Death at the Crossroads of Subjecthood in *Happy Wheels* (Fancy Force, 2010)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines grammarised death mechanics and the moves of digital corpses in *Happy Wheels* (Fancy Force 2010) to point out how death is organised around a necropolitical mode of perception. It asserts that this grammarisation of death amplifies the real-life precarity of the deceased between subjecthood and objecthood by analysing how death is made into a spectacle with voyeuristic tendencies which verge on pornographic. By relating this to Giorgio Agamben's and Achille Mbembe's scholarship on bare life and the living dead, I ultimately propose that *Happy Wheels*, and other games in which game bodies are designed for destruction, entangle with real-life instances of denigration and subjugation of human lives.

Keywords

Death, necropolitics, game analysis, *Happy Wheels*, grammarisation

INTRODUCTION

Happy Wheels is a 2010 web browser game published by its creator, Jim Bonacci, through his studio, Fancy Force. Though the Adobe Flash software that *Happy Wheels* was originally built on is now defunct, *Happy Wheels* has been preserved on its host website, totaljerkface.com, where it continues to be freely available to play. The gameplay sees players select a vehicle-bound player-character and attempt to navigate the character through treacherous 2-D platformer levels with usually disastrous consequences. Discussing his design intentions with Vice magazine shortly after the game's initial release, Bonacci expressed that his desire was to create a game with violent death mechanics which emphasised humour and spectacle to make the deaths themselves a source of playful entertainment (Bonacci in Holmes 2010, n.p.). Bonacci describes how the 'tame or boring' death mechanics that he had encountered in other Flash games made death, though common, a less appealing and less interesting part of play (ibid). Indeed, *Happy Wheels* puts the violent deaths of its roster of characters central to the game's core appeal, with the game gaining notoriety for its treatment of death as spectacular and humorous.

Death in video games is realised through the representations of the game system and the performances of players which are, in turn, grammarised by the affordances of game mechanics and the moves that are available to players. 'Grammarisation' in this

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sense refers to the ways in which video game design aspects formalise death through game structures, mechanics, and moves. The treatment of the digital bodies represented are important and revealing points of encounter as they are indexical references to how death is coded in each gameworld. As Christiansen (2014) points out, 'by playing with death, it acquires new meaning and purpose', and so it can be read as a rhetorical force that is rich in its potential for analysis (2). Players negotiate a relationship with death in play that has a wide variety of designed gameplay implications, consequences and associated affects as a result of its grammarisation. This makes death mechanics in games a rich area of study to further understand death in a wider social and cultural milieu. The treatment of death in digital games does have real-life resonances and entanglements that can be read against the current necropolitical horizon through what Amanda Phillips (2015) terms 'mechropolitics'. Phillips clarifies that 'the simulation of death as both technological feat and gamic goal produces a playground of mortality in which new orientations toward death and dying might be invented, rehearsed, and even normalized' (138). For example, the gamic technological feat of the headshot and the twitch reflexes required for players to carry out the headshot in games, Phillips argues, renders the routine police shootings of unarmed civilians more acceptable and likely (146-147). Similarly, Mayar (2021) describes 'extermination through ludification as not only the ultimate but also the most plausible result of the self-assigned, but popularly sustained, right of the sovereign to rule over human bodies' (5). The ergodic nature of gameplay enmeshes with onscreen representations of these death orientations, making play a compelling arena to assesses the many entanglements that games have with real necropolitical structures through an 'entwining of the technological and the cultural' (Phillips 2015, 137). That playful action around abstract concepts, including death, is worthy of scholarly thought is apparent in Bogost's (2007) arguments on the persuasive quality of video games, in which the relationship between the player and the computational moves available to the player are designed around and frame logics which ultimately structure behaviours both in gameplay and beyond it (3; 29; 340). These structured game behaviours could be further read as a type of constrained reasoning that leaves traces on the bodies and nervous systems of players (Damasio 1996, 1413-1415). Play (inter)actions may start to form the basis of behaviours in response to the causal links between processes and models of political and cultural logic identifiable in video game design. Exploration of how these moves and mechanics resonate with cultural sensibilities around death which continue to allow the denigration and exploitation of populations is worth pursuing.

