DaCNet

Interdisciplinary Death & Culture Research

PLAYING DEAD ABSTRACTS

The Slender Man: the Internet's Playful Creation of a Monster

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In 2009, the Internet gave birth to a monster. The sharing of images, stories, web videos, video games, and all forms of digital content led to a mass communal story online, with quite a lot of people all contributing to the great online mythology of the Slender Man. Meanwhile, the monster works its dark works – its figure lingering in the back of photos a demonstration of its threat. Of how it steals children, and brutally kills its adult victims. The online community engaged with the myth both directly, in their telling and re-telling, and also indirectly, but discussing the myth with a sincerity which, at first glance, appears intense. But this sincerity is in an act of play – users play with the stories, religious language, and sincerity in their engagement of a mythology of death. The stories themselves play with the abstract boundary between the digital and the non-digital worlds. The structure of the full mythos – the collection of the various forms the narrative takes – demonstrates a horrific relationship of monster to society, but more importantly society to itself, which the myth also playfully places the audience into – so they become trapped in the play with death in the digital, which follows them even when the computer is off.

The Pleasures of Survival: The Gamification of Zombie Novels

Dr Chloé Germaine Buckley, Manchester Metropolitan University

This paper argues that twenty-first-century zombie fiction exemplifies 'Convergence Culture': the flow of content across multiple media platforms and the meshing of 'top-down' production processes with 'bottom-up' processes activated by readers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). The twenty-first-century proliferation of zombie fiction in print is a result of the genre's growth across other media: horror film, serial television, roleplaying, table-top and video games. In a reversal of the traditional model of adaptation, zombie fiction draws on these other media. Examples include Naomi Alderman's book tie-in for the couch-to-5k running app, *Zombies! Run!* (2016) and Max Brailler's *Can You Survive the Apocalypse*? (2011).

Such zombie fiction reveals the 'gamification' of popular culture (see Koivisto, 2017; Deterding el al, 2011; Raessens 2006;). As Jonna Koivisto notes, 'gameful interactions are becoming normalised into our cultural structures and imagery.' To encourage 'gameful' interactions, twenty-first century zombie narratives borrow the pacing of videogames as well as the ludic mechanics and 'flow' dynamics present in many types of games. One effect of these gamifying strategies is to construct

the reader as active agent in the production of meaning. This reading positions the zombie as a figure of potential empowerment, rather than a repository of social anxiety and negative identification - common readings in Literary Studies and Sociology. As well as complicating dominant critical paradigms in its appeal to pleasure, zombie fiction problematizes the notion of gamification itself. Most theorists of gamification insist on its utilitarian function in promoting mastery of an external goal. Yet, gamified zombie fiction such as Max Brook's *Zombie Survival Guide* (2004) paradoxically challenges such outcomes. Thus, I argue, zombie fiction can disrupt top-down corporate processes that seek to commodify gamification. Zombie fiction is exemplary of the ways contemporary popular culture uses multimodal storytelling enmeshed within paradoxically competing processes and structures. Here, though it is the figure of the zombie and its threat of annihilating death that marks such entanglements.

Playing the Underworld? Picturing Dead at Play in Greek Vase-Painting

Dr Barbara Carè, Universities of Turin and Nottingham

Depiction of deceased in ancient Greek iconography is widely attested, and although the narrative construction varies very widely, the images frequently display the dead involved in real life activities, such us gaming. Thus, a variety of pastime is shown in combination with grave scene; furthermore, a unique and intriguing vase shows youths playing before a grave while carrying on the opposite side the only certain red-figured depiction of Charon, the ferryman responsible for conveying the dead to the afterworld.

Game and its imagery have assumed in antiquity a strong symbolic association as a signifier of more complex ideological values, especially in relation to the funerary performance characterized by a strict codification of ritual behaviours and gestures and a symbolic resonance (in literary sources game is associated with afterlife as well). The contribution offers an insight into this topic. Case studies will be discussed in an attempt to shed light on the metaphorical meanings of game-related evidence by looking at how this material has been overlaid with symbolic meanings and beliefs.

