



UNIVERSITY
of York

PLAYING DEAD



DaCNet
Interdisciplinary Death & Culture Research

WELCOME

Welcome to Playing Dead. The first, of what we hope to be many, one-day symposia exploring death and culture in society. Today's symposium offers a broad range of papers from a variety of scholars working across a range of disciplines.

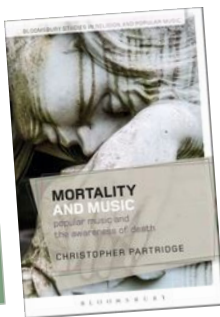
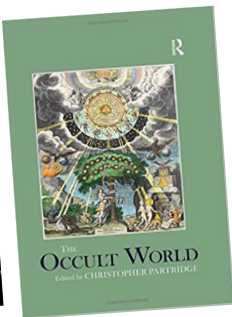
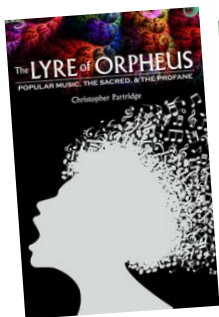
Play, when considered outside of the realms of childhood, is still finding its feet in the academic environment. As such, whether we seek to convene an activity as play or leisure, we are still questioned about the 'seriousness' of play. It is the purpose of today's event to add to the rich and ever-developing dialogue of play within contemporary society. Death and death-scholarship, too, is somewhat wary of the realm of gaming, in which death, for the most part, is synonymous with punishment. However, the tides are turning. Releases such as Tale of Tales' *The Graveyard* (2008) or, more recently, Laundry Bear Games' *A Mortician's Tale* (2017), a self-described death-positive experience, offer space in gaming environments in which conversations between death and leisure might be reconsidered. However, these death-focused games are not without their own complications and nuances. Yet, what can be seen is that the independent video game market is beginning to provide new and innovative ways for players to encounter death in its diverse myriad of forms.

Alongside a keynote address from Professor Christopher Partridge, we will delve into cultures, practices, narrative and technologies as we explore the intersections between, death, culture and play. We will be provided a playful posthuman lesson in death; negotiate death positivity within video games; discuss the crowdfunding of memorialisation; convene with the monstrous Slender Man; analyse the pleasures of survival within zombie narratives; confront theatrical incarnations who won't stay buried beneath the earth; negotiate permadeath in the City of the Damned; before finally delving into the violent virtual city of Los Santos.

We hope that you enjoy today's symposium provides you with space for discussion and analysis.

Matt Coward & Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce

DaCNet, University of York



Professor Christopher Partridge Lancaster University

Christopher Partridge is Professor of Religious Studies in the department of Politics, Philosophy & Religion at Lancaster University. His research interests include countercultural discourses, protest politics, esoteric thought, and paranormal culture as well as a particular interest in the social significance of popular music.

He is the author of *Mortality and Music: Popular Music and the Awareness of Death* (Bloomsbury, 2015); *The Occult World* (editor, Routledge, 2015) *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, The Sacred, and The Profane* (Oxford University Press, 2014); *Dub in Babylon* (Equinox, 2010); *The Lure of the Dark Side: Satan and Western Demonology in Popular Culture* (co-authored with Eric Christianson, Routledge, 2009); and *UFO Religions* (Routledge, 2003). As well as this, Chris is the editor of the series *Studies in Religion and Popular Music* (Bloomsbury) and the co-editor of the series *Studies in Popular Music* (Equinox).

Morbidity, Mortality, Music

As well as the ubiquitous themes of love and betrayal in popular music, there has also been an interest (sometimes a related interest) in violence and death, from early folk songs through to contemporary heavy metal. Focusing on popular music produced over the last couple of decades, this paper discusses some of the often macabre and outré explorations of death, violence, suicide, and gore in popular music.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

SESSION I

CHAIR: DR RUTH PENFOLD-MOUNCE



Laundry Bear Games (2017) *A Mortician's Tale*.

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.

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 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.

SOME GAMES YOU JUST CAN'T WIN

SESSION II

CHAIR: PROFESSOR JOANNA LATIMER



Tale of Tales (2008) *The Graveyard*.

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

Vivian Asimos, Durham University

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 SLENDER MAN

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 Brailer's *Can You Survive the Apocalypse?* (2011).

Such zombie fiction reveals the 'gamification' of popular culture (see Koivisto, 2017; Deterding et 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.

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?

STAYING DEAD

SESSION III

CHAIR: DR DAVID BEER



Living and Dying in the City of the Damned: A Reading of *Mordheim*'s Gothic Post- Apocalypse

Jonathan Stubbs, Nazarene Theological
College, University of Manchester

As early as Johan Huizinga'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.

