game environments

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

Rex Barnes

Abstract
This article examines the motif of death in popular electronic games and its imaginative applications when employing the Wolf Link Amiibo in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017). As I demonstrate, the Wolf Link Amiibo engages digital quietus as a meaningful event in three ways: as in-game perk, as ritualized object, and as narrative device. In the first place, the "toy-to-life" figurine mitigates against recursive elimination by generating an NPC (non-player character) to hunt for food, search out hidden shrines, and attack nearby enemies. Second, it affords a unique awareness of death according to a temporal pattern, one that requires ritual performance outside the virtual world of Hyrule. Third, the small statue conceptually narrativizes the repeated loss of life through an aesthetic of resurrection, namely by representing the Amiibo as efficacious technology found within the game-world of *Breath of the Wild*.
Keywords: death, ludic play, affect, Amiibo, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, ritual, devotional objects, religion, gamevironments

Introduction

Death is a hallmark of the video gaming experience. It pervades popular gameplay, attuning players to the inherent challenges and rhythms of the game. The gaming expression "I died," for example, is idiomatic of situational failure (Bernardi 2015). It means the player has arrived at an accidental and momentary impasse. In my youth, "I died" countless times as a result of alien hordes (*Contra* 1987), Dracula's ghouls (*Castlevania* 1986), and the seemingly endless supply of Bowser's fireballs (*Super Mario Bros* 1983). These fatal encounters were frustrating, of course, but also short-

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lived and instructive. For every death I incurred, an extra "life" granted the opportunity to spawn again and strategize a new approach. In retrospect, many of my favorite Nintendo titles established character-elimination as a relative commonplace: the maximum of 99 lives could easily translate into as many deaths. Strikingly, the latest Nintendo Wii U version of the Super Mario series, *Super Mario 3D World* (2013), now enables players to earn a whopping 1110 lives. It would appear that the life (or death) expectancy of Mario and his companions has risen considerably since the 80s and 90s.

The ubiquity of death in Western video games is remarkable for several reasons. For one, ours is a culture in which human passing is rarely visible in everyday life. Except in the contexts of war or untimely accident, it is generally a private phenomenon tended to by individuals in specialized institutions and bureaucracies. Moreover, death is considered – for the most part – a singular albeit universal event. It happens to everyone once, not multiple times, thereby marking the permanent end of biological life. As such, death is a phenomenon about which we cannot speak about from experience (Wenz 2013). Rather, meanings ascribed to what happens to us once we have died are largely the ideological province of religious systems of thought and practice.

These points raise provocative questions for scholars working on the intersection of religion and popular culture: How is death represented in different games and game genres? In what ways do video games evince similar and dissimilar ideations for the reality of human death? To what extent does a player's digital passing communicate more profound impressions – ones beyond mere situational failure? In response to these queries, this article approaches the subject of player-death by examining a relatively recent innovation in gaming technology introduced by the Nintendo video

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gaming company. Specifically, I evaluate the functionality of Nintendo's Amiibo accessories and how the Wolf Link Amiibo, in particular, employs familiar and novel gaming practices associated with player-fatality in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017).

As I demonstrate, the Wolf Link Amiibo engages digital quietus as a complex and meaningful event in three ways. First, the Wolf Link Amiibo generates a virtual NPC to hunt for nourishment, uncover hidden shrines, and attack nearby enemies on the player's behalf. The plastic figurine thus offers a practical advantage vis-à-vis ludic gaming death: it helps mitigate player-elimination through its programmed directives. Second, the "toy-to-life" statue affords a unique awareness of death as a lasting consequence of the player's choices, for the Nintendo accessory is time-sensitive – meaning that should Wolf Link die the player can only summon the digital canine again after a twenty-four hour period. The player, therefore, quickly learns to be mindful of death according to a ritualized pattern centered on Wolf Link's digital presence or absence. Third and finally, this particular Amiibo helps explain the repeated loss of life through an aesthetic of resurrection in *Breath of the Wild*. While a few video games also feature player reanimation, the Wolf Link effigy facilitates imaginative recognition of the physical toy as a fictive device derived from the game-world of Hyrule.

