from so including such an embedding (type 3).

Within the broader context of religion studies and the inherent relationship between the concept of death and the *raison d'être* of (institutionalized) religion, this typology sheds some interesting new light on the way people deal with the universal inevitability of death. Type 3 is not very interesting in this perspective, but the other two certainly are. Type 1 acknowledge the existential weight of death, but suggest an alternative possibility for an individual's own extended continuity, while type 2 champions a more positivistic approach to death by offering some sort of emergency exit. Both types offer a solution against violent death, not against death by illness of age (which is made explicit at the VitaChamber of *Bioshock*).

The religious dimension of the death narratives can be located in their (partial) promise of an eternal life (although only against violent death), their offered possibility to learn from one's mistakes (linked to the religious idea of the forgiveness of sins), and their stimulation to contemplate one's own contingency (connected to the religious idea of contemplation and spirituality). Type 1C – the replacement of the avatar by a default other one – is more cynical (and some would say, more realistic) of tone: life is not eternal, an individual is not special, and eternal life is only attainable as a collective.

In short, the death narratives of video games form an experimental space for negotiating one's own mortality. And contemplating over, coping with and possibly the overcoming of the inevitability of one's own life is, according to Tillich and Malinowski, perhaps one of the most important aspects of religious life in the first place, if not the most important one.

This typology, however, is only the beginning of further scholarly research and reflection on the concept of player's death in video games, especially considering the

uneasy tension between the triviality of in-game death and the gravity of death in real life. Some game developers have tried to negotiate this tension by looking for new gaming concepts, both narratologically and ludologically.

In 2014, the indie developers of RobotLovesKitty presented their idea for *Upsilon Circuit*, a single-server, online action role-playing game (Tach 2014). The company envisioned a system in which the players would have only one chance at playing the game, and one chance only. Once the avatar dies, the player can never play the game again, a rather radical interpretation of the concept of permadeath. Unfortunately, the game was never developed and released (Grayson 2017).

In the game *One Chance* (2010), the player is given control over the scientist John Pilgrim, who has six days to save the world form the cancer-attacking cure he created himself but which has spiraled out of control. When he reaches one of several possible endings, the player is not able to restart the game to find out what the other endings are. Although this gimmick can be easily circumvented by refreshing the cache of one's internet browser, *One Chance* experiments, both narratologically and ludologically, with the concepts of death and choices that have lasting consequences.

The next real goal the game industry should set itself is to find a satisfying combination of the commercial need to enable as many players as possible to conveniently play a game, and the equally satisfying incorporation of long-lasting consequences of player's choices and failures, including the deaths of their avatars. Otherwise, the concept of death will be the only thing that is truly dying.

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