Some Games You Just Can't Win: Crowdfunded Memorialisation, Grief and *That Dragon, Cancer*

Matt Coward, University of York

January 2016 saw the final release of Numinous Games' crowdfunded walking simulator *That Dragon, Cancer*. A game powerful indie game which subverts many of gaming's traditional and valued norms. In less than two hours of abstracted adventure players are transported through a series of vignettes documenting one family's struggle with cancer, and the battle faced by their terminally ill child, Joel. Digital memorialisation has been documented by scholars since the late 1990s. This has come in the form of sites specifically created for the purpose of memorialisation, social networking sites repurposed by their users for moralisation (Myspace and more recently Facebook), and online virtual worlds (*Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*). However, within *That Dragon, Cancer* the productive nature of grief has created and envisioned an experience purpose-built for memorialisation. In this paper I will first document digital memorialisation within virtual environments. From here, I will

discuss the ways in which *That Dragon, Cancer* provides a purpose-built space for both grief, memorialisation and understanding, focusing on the important stylistic and mechanic-based decisions undertaken in the games design. Finally, I will explore the way in which *That Dragon, Cancer*, through the use of crowdfunding in late 2014 transformed from a project memorialising one child, to the memorialisation of many across the globe.

Driving Safely or Running Down Pedestrians? Players' Experiences of Violent Open World Games

Dr Jack Denham and Dr Matthew Spokes, York St John University

This paper presents initial findings from fifteen qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young people about their playing practices of the popular videogame, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013-2015), and particularly, their experiences of death and violence as it is 'played' in the fictional city, Los Santos. Psychological research in videogame violence has focused on a highly problematic causal link between simulated aggression and real-world violence which potentially obscures a rounded understanding and conceptualization of the sorts of social practices and processes at play when we 'play'. Sociological or Criminological work has been limited thus far, and has found its groundwork theoretically in Mike Presdee's notions of 'carnivalesque', lawless, structureless spaces. Contrary to this, we argue for a more considered approach that unpacks the interrelationship between social, spatial and procedural practices with regards to forms of simulated violence and death, closing substantive knowledge gaps in a controversial topic that has attracted sustained - and heated - tabloid debate.

Ars Moriendi, Graveyard Poetry and the Gothic Game Tutorial

Jon Garrad, Independent Scholar

This paper is something of a thought experiment. It will read particular coordinates in the cultural praxis of death, Gothic as a genre and gaming as a mode against one another, and establish the extent to which congruence exists between them.

On the one hand, we have the 'graveyard school' of eighteenth-century poetry, defined (after Parisot, 2016) through narrative strategy and its concern with the post mortem journeys of body and soul as a kind of *ars moriendi* for the Enlightenment, inheriting the spiritual responsibilities of these earlier texts while palming their practicalities off onto death professionals.

On the other, we have the tutorial experience of games whose stories begin with protagonist deaths: *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor*, as well as the 'prelude' sessions of *Vampire: the Masquerade* and its associated games. Each of these games has to teach the player a) what happens after 'they', as avatar-protagonist, have 'died', b) how to conduct themselves in the new space they inhabit (the implicit and unwritten expectations of the game's form and genre) and c) the practicalities of existence (how the controls work).

I argue that the similar concerns of these discrete textual groups create a need for similar aesthetic and narrative strategies. Furthermore, the initial struggle with new controls and environments creates an iterative experience similar to the reading and rereading of a difficult poem, as advanced by Galef (1998), Hirsch (1999) and Padel (2009). The essentially iterative experience of mastering a gameplay process makes the 'reading' of a game more comparable with poetry than with film or prose texts, and poetic theories and praxis more valuable tools in the game critic's proverbial box.

Staying Dead: Burial and Self-Exhumation in the State of the Nation Play

Dr Benjamin Poore, University of York

D.C. Moore's epic history play *Common*, staged at the National Theatre in London in 2017, is set in the eighteenth century, at the time of the Enclosure Acts. Mary returns to her village a wealthy woman, having been left for dead some years before by her brother. Her homecoming doesn't go to plan, however, and she is killed and buried by her sister. At the start of Act 3, Mary digs herself out of her grave – no naturalistic explanation necessary – and goes off to join forces with the landowner. *Common* was one of several high-profile theatre productions in 2017 to materialise ideas of land and national myth by placing landscapes and soil on stage, a phenomenon that I call 'native soil'. Another example is Mike Bartlett's *Albion*, set in the present day in the garden of an Oxfordshire grand house where Audrey has moved after the death of her son. In their attempts to restore the estate, Audrey and her family fight a losing battle against the encroachment of soil, darkness and decay. Both *Common* and *Albion* have been read as the inchoate beginnings of a playwriting response to Brexit, and the 'nativist' populism of the Leave campaign in the 2016 EU Referendum. To deal with the rupture of Brexit, the theory goes, the modern state-of-the-nation play needs to break with the genre's realist conventions.

However, this paper also compares *Common* and *Albion* to two plays from the turn of the millennium, *Luminosity* by Nick Stafford and *Sanctuary* by Tanika Gupta, both of which also feature characters who won't stay buried in the earth. Is it possible that – for all their rejection of the rhetoric of nativism – these 2017 plays are more insular than their new-writing counterparts of fifteen years ago, because they end up burying Britain's imperial past?