In order to provide a more robust account of the Wolf Link Amiibo's applications, the first part of this article delineates the most basic contours of death in popular electronic games. Admittedly, this introductory sketch is far from exhaustive and intentionally scant on descriptive analysis. With broad strokes, it aims to provide a brief exposition of death's function and portrayal in many arcade games and on home-gaming consoles. It does not consider the significance of, say, death in speed

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runs, deliberate player eliminations, or the use of "hardcore mode" in certain games. Nor do I give attention to the diverse ways in which players eliminate NPCs adversaries as part of specific gaming genres. Instead, this examination foregrounds ludic and diegetic representations of the player's own passing, as well as those that relate to NPC companions. In the second half, after providing context for what "death" can mean in digital gameplay, I turn to the Wolf Link Amiibo and how the accessory relies on and invites players to reimagine conventional perspectives of video gaming death.

Death in Popular Video Games

As noted above, video game eliminations frequently instantiate an ongoing process of die-and-retry, a repetitive cycle that allows players to constantly 1-up eternal rest. A rough equivalent of this idea can be seen in films, such as *Groundhog's Day* (1993) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), where characters played by Bill Murray and Tom Cruise recursively fail or perish but then immediately reawaken the same day to start anew. In these movies, death is an entertaining pretense that lacks ontological finality; it serves as a didactic means to strategize novel approaches to survival. In a similar manner, the majority of video games present death in ludic terms (Aarseth 1997, 2004, Juul 1999, 2005). Upon fatal contact with an adversary or when falling off a ledge, characters like Bill (or Lance) the commando, vampire hunter Simon Belmont, and the Italian plumber Mario (or Luigi) suddenly vanish from the screen, thereby signaling immediate albeit temporary defeat. Character eliminations of this type are often thought to be devoid of moral implications, for the player is presented with just two choices: discover how to conquer the puzzle or die again and again (Wenz 2013). On this reading, the boundary between life and death is reduced to practical problem-solving, not philosophical or theological quandary. To borrow from Frank

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Kermode's study (2000) of teleology in literature, we might say that our favorite digital protagonists lack or perhaps resist *the sense of an ending*. Given that Mario and his associates die, a lot, and with little penalty or self-reflection, virtual death can appear intellectually and emotionally trivial.

And yet, not all video gaming deaths are unremarkable. To say that the player's passing communicates mere failure obscures the fact that different games and game genres exhibit the loss of life in disparate ways. Many electronic games, for example, render fatality as something of an abstraction – meaning it can be unclear whether anything has actually perished or if the sequence of events has simply come to an end. The puzzle-game *Tetris* (1984) famously ends in what is technically called a "top out" – the inevitable point at which rapidly descending tetrominoes reach the top of the playing field. Although *Tetris* never references the concept of death nor simulates biological life, it is not uncommon to refer to a "top out" with the expression "I died" (Ho Sang 2014, Twin Galaxies Archive 2012). No less idiosyncratic, the titular orange figure of the arcade game *Q*bert* (1982) loudly curses "**@!#?@!**" on screen when knocked off floating blocks. In these two nostalgic examples, the language of death fits awkwardly with the idea of situational failure (Bernardi 2015). Even in the multiple iterations of the *Super Mario Bros.* series*,* the perils of the Mushroom Kingdom represent fairly innocuous obstacles rather than pernicious encounters. These and countless other electronic games approach death in a manner similar to Backgammon, the card game War, or even Chess: player-elimination occurs as an element of gameplay but with minimal violence or narrative importance (Lange 2002, Wenz 2013).

Early arcades of the 1970s and 80s were among the first platforms to introduce player-deaths in this manner. Due to the high cost of arcade cabinets, coin slots

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required the player to insert money in order to start or continue the game. Classics like *Pac-Man* (1980), *Donkey Kong* (1981), and *Galaga* (1981) thus established the repeated loss of life as a way of paying to play (Lange 2002). It was the advent of gaming consoles in the early '80s, such as the Nintendo Entertainment System, Atari, and Sega systems that brought electronic games into households, thereby obviating the requisite coin payment for replayable life (Kocurek 2015). Removing coin-operation from domestic gaming systems, however, did not make player death any less frequent. Early console games still force players to navigate and master a particular game's challenges with a limited set of lives and health. Many also have a "save" function, as well "check" or "spawn" points, which register in-game progress despite multiple deaths (Tocci 2008).