Driving Safely or Running Down Pedestrians? Player 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*, 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 'carnavalesque', 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.

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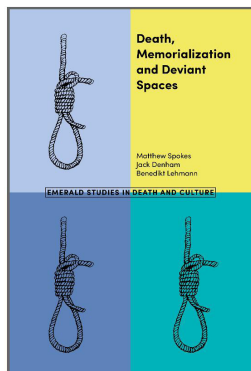
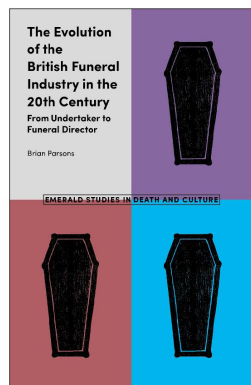
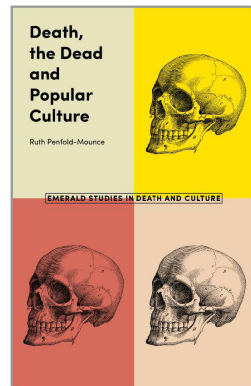
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DEATH & CULTURE NETWORK



The Death & Culture Network (DaCNet) based at the University of York seeks to explore and understand cultural responses to mortality. It focuses on the impact of death and the dead on culture, and the way in which they have shaped human behaviour, evidenced through thought, action, production and expression. The network is committed to promoting and producing an inter-disciplinary study of mortality supported by evidence and framed by theoretical engagement.

As well as convening the biennial conference Death & Culture at the University at York, DaCNet also has a book series with the award winning publisher Emerald Publishing, an active interdisciplinary research network, a reading group, and is the host of postgraduate and early career research forum RoSII (Researchers of Sensitive Interdisciplinary Issues).

Death & Culture II

6-7 Sep 2018, University of York

The human response to mortality is a research theme across the arts, humanities and social sciences. As a result, this conference seeks to provide a forum for networking and sharing interdisciplinary death scholarship. We welcome research rooted in empirical studies as well as conceptual and theoretical engagement which focus on cultural responses to death and the ways it has shaped understandings and perspectives on mortality. The conference, in its second iteration, seeks to continue engaging with the study of mortality as an academic enterprise, supported by evidence and framed by theoretical engagement. This truly interdisciplinary event brings together death scholars, including postgraduates, as well as those who might not consider themselves death scholars, whose work that overlaps with death and the dead.

With keynote presentations from:

- Professor Joanna Bourke (Birkbeck, University of London)
- Professor Dorte Christensen (Aarhus Universitet, Denmark)
- Professor Dina Khapaeva (Georgia Tech, Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts, USA)
- Professor Stephen Regan (Durham University)

For more information, or to book your place, please visit our website:

www.york.ac.uk/dacnet

PROGRAMME

09:00 Registration

SESSION I

09:30 Pushing the Posthuman Perspective - Playful Lessons in Death (Dr Poppy Wilde, Coventry University)

10:00 Negotiating Death Positivity in Video Games: Overcoming the Addiction to Respawnning (Solveiga Zabaite, University of Glasgow)

10:30 Some Games You Just Can't Win: Crowdfunded Memorialisation, Grief and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Matt Coward, University of York)

11:00 Coffee break

11:30 Keynote address: Morbidity, Mortality, Music (Professor Christopher Partridge, Lancaster University)

12:30 Lunch

SESSION II

13:30 The Slender Man: The Internet's Playful Creation of a Monster (Vivian Asimos, Durham University)

14:00 The Pleasures of Survival: The Gamification of Zombie Novels (Dr Chloé Germaine Buckley, Manchester Metropolitan University)

14:30 Staying Dead: Burial and Self-Exhumation in the State of the Nation Play (Dr Benjamin Poore, University of York)

15:00 Coffee break

SESSION III

15:30 Living and Dying in the City of the Damned: A Close Reading of *Mordheim's* Gothic Post-Apocalypse (Jonathan Stubbs, Nazarene Theological College, UoM)

16:00 Diving Safely or Running Down Pedestrians? Players Experiences of Violent Open World Games (Dr Jack Denham & Dr Matthew Spokes, York St John University)

16:30 Closing remarks

16:45 Close



Thanks and Acknowledgements

Special thanks are offered to the University of York's Research Centre for Social Sciences who generously fund DaCNet and to the Department of Sociology at the University of York

Thanks to Professor Joanna Latimer, Dr David Beer and Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce for chairing today's sessions.

Thanks to *Tale of Tales* (p. 8) and *Laundry Bear Games* (p. 1, 4 & 20) for allowing the use artwork from their games in this booklet.

Special thanks to all of our fantastic contributors who have made this event possible.

