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Special Issue

Video Gaming and Death

edited by

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Issue 09 (2018)

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Dying In The Game: A Perceptive Of Life, Death And Rebirth Through *World Of Warcraft*

Wanda Gregory

Abstract

What does it feel like to die in a video game? Not just the feeling of seeing your avatar die and resurrect in front of you on the screen, but how does it feel to deal with death in a game when you are facing a life threating disease in the real world? How can one experience the various aspects of life, with a focus on death, rebirth or resurrection, through a game and the player's avatar? These are several of the questions, which will be explored in this essay based on the author's own personal experience. Through her diagnosis and subsequent treatments for cancer, the author played the MMORPG World of Warcraft. Originally played for fun, after her diagnosis, the game took on a new role. Along with Tahara, her shaman troll, the author experienced the game as a reflection of life, death, and rebirth. The game became less a distraction and more of a way to learn how to deal with her illness and her ultimate fear of death. Through this connection between herself and her avatar she gained a better understanding of not only dealing with death, but life.

We read books about death, view stories on television and in films, but what about games? I remember my mother and grandmother crying while they watched *Brian's Song* (1971) in which James Caan played the football player Brian Piccolo who died of cancer. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) brought all of us to tears, surrounded by death as the result of war. What brought me to tears were books; the death of Beth in *Little Women*, Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* (1875), and Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web* (1952), some of my first introductions to death.

These deaths were not real though. I knew I could close the book and return to reading *A Winkle in Time*, or I could tell myself that Charlotte's children would be there to comfort Wilbur. My mother and grandmother could change the channel and watch *Friends* (1994-2004) or the Cooking Channel. Death in sanitary rectangular boxes. Boxes we can take out when we want to feel sad or have a good cleansing cry.

But our media tastes have changed, and we live in a world filled with digital games. What happens in a game when you die? Do you die? How does it feel to die? What if your friend's character or your non-player character (NPC) shaman trainer dies in the game?

For the longest time I did not play games where my character died. I do not think it was intentional. It was just that the types of games I chose to play did not really involve death. In some games, it looked like the character might have died. In *Tomb Raider* (1996) when Laura Croft falls off a cliff she does not die. You do not see her lifeless body lying on a ledge below; but in real life, you know that the fall killed her. Instead, the game is designed to allow you to replay that level. Other games also allow you to reboot or replay if your health level drops to zero or when you run out of lives. The princess character in *Zelda* (1998) might be kidnapped in the game and frozen in a block of ice until Link saves her, but miraculously she never dies of hypothermia. I might be run over with a lawn mower by zombies in *Plants vs. Zombies* (2010), but even then, the screen simply goes dark. I can start again, having learned from that experience not to plant sunflowers too close to the door.

In the game *Never Alone* (2014), the player moves between playing the young female protagonist or her white shamanic fox totem (depending on the situation). When the game first launched I was excited to play. I had hoped that the game would allow me

to play as a shaman character based on the mythology of Native American tribes. At first moving between the two characters was fun, but then I missed a jump and the fox landed in the water. For that brief moment, before the reboot occurred my white fox lay facing down in the water. I cried. I was horrified. I was not use to seeing death portrayed in such a casual way amidst the beauty and story of the game itself. I tried the level again. This time playing the female character. Again, I missed the jump and she landed in the water. Like the fox, she lay floating face down. She had died. I felt I had died. I cried again. I did not play the game for weeks fearful that if I did not learn to play it correctly I would continue to kill my characters. Death before the reboot.

In games such as *Neopets* (1999), the player can create and take care of a Tamagotchi-like pet. The game designers want you to spend time and money returning to the game every day to take care of your companion. However, if you do not feed your pet, she will not starve to death and die. Their audience is children, and no parent wants to pay for a game, which makes their eight-year-old cry in the back seat of their car or learn the reality of what happens when their pet is not fed. In real life the pet dies. However, in the game, the pet might get sick, but it is never life threatening. Instead, your pet might get an illness that you can cure, though it might involve going to the virtual pharmacy to purchase virtual medicine with real money.

If you do not have enough money for your pet's drugs, the game will encourage you to play a series of casual games to earn more coins. To highlight the urgency of your pet's illness, you might be told that your pet is feeling worse and that you really need to get her help today. As your pet becomes increasingly sad, thin, and lonely, you cannot help but do something. You do not want her to die in front of you and experience the guilt.

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Even when you finally got tired of playing *Neopets* your pet still does not die, despite the fact that you were not there to feed it. Instead, the pet will be sent to an adoption agency where another player can adopt her.