As consoles and home computers are now equipped with graphic cards, faster processing speeds, and overall improved hardware design, video gaming eliminations have become far more sensational – though often retaining the conventional "die-and-retry" mechanic. For example, first-person shooter (FPS) games, like the many iterations of *Fallout* (1997), *Call of Duty* (2013), and *Doom* (1993), employ graphic violence and gore to regale fans with moribund digital imagery. Likewise, survival-horror games, such as *Resident Evil* (1996), *Dead Space* (2008), and *Silent Hill* (1999), specialize in cinematic cut-scenes that trigger vivid animations of death introduced by supernatural elements (e.g., zombies, demons, ghosts). In these well-known titles, death becomes a jolting spectacle experienced in real time and in the first-person. Alternatively, myriad action-adventure and role-playing games (RPGs) narrate epic journeys wherein the loss of life can either halt or herald the apocalypse. *Final Fantasy* (1987) games introduce multiple end-of-the-world storylines and scenarios to explain major character fatalities. Such memorable narratives rely on death as a diegetic means to account for the game's broader imaginative universe or its

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cataclysmic end (Atkins 2003, Newman 2002, Simons 2006). Most recently, roguelite (and earlier roguelike) games have playfully destabilized conceptions of death *qua* failure by juxtaposing procedurally generated environments with the occurrence of so-called "perma-death." In *The Binding of Isaac* (2011)*, Enter the Gungeon* (2016)*,* and *Crawl* (2017)*,* to name again but a few, the deceased are forced to start from the beginning each round, losing knowledge of the game's randomized rooms, enemies, and items. Here, elimination becomes a unique experience buttressed by the player's experimentation with highly varied environments and gameplay mechanics.

These brief examples demonstrate that depictions of death in video games are never static. The myriad ways in which game developers mediate fatal encounters are increasingly multifaceted and constantly evolving. While death may show a series of failed attempts, it certainly also informs the rich gaming environments many of us intellectually and emotionally inhabit on a daily basis. The prominence of one form of elimination or another will, of course, depend on the game in question. Retro platformers like *Super Mario Bros., Castlevania,* and *Contra (*Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2017*)* are markedly less narrative-driven, thriving instead on processes of trial-and-error. In this case, death is experienced as part of the structural playthrough of a given title. Story-based games also often evince the customary replay function, but strive to engender memorable impressions of death that remain with the player even after the game has ended. This makes good sense: popular video games – much like contemporary cinema and literature – revel in storytelling as a means to engage the player's imagination.

As a testament to how enduring death has become, the popular gaming website *IGN.com* (n.d.) lists the number one video gaming moment in terms of character-elimination:

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"Death happens all the time in videogames. In *Call of Duty* it's a slap on the wrist, in *Dark Souls* it's education, in *Pac-Man* it's another coin for the machine. In *Final Fantasy VII,* though, one death is a genre-defining moment: Aerith Gainsborough's [death]...what hit so hard about Aerith's death wasn't just empathy for [the game's main character] Cloud—it was the fact that you, too, had known her, had invested all that time and energy in her, only for her to be suddenly taken away. There is no moment in gaming's emotional journey from kids' entertainment to modern story telling medium that has endured as strongly as this." (http://www.ign.com/top/video-game-moments/1; quoted also in Wenz 2013).