Living and Dying in the City of the Damned: A Close Reading of Death in Mordheim's Gothic Post-apocalypse

Jonathan Stubbs, Nazarene Theological College, University of Manchester

As early as Johan Huzinga's 1938 landmark exploration of play, *Homo Ludens*, death has been recognised as integral to play. Today's digital games continue this close association. This motif is particularly evident in both apocalyptic and gothic games. Whilst apocalyptic games arguably focus on death in the context of heroic struggle, Gothic games typically emphasise death's impermanence, but eternal presence.

This paper provides a close reading of the theme of death in the single player campaigns of Rouge Factor's *Mordheim: City of the Damned*. Multiple missions were played through, during the story-mode campaign, noting aspects of narration, game-world environment and post-battle sequences. Additional observations were made through game-specific 'Let's Plays'. Death looms large in its gothic aesthetics, from narration to macabre corpse 'presentation'. Meanwhile, its mechanics provide the continued threat of permadeath, eschewing the ability to casually reload.

As part of a growing trend of permadeath games *City of the Damned*'s motif of death emphasises its inevitability and harsh reality in the precarity of this gothic post-apocalypse. Whilst death is arguably more significant, the ultimate message is one of meaninglessness and the expendability of life in the pursuit of wealth for the warband's distant patron.

Pushing the Posthuman Perspective – Playful Lessons in Death

Dr Poppy Wilde, Coventry University

Posthuman subjectivity proposes new ways of understanding lived experience. From this perspective subjects are seen as constantly entwined with others, human and non-human, against a humanist tradition that proposes the subject is self-contained, autonomous and fully in control of their own thoughts and actions. This recognition has led to a renewed understanding of how and what we are affected by. However, Braidotti (2013) suggests that to push the posthuman agenda further we should also consider what such a perspective could tell us about death and dying.
In this paper I take gaming as an example of posthuman death. This develops previous research in which avatar-gamer can be theorised as an embodiment of posthuman subjectivity, wherein neither entity is considered separate from the other (Wilde and Evans 2017). Drawing on Barad's notion of intra-action, I proposed that these entities are engaged in posthuman empathy – non-hierarchically and affectively entangled. However, whilst this understanding might inform our understanding of how we live, how much can this example of posthuman subjectivity tell us about death?

Using the avatar-gamer subjectivity to explore this, I consider what death in a game can tell us when viewed from a posthuman perspective. I draw on fieldnotes from my 18-month autoethnography in World of Warcraft that specifically focus on death and dying. In analysing this data, I ask: can reflexively engaging with a (posthuman) form of death allow a rethinking of death's place in our lives, and how we respond to it? I conclude that even when acknowledging posthuman and distributed subjectivity, death is still constructed and conceived of in ways fitting a humanist, neoliberal society. Whilst Braidotti (2013: 129) argues that we should 'think with and not against death', our media outputs, games included, have a long way to go in order to take up this challenge.

Negotiating death positivity in video games: overcoming the addiction to respawning

Solveiga Zabaite, University of Glasgow

Death in video games has long been presented as a signifier of failure, a minor nuisance resulting in either simple respawning or frustration of having to play from the last save point. However, video games have the power to be transformative and persuasive (Bogost, 2007). In this presentation I will explore how video games can engage with death in a more profound and instructive way. Specifically, I have chosen to look at the topic of death in video games through the lens of the mission of the death positivity movement. The death positivity movement can be described as a de-centralized contemporary social movement, connecting death workers, educators, artists, journalists, etc., and geared towards encouraging open dialogue about death, dying and bereavement.

On October 18th, 2017, the first game to be explicitly marketed as 'death positive' - *A Mortician's Tale* - was released. It received mixed reactions from reviewers and players. I will provide my critique on the game's superficial engagement with the death positivity movement. Further, I will discuss such games as *The Graveyard (2008), That Dragon, Cancer (2016), What Remains of Edith Finch (2017)* among others, that fulfil the movement's goals better than the aggressively marketed *A Mortician's Tale.* I will also discuss different engagements with permadeath (a concept in gaming, meaning that when a character dies it is permanently removed from the game) that can illuminate the concept of death positivity from unexpected angles. One example is game writer Christopher Livingston's unexpectedly poignant experiment with permadeath in the open world zombie survival game *DayZ:* he played until his character died, choosing to never play the game again. I argue that Livingston unknowingly succeeded in performing a death positive act, using this form of art to reflect on his own mortality.