In looking at the representation of death in video games, particularly shooter games, there are several options. When you die in the game, your death is seen as a representation of your ultimate failure. You do something wrong and *Pac-Man* (1980) dies, Mario dies, and even characters in the *Sims* franchise have been known to die. But, they don't really die. You just start again. You learn from your mistakes.

Death in games might then be seen as a reset function. A game mechanic to extend the gameplay. In games, death also helps you remember things. You remember that you died from that attack of zombies in front of the house down the street. If you want to get to the store for supplies, you need to pass by that house without dying. If you know that the zombies will jump out at you whenever you are near that house, then you have two options; have the right guns to shoot them or take a different route. You might still hear the screams and cries from the zombies and those who didn't learn from their mistakes. Since you have already experienced death by zombies, you are unlikely to engage with them again. You know though that even if you do die in the game, it is only a reboot. You can play again. You do not have to die the next time.

Other games take a different approach to death. Death as an inconvenience. You lose items when you die. Often times you are resurrected, but no longer have your shield or buff armor to protect you. Your coins are gone. Death as inconvenience forces you to find your lost armor or work to earn coins so that you can purchase a new item and not die again.

Besides death in games, some game worlds have been the scene of funerals for gamers in the real world. During such virtual ceremonies, the mourners have often been attacked and experienced virtual deaths. Called "funeral raids" characters attack the group or guild during the funeral and take their loot with no respect for the dying. Killing the characters and friends of the real person being honored.

For example, several years ago, one woman, an officer in a Horde guild, suffered a fatal stroke. In celebration of her life in *World of Warcraft* (2004), her friends decided to organize a virtual funeral to say farewell. Since the woman had enjoyed fishing, and snow in the game, the meeting place was set in Winterspring on a game server known for player vs. player participation. Posts were placed on forums promoting the event and also requesting that attendees be left alone as this was a celebration of her life both in the real and virtual worlds.

Perhaps it was grievers, or tricksters, or just teens out for a virtual late-night raid, but things did not go as planned. Once other guilds on the Alliance side heard of the event they decided to attack the Horde funeral allowing them to earn kills for themselves as a way to level up. Many in the game community felt that because this was a funeral for a friend it should have been respected. Others thought that since this in-game funeral happened on a game server known for player battles and slaying, it was part of the game and the perpetrators were justified in their actions. After all, they did not break any rules. One responder to the action suggested that while no game norms were broken, social norms were. In looking back through history, raids on other tribes, clans, or countries have occurred during times of death and mourning. Perhaps this is now no different in the virtual world.

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My own views towards death changed when I started playing *World of Warcraft* and created a shaman troll character named Tahara. In this game, your player can die, and you have two options. The first option is to pay a portion of your loot to the Angel of Death who is seen floating above you, resurrecting you for a fee. The problem is that not only do you lose some of your possessions; but when resurrected you feel physically weak. When the angel returns you to your body, which is lying on the ground where you died, you may reappear in the midst of the same 10 orcs who killed you initially. In this weakened state, the orcs will kill you again and you will find yourself in the cemetery with the Angel looking down on you once more.

The second option – find your body. Similar to the payment plan, you awaken in the nearest cemetery with the Angel of Death floating above you. Instead of paying for your resurrection, you have to travel to find your body. In this option, you travel as a ghost for what may seem like days as you navigate across rivers and over mountains looking for your corpse – marked on a map to help you find her. Once you are in sight of your lifeless body, lying on the ground, you may have to wait until the orcs leave before reentering to avoid being killed again.

In the beginning, when I died I went for the payment plan. That changed when I kept dying repeatedly. After several deaths, I found myself running out of items to use as payment. I tried the second option – find my body.

Seeing yourself as a ghost and traveling over the land is surreal. The background of the world becomes gray and cloudy. Instead of meadows filled with other players, the roads and towns are silent. There is no movement. You are in a nether world, the world between the living and the dead. Heaven and hell. Your ghostly former self-

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traveling alone, looking for her corpse.

Of course, when I found her body I had to approach with caution so that I would not be attacked again and have time to power up my protective energy shields. After a while I grew tired of running to find my body. I decided to take a third, unwritten approach. What if I didn't die? What if I could travel through the valleys and mountains as a traveler instead of looking for my body? What if I just stayed at lower levels of game play rather than risk questing to achieve higher levels?

Nowhere on the *World of Warcraft* website does it say you have to die. Nowhere do the rules say you have to fight other creatures or go on life threatening quests. Instead, you can wander in low-level areas of the game picking herbs or skinning random animals to gain points. Grinding your way up the level ladder. I certainly was not the first to consider such actions.