For casual and avid gamers alike, a character's passing is thus capable of engendering profoundly affective experiences, ones meant to be shared and remembered (Curtis 2015). And it is worth emphasizing that this collective remembrance can extend beyond visual or narrative representations. In fact, some of the most memorable games evince multisensory evocations of what dying sounds or feels like. Think, for example, of the failure melody and game-over cadenza triggered when Mario dies in the original *Super Mario Bros.*, or the disruptive controller vibration when Donkey Kong perishes in *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* (2014, 2018). Alternatively, in Heart Machine's critically acclaimed *Hyper Light Drifter* (2016), the titular Drifter audibly and visibly coughs up a pool of blood after major boss fights and at random. As the screen apoplectically flickers through such disturbing scenes, the player is immersed within a gaming world plagued with chronic illness. These instantiations of death (or dying) foreground affective responsiveness to, rather than cognitive understanding of, death (Langhorst 2014). We are made to *feel* death as a sensory interface with the game. In platformers like *Super Mario Bros.* and *Donkey Kong* the sounds and rumblings of death are at once irritating and amusing, whereas in *Hyper Light Drifter* the character's gradual decay lends seriousness to the overall mood while playing. In other words, multiple games may feature character elimination as a rather tedious obstacle to gameplay, but they also mediate wonder, immersion, and

empathy through the mechanic of death.

Nintendo's Amiibo Accessories

In light of the foregoing discussion, Nintendo's Amiibo technology creatively relies on but also reimagines conventional ideations of video gaming death. In particular, the "Wolf Link" Amiibo offers a compelling example wherein digital quietus becomes a multifaceted element of gameplay when playing *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. To clarify, Amiibo are "toy-to-life" figurines of Nintendo characters like Mario, Link, Donkey Kong and others. They are additional-purchase items, which complement digital gameplay and are never required to complete Nintendo games. Following the trend of *Skylanders* (Activision, 2011) and *Disney Infinity* (2013), Nintendo introduced Amiibo accessories in 2014, selling approximately 5.7 million toys worldwide their first year. Subsequent years indicate growing momentum as Nintendo sold approximately 24.7 million and then 28.9 million units in 2015 and 2016 respectively, although in 2017 Nintendo sold approximately 9.1 million units (Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2017).

Amiibo accessories contain wireless data-storage software – called a "near field communication" (NFC) device – which communicates with specific Nintendo hardware, including the Wii U and Switch consoles, as well as the handheld 3DS system. Via the NFC, Amiibo furnish players with varying benefits or "perks" that depend on the combination of toy and game. To receive a given perk, one places the small figurine (~4 inches tall) on the gamepad controller, at which point the NFC communicates with both game and gaming console to unlock an in-game utility (ambiibo, 2018). Employing the "Princess Zelda" Amiibo in *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess HD* re-release (2016), for instance, equips the main protagonist (Link) with additional "hearts" (i.e., character health), whereas the "Toon Link" Amiibo

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grants extra arrows in the same game. On the other hand, "Yoshi," "Princess Peach," "Mega Man," and several other Amiibo toys award driving costumes in *Mario Kart 8* (2014) and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* (2017). With more complex applicability, *Super Smash Bros.* (2014) allows players to train and store artificial intelligences within the Amiibo's software, copying the player's skill and patterns of play for characters represented in this specific game. Numerous Nintendo titles are Amiibo compatible and generally invite players to unlock new challenges, "skins," and other bonus applications.

Amiibo thus constitute material objects, which provide immaterial (digital) support to Nintendo users. Consequently, part of the appeal for Amiibo figurines lies in their status as material objects. Vividly distilling scenes of iconic videogaming action, Amiibo are displayed in homes and work places; many are also collected, traded, and sold online, often for exorbitant prices. In 2014, for example, the defective Samus Aran Amiibo with two cannons sold on eBay for $2,500 and was originally priced at $13 (Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2017). Whether representative of Princess Peach, Kirby, or some other Nintendo character, these statues are designed to allure. They are aesthetically attractive in their resemblance to action figures, just as their stamped-plastic form invites players to physically handle them. As such, Amiibo make for captivating objects of variegated play: they possess the visual and tangible incentive to play Nintendo games, even when the console is turned off. Their materiality promotes immersive engagements, which expand the player's gaming experience beyond the television screen or computer monitor. As the broader "toy-to-life" epithet suggests, Amiibo exude liveliness that informs and is informed by the player's interaction with the physical toy itself.