This paper examines death as the crossroads between subjecthood and objecthood and investigates how death mechanics and player-moves that are available in *Happy Wheels* amplify its spectacular, objectifying configurations. The investigations conducted in this paper concerning death moves in *Happy Wheels* and their associated affects in play experience were conducted via this author's own gameplay that was recorded in a play research diary and then critically analysed with necropolitical theory and games research literature. Using my own play to develop these arguments, I took the treatment and visibility of digital corpses as indexical points of encounter that make, as Schwartz (2015) elegantly puts it, 'an ontologically invested statement about the corpse as a material object' (103). In its material reality, the corpse 'threatens subjectivity from elsewhere' and 'destabilises the present with the threat of flux, decay, disappearance, and oblivion' (2). Moisseeff (2020) also points out this paradoxical effect of the presence of the bodies of the deceased: 'making people feel at once the irrevocable absence of the deceased and yet his or her atrocious material presence' (185). A reading of the corpse as crossroads between

subject and object accounts for how it 'disrupts stable dualities between subjectivity and objectivity' that, in referencing the deceased, maintains 'a kind of marginal subjectivity' while nonetheless existing primarily in its current state as a material object, no longer inhabited by the life that is now gone (Schwartz 2015, 26). As such, the presence of a body provides a site of mediation on and around which modes of perception are structured. How game death mechanics organise death into a representational output is made visible on the digital corpse: how the body moves, how players encounter it and might interact with it, and how it functions in gameplay experience all have complex resonances with real world treatments of the dead and dying. The first half of this paper aims to point out the ways in which the body in *Happy Wheels* is primed for destruction in pursuit of spectacle by analysing the moves of the digital corpse and its moments of destruction. In doing so, I point out pornographic resonances in the game's emphasis on bodily destruction and gore which furthers the objectification of these bodies. I also argue that the power over these digital bodies that the game affords players further invites experimentation in which the possibility for creating suggestive of amusing spectacles leads to a further trivialisation of death. The second half of this paper moves beyond the moment of destruction and introduces Achille Mbembe's (2003; 2019) conceptualisation of the living dead to argue that death imposes onto life in *Happy Wheels*. The loss of subjecthood suffered by the living dead is legible through their exile from the category of humanness and the confiscation of rights over their own lives; ultimately denying them meaningful deaths. This concludes with reference to the marginalised groups represented in the *Happy Wheels* character roster and my assertion that these player-characters that are designed for death, are, in fact, caricatures of real marginalised groups whose lives are both overtly and covertly devalued, reflecting real life inequalities.

DESIGNING SPECTACULAR DEATH

As set out in my introduction, death in video games is a designed and grammarised performance that takes place across player(s) and the game system's formalising structure of rules, mechanics, and moves. It is through this mediation that gameplay emerges: the player's input is subject to the ways in which the game frames and configures play – which sometimes includes in-game death – into a representational output. How the digital body moves – how it works as/with game mechanics and how players may engage with or respond to it – is ripe for analysis. Looking at the dead or dying bodies in *Happy Wheels*, it is clear that death has been designed towards the creation of spectacle. As has been noted in my introduction, one of Jim Bonacci's intentions for *Happy Wheels* as the game's creator was to make death an entertaining element of gameplay, and he cites the moves of the digital corpse as central to this mission:

> It always bothered me when, in similar titles, you'd fall off your vehicle and harmlessly bounce around. In other cases, you would have the same canned animation over and over … For me, half of the fun of playing a game that imitates life (sort of), is making mistakes and seeing the end result. (Bonacci in Holmes 2010, n.p.)

Bonacci's attention to spectacle did garner *Happy Wheels* success in the years after its release. A cursory glance over the content of the prominent Let's Play YouTube channels in the years after *Happy Wheels* was publishes indicates both that the game amassed a fairly large player-base, and that there was an appetite to watch the game as an audience member of another player. YouTube personality PewDiePie, for

example, amassed a series of over 70 *Happy Wheels* Let's Play videos from 2012-2016, with one video called 'HAPPY WHEELS – FUNNY MOMENTS MONTAGE' (2012) receiving 29 million views. The success of *Happy Wheels* as something to not only play but to watch as a Let's Play video speaks to its success in creating entertaining spectacles. As such, the game design cause and effect become quite clear: Bonacci, as an Adobe Flash game designer and creator, felt compelled to make death in his game into something entertaining and spectacular, the outcome of which can be seen in the resulting internet content which shows players, commentators, and audiences taking ludic pleasure from these death mechanics. What must be noted here is that death as a representational mechanic is subject to the desires of its designer, and so in this case, death mechanics have been organised around design goals to provoke, excite, and entertain.