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In the now iconic *South Park* Episode on *World of Warcraft*, entitled "Make Love Not Warcraft" (2006), an anonymous griever kills Cartman, Kyle, Stan and Kenny's *World of Warcraft* characters. This griefer begins to take over the entire game world, killing all of the players. In the episode, the destruction caused by the griefer forces the publisher, Blizzard Entertainment, to admit that they had never played the game, thus were unaware of how to handle a rogue killer. Instead, they watched helplessly from their conference room as their revenue from the game decline.

True to *South Park* form, Cartman comes up with a plan to deal with the deaths and killings. To keep him and his friends from being killed by the griefer they had to go stealth while they tried to level up and take on the killer. Instead of going on the more epic quests as a way to level up, which would cause the griefer to find them,

they undertook what is called "grinding" as a way to level up. Grinding involves undertaking low level tasks that do not offer the same experience points as going on a quest or killing others. This approach required them to spend 21 hours per day grinding, which resulted in weight gain and acne from their diet of fast foods while playing. Eventually, with the help of Stan's dad and the virtual sword given to him by one of the Blizzard accountants, they kill the griefer's character. One of the final scenes shows the griefer at home in his basement stunned that his character has died.

I decided on this third approach. Why die? Why not just go solo and grind away? It is only a game. Tahara and I stopped questing. Instead, we collected herbs, learned skinning and tailoring techniques, and traveled the world. When we came upon thieves or orcs, we hid and waited for them to leave. Sometimes we would go on lower level quests where we could overpower our enemies. Other times, when questing with friends, they would give us their loot to help us level up.

In return, Tahara would heal them through her shaman spells. I knew though that at higher levels of play Tahara could become a stronger shaman. At level 50 she could learn to resurrect herself and others during battle. I began to think it was not fair to keep her at such low levels because of my fear of death. Was I keeping Tahara fearful of evolving? Of growing up? Was I the one fearful of death? Her death. My death. Our death.

The idea of dealing with her death, of taking her back to her body was at first a difficult decision. I did not want her to die. I did not want to travel with her as a ghost or pay the Angel of Death. But I decided to go ahead and take chances...Die...Resurrect. Die again as a way to level her up. It is only a game I kept

telling myself.

It was during this time that I was diagnosed with cancer. While intellectually I knew that my prognosis was good, I did not want to think about death—real or virtual. When I would log on to the game and begin exploring, I would look for the lower level quests. The ones in which we were less likely to die. My friends thought I was being ridiculous.

> "It's just a video game. It's just a video game character. It's not you. You're not a troll and you're certainly not a shaman troll. Your character dying doesn't mean that you are going to die. Don't be stupid." (Personal conversation with anonym., 2018).

Maybe I was being stupid. But I was terrified of seeing her die in front of me. I knew that there would not be blood. It would be a silent death. I knew that this was just the "failure as quest game mechanic". So why was I scared? Why did it matter what it might feel like? What if that ghostly figure was the physical me looking up at the Angel? What would death feel like in a video game if it was really me in the game? These questions plagued me while I struggled with my own thoughts on my life, my death, and my own mortality.

Sometimes while playing I jumped back from my keyboard. My fingers shaking as the enemies surrounded me. I would start shooting my spells but often to no avail. As an interim step to help me deal with these fears I started by playing in third person view. From this perspective, I was the watcher, even if it was me that I was watching. As I grew more confident, I began trying to play in first person. From looking at the robbers from a distance and seeing Tahara on the screen fighting them, I was now Tahara looking directly into their faces and fighting them at close range. Did I die? Of course. Many times. I was playing in the moment. I looked up to see the Angel

looking down at me. In some ways strangely peaceful and calming. I knew that I still had the option of giving away my armor and that seemed all right. I told myself that it really is just a video game. It is not a prediction of my future.

Instead of worrying about the death or the failure of my character to achieve what the game thought was necessary to win, there was another approach to the game – living. I began to consider the possible role of resurrection and rebirth within the game. The notion of what might be learned not just through the life I had led – the actions taken in the game – but what I might learn from the failure, death in the game.

Instead of fearing death, I started to take risks in the game. Instead of hiding behind rocks or waiting until the thieves had left, I, "we" took a bolder approach. We entered the battle zone, we quested with others. I watched Tahara level up and grow. I began to experience her virtual life rather than live in fear of death. Through her, I became bolder; stronger in the risks I was willing to take. Yes, we did die in the game. But we learned to resurrect ourselves and learned from our actions. We learned not only how to die, but also how to live.

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