The Wolf Link Amiibo and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*
I recently acquired the Wolf Link Amiibo for the action-adventure game *The Legend of*

Zelda: Breath of the Wild (2017). The hard plastic icon depicts the characters Wolf Link with "Midna" (both are featured in the earlier game *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (2016) riding on his back. From online commercials, I inferred that the device would summon to my television screen the power of the Triforce goddesses in order to help defeat the wicked spirit Calamity Ganon. Specifically, by tapping the Amiibo statue on the gamepad controller, a figure of Wolf Link (without Midna) emerges in *Breath of the Wild* as a digital companion. The in-game manifestation of Wolf Link also precipitates a sound bite from *Twilight Princess,* signaling the character's arrival in a manner consistent with the earlier *Zelda* title. Thus, rather than proffering perks of additional gear or health, the physical toy generates an NPC to hunt for food, find concealed locations, and combat nearby enemies on the player's behalf. As *Breath of the Wild* turns on exploratory and combat-based gameplay, the Amiibo contributes an overtly practical advantage with regard to ludic gaming death: it helps diminish repeated elimination by aiding the player. One primary reason to employ the Wolf Link Amiibo, then, is to help ensure that the loss of life occurs less frequently.

Of course, the formal perk offered by the Amiibo is hardly a new approach to gaming survival; Nintendo, in introducing an NPC to help accomplish in-game directives, is reprising a traditional gaming convention. Several electronic games exploit NPC companionship as a means to enrich gameplay and generally help allay the event of player death. In *World of Warcraft* (2004) or *Diablo 3* (2012), one can regularly summon, invite, or decline diverse NPC "mounts" and "companions" to fight alongside primary protagonists. Likewise, *The Binding of Isaac* and *Secret of Mana* (1993, 2018) allow users to interact with "familiars" and "sprites" so as to collaboratively navigate the challenges presented in each game. Perhaps the most immediate equivalent to the Wolf Link companion is the German Shepherd NPC named "Dog" or "Dogmeat" in *Fallout 4* (2014). Akin to Wolf Link, Dogmeat

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accompanies the player, fetching desirable items and locating certain locations according to the player's preference. Broadly speaking, NPCs of this sort "enable a single player to participate in team-based experiences, improving immersion and allowing for more complex gameplay." They are designed to enhance the experience of certain electronic games by serving as "a surrogate teammate or co-adventurer" (Tremblay, Dragert, and Verbrugge 2014, 1). The same is true of Wolf Link in *Breath of the Wild*: howling, sniffing about, and responding to commands, the NPC operates as an animated companion that ventures alongside the player's avatar.

While the tactical companionship of Wolf Link will be evident to outside observers, some of the technology's other applications vis-à-vis death are perhaps less obvious. For example, I discovered early on that the Amiibo is time-sensitive – meaning the player can only summon Wolf Link once every twenty-four hours after the NPC's elimination. This is especially important because the lupine companion (like the player's avatar) has a limited amount of health. All games from the *Legend of Zelda* series feature ludic death as a gameplay mechanic: once (humanoid) Link loses enough health and ultimately perishes, he is immediately revived at a previous "save" point. When playing *Breath of the Wild* with the Wolf Link Amiibo, however, the player quickly learns to be mindful of their perishable associate according to a temporal pattern. Should Wolf Link die (unlike the player's avatar), the NPC cannot be reanimated until the following day. True, the player can continue playing without Wolf Link, but part of the Amiibo's appeal lies in juxtaposing virtual fellowship alongside a heightened self-awareness of proximate death. To this end, the player is forced to recognize that collective survival depends on an appreciation of death as a lasting consequence of the player's choices. Notably, the vitality of Wolf Link can be sustained by feeding the character food collected in-game (e.g., raw meat, vegetables, fruit). After taking damage the player has the opportunity to fulfill the

NPC's "biological needs" and forestall the twenty-four-hour death-cycle. With this in mind, Wolf Link manifests in *Breath of the Wild* as a virtual personality and surrogate "life" to be nurtured. The character's digital presence or absence registers an understanding of mortality that can alter the rhythms and challenges when playing with the Amiibo.