Many video games code the death of an avatar or player-character as a failure through a Game Over state; what Fassone calls 'a form of cybernetic caesura in which interaction is suspended and usually can only be resumed at the price of returning to a previous state' (2017, 54). In *Happy Wheels*, however, the relationship between death and failure is less clear cut. Though the game is ostensibly won by reaching the end of levels, the alternative ends that player-characters can meet in death indicate that the creation of these spectacles is an equally valid goal of gameplay. Winning by finishing a level is marked in *Happy Wheels* by a small pop of confetti along with a message to players notifying them of their victory (figure 1), though I argue that the extreme violence of the death sequences is given just as much, if not more fanfare with blood particles mimicking the confetti to a similar celebratory effect (figure 2).

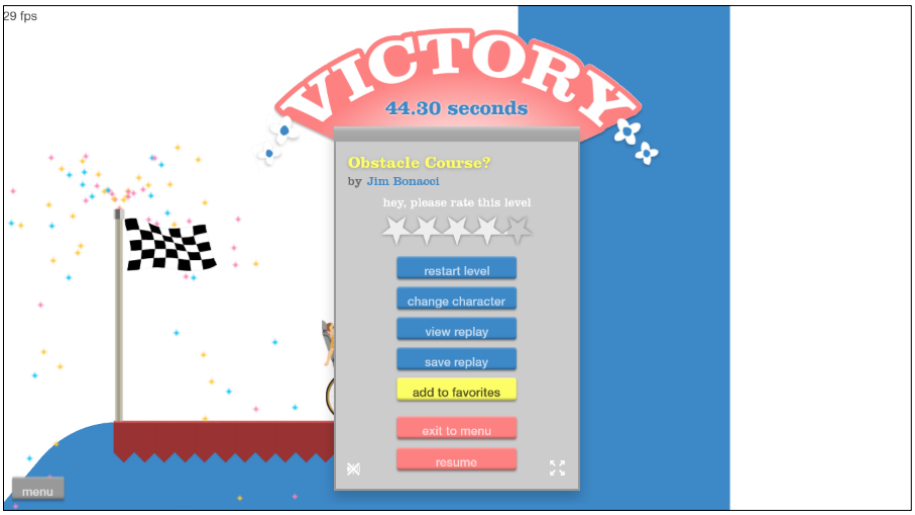

Figure 1: Completing a level in *Happy Wheels* is marked with a small pop of confetti.

Figure 2: Death in *Happy Wheels* sees characters mutilated in spectacular ways, with spurts of blood resembling the celebratory confetti of the win condition.

The exaggerated physics of *Happy Wheels*, combined with the wide variety of hazards present in the levels, mean that no two deaths will look the same and each death becomes a unique display. This is compounded by the limp, floppy quality of the bodies themselves. The way in which characters will fall and flail about in their environments is known in gameplay terminology as ragdolling – named for how these characters come to resemble ragdoll toys in their limpness. In *Happy Wheels*, making die can be realised by moving the characters through the level and exposing them to a range of lethal hazards like falls or spikes, or by playing as a level designer. In both play modes, ragdoll bodies are a key source of entertainment. By playing levels, players get to see how the forces of the simulated environment interact with and manipulate the motions of their chosen character. Meanwhile, in level design mode, players can use their imagination to conceive of how a ragdoll might react to the environments they build, following this with the satisfaction of experimentation as they playtest their creations. In other games that feature them, ragdoll bodies *can* stay in one piece; for example, in *Yakuza Kiwami 2* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2017), beaten up bodies that have been defeated by the player-character will ragdoll, but this will not result in dismemberment. Yet, *Happy Wheels* goes further in the destructiveness of death through the deployment of gore: intestines can unravel and stretch as a body is split in two, limbs snap off easily, heads can fly off or be smashed against the ground. An almost endless supply of blood (depicted as small, bright red polygons) tends to spurt wildly, forcefully projected from the body. In other words, *Happy Wheels* features an abundance of cartoon gore as characters are exposed to the lethality of the level. This variation of visual effects that ensure each death is its unique spectacle, further sees that death becomes a form of experimentation in *Happy Wheels* with much of the game's appeal seemingly coming from the potential of the ragdoll body to be amusing in its death, with different deaths offering countless unique possibilities to entertain.