Furthermore, the performative manner in which Wolf Link is repeatedly brought (back) to life carries significance. As already noted, Amiibo are not only designed to offer in-game perks but serve as material objects with which players interact outside virtual environments. In this, Nintendo's hybrid technology challenges and exceeds the narrow view that videogaming exclusively involves escapism into pixelated screens. As Marc Antonijoan and David Miralles have noted, the complex interface of Amiibo (and similar gaming accessories) blurs "the boundary between toys and games, expanding existing modes of game play to the physical world, [and] providing the opportunity for physical play outside the game." (2016, 2388) Nintendo's "toy-to-life" accessories, according to Antonijoan and Miralles, intuitively widen the field of conceptual play by facilitating tactile and digital engagements with the Amiibo toy in- and outside a given game. Minna Ruckenstein has similarly argued that interactive toys of this kind enable "spatial extensions" which allow players to reshape their surrounding and effectively combine "the materiality of the toy with games and media." (2013, 480) For Ruckenstein, these small icons creatively obscure where virtual worlds begin and the physical world ends. These scholarly perspectives call attention to Amiibo as "postdigital" media (Berry 2015) that artfully transform the material and digital elements of electronic gameplay.

The same general interface informs playthrough of *Breath of the Wild*: application of the Wolf Link Amiibo to the gamepad controller at once summons the familiar *Zelda*

character to the screen and requires the player to tangibly interact with the material toy as part of the virtual game. What is especially compelling about this hybrid interface is the way in which resurrecting Wolf Link feels deliberately ritualistic, as if placing the figurine on the gamepad fictively marks a quasi-ceremonial performance appropriate to the aesthetics of death in *Breath of the Wild.* Though this may well sound odd – that playing an electronic game has anything to do with ritual practice – scholars have shown that both play and ritual have more in common than is typically assumed. Long before the advent of video games, cultural historian Johan Huizinga first connected the act of play with ritual, noting how in practice both instantiate "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."(2013, 480) According to Huizinga, "there is no formal difference between play and ritual" (ibid.) as both ascribe order and meaning to experience by virtue of coordinated movements in designated fields of play. Huizinga argues that, just as rituals can be playful, so too can play be ritualistic, for both serve to distinguish everyday life from temporary representations of reality. More recently, gaming scholar Rachel Wagner has shown that video games, in particular, "can work in ways that remarkably resemble rituals—down to the emphasis on a kind of rigid repetition requiring 'faultless execution' or predetermined gestures and behaviors" (2014, 17). Drawing from scholarship in religious studies, game theory, and Huizinga's study, Wagner demonstrates the complex ways in which electronic games "overlap as symbolic spaces of ritualized order-making" (ibid., 13). The insights of Huizinga and Wagner indicate that gaming and ritual performance are, indeed, closely intertwined: they both thrive on repetition and procedurality; they creatively demarcate extraordinary spaces of interaction; they also often mirror and comment upon ordinary experiences outside of ritualized spaces. In short, Huizinga and Wagner maintain that when we play games, we engage in ritual-like activities that manifest predictable but also profoundly meaningful spaces of encounter.

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For our purposes, the Wolf Link Amiibo foregrounds an inherent ritualism of gameplay, in that the toy's application corresponds with how ritual actions are depicted and enacted in *Breath of the Wild*. On the one hand, the player will discover several in-game objects that require procedural and repetitive acts in order to receive different benefits. After visiting monastic shrines riddled throughout Hyrule, for instance, (humanoid) Link attains mystical gifts called "spirit orbs." These tiny collectibles the player must eventually bring (with a prayer) to stone Goddess Statues that grant Link additional health or endurance. Alternatively, should Link desire increased inventory space for weaponry, he can offer sacrificial oblations (usually apples placed in small urns set before, again, stone effigies) to hidden "Korok" creatures and collect "Korok Seeds" for this purpose. The religious settings of both – monastic shrines and ritual oblations – is noteworthy and accentuates how collecting these fantastical objects entails in-game ritual performances that are consequential to the player's survival: the gathering and transformation of spirit orbs and Korok Seeds makes it all the more likely that Link will persevere and evade death with increased health, endurance, and inventory. By extension, the repetitive process of collecting these items registers an element of progression: it invites the player to gradually build their capacity to survive for longer sessions of play.

Equally compelling, *Breath of the Wild* also dramatizes the relationship between out-of-game objects (like Amiibo) and physical, ritual-like acts. The primary example of this can found in the game's interface with the Nintendo Switch or Wii U tablet. Among Link's arsenal of new gear in *Breath of the Wild* is a pixelated item called the "Sheikah Slate," a glowing tablet that allows the player's avatar to navigate and communicate with different magical devices found in the virtual world of Hyrule. The protagonist memorably carries the tablet with him everywhere he goes and taps the

device on specific Sheikah pedestals in order to open locked doors, learn new abilities, and generally communicate with different in-game technologies. The portable item is obtained at the start of *Breath of the Wild,* at which point the screen reads: "a mysterious tablet with a glowing center. You've never seen this device before and yet...there's something familiar about it." The visual parallels between the fictive Sheikah technology and Nintendo's Switch/Wii U tablet will be unambiguously "familiar" to players: both are handheld gadgets that have bright screens (the "glowing center") through which the user and avatar simultaneously look for various purposes. As such, the Sheikah Slate and physical controller interpolate the player *qua* Link by means of their visual and tangible similitude: as the player holds and employs the gamepad to interact with the game, the player's avatar carries and applies the Sheikah Slate to different surfaces and objects in a similar manner.

The point is that *Breath of the Wild* facilitates recognition of a cause-and-effect relationship between material objects – whether in-game or otherwise – and ritualistic performances. Just as the player taps the Wolf Link Amiibo to the gamepad controller, so too does the player's avatar tap the Sheikah tablet on pedestals to acquire new abilities and access shrines. Or, just as Link regularly engages with devotional statues and votives to gain bonus attributes, so can the player employ the toy-to-life effigy in order to gain the plastic figurine's programmed perk. Where these elements of the Amiibo's functionality help immerse the player within this *Zelda* game, they also inform how the toy statue combats the event of death. In particular, by repeatedly summoning the lupine hero, Wolf Link emerges as something of a figurative intercessory figure whose resurrectability signifies everlasting virtual life. Every time the NPC companion is invoked for aid, the gestural performance and material accessory serve as a tacit reminder that Wolf Link is always just beyond the reach of permanent elimination (at least after the twenty-four period). Of course, the

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same general sentiment could be said about the majority of Western video games: Mario, Luigi, Simon, Link, and others are immortalized during gameplay by consistently circumventing final death. When playing with the Wolf Link Amiibo, however, Nintendo's technology uniquely leverages its materiality and ritualism over the threat of player elimination. Rather than exclusively dependent on the virtual perils of *Breath of the Wild*, the toy-to-life icon locates the life and livelihood of Wolf Link both in and out of the game. Though the canine NPC will undoubtedly die many times during playthroughs, the physical toy operates as a point of "postdigital" encounter, ensuring that Wolf Link is simultaneously alive "here" in the Amiibo and – in the event of death – temporarily dead "there" in Hyrule. It is in this sense that the material statue and its ceremonial application rely on conventional notions of videogaming death, while reconfiguring how the player comprehends digital fatality by means of ritualized play.

That the player recursively reanimates Wolf Link after death also parallels the way in which *Breath of the Wild* generally explains the familiar die-and-retry cycle. Like all *Legend of Zelda* titles, *Breath of the Wild* revels in the themes of ruin and rebirth. At the game's start, Link notably awakens in a "Resurrection Chamber" to a world ravaged by the perennial menace known as Calamity Ganon. Having perished in the demon Ganon's attack on Hyrule a century ago, the player learns that Link has been revived in order to avenge the ghosts of a civilization lost. Complementing this narrative arc, the Wolf Link Amiibo obliquely fits the game's diegetic account of death and resurrection: where the player's avatar (Link) once died and has now been resurrected by ancient technology, so too can the player now employ the Amiibo technology to do the same for Wolf Link after elimination. Jason Tocci (2008) has shown that narrative explanations for rebirth are found in other games as well, including *Bioshock* (2007)*, World of Warcraft,* and others. In a similar fashion, *Breath*