Death wielded as a tool of experimentation in play is not unique to *Happy Wheels*. Avatar or player-character death, as trivial and consequence-free as it frequently is, has been identified by Schott (2017) to hold a 'hypothesis testing value' (4) for how it allows players to explore the consequences of actions in the game environment. Keogh's (2013) analysis of death that affords reloads, replays, and iterative forms of

engagement with a gameworld and system, describes the ways in which this allows, or even encourages experimentation in which the sacrificing of a digital body becomes a routine interaction with the environment (n.p.). Experimentation of this kind is one outcome of the trivialisation of game death in which death as a state of ending can be quickly overcome through reloading or respawning. Though, I argue that *Happy Wheels* goes to lengths to adopt the triviality of death (or perhaps more accurately, the trivial nature of these specific deaths) as an aesthetic function. I argue this to be the case by returning to the high levels of cartoon gore that are present in *Happy Wheels*, as well as the suggestive positions that ragdoll bodies frequently fall into. This gore, as mentioned above, allows each death to become a unique marker of the collisions between player actions and simulated game environments with highly mediated visual references to the destruction of real bodies. The exaggerated cartoon gore and flailing of limbs appeal to experimentation through its potential to create ever-changing spectacles, with the player afforded the playful means to wield violent death in the pursuit of amusement through their manipulation of bodies or the game environment. Discussing the aesthetic function of gore in video games, Rambo (2020) notes that 'gore solidifies the bloody mark of violence into a body of its own' (358). In this sense, character bodies themselves are consumed by the violence of their own deaths; they are subjugated by the violence that is always on the verge of coming forth and eroding the human body it erupts from. The bodies at stake here, the represented human body and the body of castoff viscera, are not realistically represented. However, as stylistic and aesthetic design choices they work in gameplay performance to celebrate the destructive potential of violent death without fully invoking the potentially upsetting or disturbing qualities of this violence that possibly could come with a degree more of aesthetic realism. As such, these design aspects accelerate the dissolution of subjecthood to objecthood as the extent of injury sees avatars reduced to jumbled assemblages of body parts with inner and outer anatomies equally exposed. Rather than by replicating the moves of a real body subjected to these conditions, the spectacle that emerges here rejoices in the violence of the death through exaggerated and cartoonish reference to bodily destruction. Violence and harm make death exciting and provocative through the creation of spectacles which rely on inflicting wounds on floppy ragdoll bodies until they are reduced to piles of cartoon gore, no longer recognisable as subjects but more legible as an assemblage of objects.

In the aesthetic choices of these death mechanisms, gore emphasises bodily sensation to give them a highly visceral quality. The shouts of pain from avatars aid this move towards body-spectacle as the wounds inflicted upon them are realised aurally. Williams (1991) categorises films with such body-spectacle as belonging to the category of 'body genres' which feature 'a sense of over involvement in sensation and emotion' (5) and in which the body, as the grip of intensity takes hold of it, becomes a spectacle (4). This emphasis on bodily sensation is one reason why Gorer (1955) characterises the proliferation of spectacularised death in media as pornography. Sexuality, the traditional subject of pornography, is described as being similarly illustrated with a privilege on the sensory experience of bodily stimulating acts. Gorer points to prudery regarding both sexuality and death that have made them alienated and mysterious, underscoring that in both cases pornography is what titillates curiosity (51). The trend towards the alienation of death is cited as making this death-pornography media compelling: the lack of visibility of death leading to it becoming like sexuality in that it is part of human existence which has been shrouded in mystery and deemed somewhat obscene, giving it the power to elicit excitement (Ariès 1976, 92). It is also worth charting the resonances between spectacularised death and

sexual pornography in terms of their tendencies to objectify their subjects. Tercier (2013) reflects on the relationship between the objectification of the dead and death photography that is displayed in galleries for audience consumption: 'via the medium of photography, real people now dead were turned into objects, if not exactly of pleasure, then perchance of curiosity, and most certainly, as gallery art, of commerce' (221-222). Questions around the objectifying nature of pornography are pertinent when it comes to the pornography of the dead, who, as posed earlier in this paper, already occupy a place of instability between the subjecthood of the living person and the objecthood of the corpse.

The level of violence displayed in *Happy Wheels*, and the gore that draws further attention to the sensational aspects of the deaths, make this tension more apparent. Moreover, these pornographic qualities of the death mechanics in *Happy Wheels* are amplified further in the voyeuristic behaviours that players are invited to participate in through an extended viewing. As shown above in figure 1, on completing a level, a menu automatically appears through which players can exit gameplay and return to the level selection screen. No such menu appears on the death of a player-character. Even once the bleeding bodies reach the point at which level completion would be impossible it is up to the manual intervention of the player to exit play. There is no automatic 'Game Over' screen as is typical for this kind of gameplay that demands a certain level of skill to meet what is ostensibly its win condition, giving further legitimacy to my earlier claim that the creation of death-spectacles is as much the objective of *Happy Wheels* as it is to complete a level by reaching the finish line. Once the player has navigated to the level menu, a replay option allows for limitless views of gameplay, meaning the carnage can be watched and re-watched on repeat, even in slow motion. The scopophilia that *Happy Wheels* allows the player to nurture sees the bodies on display constitute what Mulvey calls 'an objectified other' upon which player-watchers can form a basis for pleasure (1975, 9). While *Happy Wheels* is unlikely to provide sexual pleasure to its players, the spectacular gamic deaths in *Happy Wheels*, I argue, constitute a ludic pleasure that delights in disturbing the modern prudery that surrounds death and in doing so revels in its capacity to shock and appal as a pornographic fantasy that centralises sensorial aspects.