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of the Wild suggests that ludic death is not necessarily an arbitrary design choice but an aesthetic that strengthens narrative coherence. This means that the ability to revivify Wolf Link via the plastic toy gives fictional significance to circumventing final death: the NPC companion can be brought back to life because the player possesses a magically efficacious device (the Amiibo) derived from the game-world of *Breath of the Wild*. As already noted, the player's own death and rebirth receive no such explanation: when (humanoid) Link perishes, the avatar simply starts anew from the last save-point with no allusion to resurrection. Use of the Wolf Link Amiibo, however, offers a unique experience with elimination wherein the player receives a greater penalty for death by proxy (from the NPC companion).

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning that Wolf Link can represent more than a mere NPC companion. For longstanding fans of the *Legend of Zelda* series, the ability to resurrect Wolf Link offers an additional, albeit obscure, layer of narrative depth. As alluded to above, Wolf Link is the playable form of the primary protagonist (humanoid Link) in *Twilight Princess* – the predecessor to *Breath of the Wild*. By featuring Wolf Link in two different *Legend of Zelda* games, the lupine character embodies a punning "Link" between gaming worlds and to past *Zelda* titles. This is made all the more prominent with the Wolf Link Amiibo, because in *Twilight Princess HD* (2016) the toy records the player's "health" (i.e., number of hearts) after opening an additional dungeon called the Cave of Shadows. If the player has played the Cave of Shadows in the former game, the exact number of collected hearts will be transferred to the Wolf Link NPC in *Breath of the Wild*. The specific details are less important here than the fact that the Wolf Link Amiibo projects a second "you" to play alongside in *Breath of the Wild*. The toy thus serves as a playful bridge between both games, exhibiting that participation in one has consequences in the other. For so-called Zelda timeline theorists, the Amiibo suggests narrative continuity for the

broader *Legend of Zelda* mythos. For more casual gamers, it conveys that when Wolf
Link dies, a surrogate "you" has perished once again but with the material assurance,
that tomorrow promises another attempt.

Conclusions

Death in popular video games often communicates failure to navigate in-game
directives and challenges; simulated experiences of fatality never evoke fear of or
mourning for genuine human loss. Frequently, the player is required to improve
gameplay skills in order to subvert untimely quietus and progress through digital
worlds. Yet many electronic games also implement narrative and aesthetic elements
orbiting elimination to affectively enhance gaming environments. In all such cases,
"death" means something; it is shared, remembered, and emotionally felt. As I have
demonstrated, Nintendo's Wolf Link Amiibo employs familiar tropes associated with
death but also adds novelty to what player elimination can represent. A remarkably
whimsical thing, the "toy-to-life" figurine offers optional support in *The Legend of
Zelda: Breath of the Wild* by generating a perishable NPC companion. In addition, it
requires the player to summon Wolf Link by means of ritual performance that
dovetails with the game's narrative explanation of death, resurrection, and other
material objects in Hyrule.

By way of future research prospects, one facet of Nintendo's Amiibo accessories that I
do not adequately address is how these interactive objects are marketed to appeal to
consumer cultures. No doubt, Amiibo serve as gateway products that incentivize
further encounter with Nintendo games and hardware. And as scholarly increasingly
uncover the complex intersections of religious sensibilities and gaming culture, it is
worth considering what Nigel Thrift calls "the material aspects of glamour," the

"enchantment without supernaturalism" of contemporary consumerism. As Thrift adeptly writes, Western economies now possess "the ability to generate a kind of secular magic that can act as a means of willing captivation becomes a key means of producing dividends" (2010, 290). In many ways, the ritualism and material presence of Amiibo suit such a description. As already noted, these accessories are alluring artifacts, and not least because they promise often unexpected and lively engagements. Yet they also attract, even exploit, affective behaviors and responses in ways that can transform our lives, for better or worse. Given the above discussion of death in video games, further research into how death and dying are marketed for specific audiences would yield significant insights into the cultural persistence of virtual fatality.

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