Analysis of how corpses are grammarised in games has to contend with these entanglements, and so the resonances with pornography that can be found in the provocative death mechanics of *Happy Wheels* should be read in relation to the objectification of the dead. As described briefly earlier, the use of ragdoll physics – termed as such for the ways in which avatars tend to helplessly flop and jerk around without any apparent control over their own bodies like ragdoll toys – sees each death become a unique spectacle, and one that can quite often become somewhat sexually suggestive. As they move and react to forces in unexpected ways, ragdolls can make death an endless source of entertainment, inviting players to kill them. In light of this discussion about the pornographic implications of the gratuitous bodily destruction present in *Happy Wheels*, it is useful to note how the ragdoll qualities of game bodies can amplify these implications. Scholarship by Phillips has highlighted the sexually suggestive moves of ragdolls that will frequently fall in compromising positions and (particularly in multi-player games and games with ragdoll non-player characters) be opened to simulated molestation from other avatars (Phillips 2019). In *Happy Wheels*, the shouts and moans of pain that the player-characters make also work to blur the lines between violence and sexuality, contributing further to their objectification while seeing to it that players are still able to elicit some sort of reaction from the bodies, reinforcing the viscerality of the deaths. In the creation of spectacles, the

bodies in *Happy Wheels* (and in other games featuring ragdolls) are excessively pliant and do not resist their own destruction, making the 'doll' in 'ragdoll' a particularly apt description. This has both necropolitical and necrophiliac implications, drawing comparisons to the objectification and denigration of subjugated bodies through bodily manipulation and violation in both life and death (ibid). These are bodies that are stripped of subjecthood and relegated to an unstable, precarious zone between subject and object. This aspect of objectification is particularly dehumanising, leading to the second part of this paper which deals with bare life and the living dead: those whose place in the category of humanness is taken away and who, in their unstable position at the crossroads between subject and object, are argued to be detained at the crossroads between life and death.

BARE LIVES

Reflecting on the trajectory of this paper so far, there are clear entanglements and resonances to be found between death as spectacular bodily destruction and objectification. The player-characters in *Happy Wheels* are consumed by the objectification that comes with these death mechanics in the production of spectacle, through which the player is afforded a voyeuristic position. Having considered the objectifying qualities of how death is grammarised in *Happy Wheels*, I turn now to conceptualisations of 'bare life' and what Achille Mbembe terms 'living dead' to address how human lives can be stripped of subjecthood as they are dominated by their potential for destruction. Looking at death in *Happy Wheels* beyond the moment of destruction allows further interrogation of the cultural implications of game bodies that are designed for and exist in relation to their own annihilation. By looking at Giorgio Agamben's reading of 'bare life' I argue that living dead and bare life both see the exile of individuals from the order of humanity, opening them to exploitative objectification. This element of my argument ultimately confronts *Happy Wheels* as a cultural object embedded in the necropolitical horizon.

Bare life is that which is exposed to the violence of exception and can be freely extinguished. Agamben (1998) characterises bare life as *homo sacer* – the figure in archaic Roman law whose killing is not punishable as homicide (it is not a judicial transgression), nor can it be sacrificed (it cannot be celebrated). This is explained by Agamben in his unpacking of *homo sacer*, which means "sacred man", as a term. Despite what sacredness has come to mean in modern use, Agamben points out that in its Roman usage, to pronounce a man sacred would be to name him outcast; 'outside human and divine law' and only included in the community in 'the form of being able to be killed' (73-82). *Homo sacer*, and the bare life that makes up this existence, sees the human reduced only to 'its capacity to be killed' with impunity (8). Mbembe (2003; 2019) later theorises bare life and conceptualises 'living dead' as a categorisation of colonised and enslaved peoples who are divested of political status and so subjugated and exploited by necropolitical (colonial) projects. Mbembe uses the descriptor 'living dead' to reflect the conditions of 'death worlds' – spaces of occupation in which 'life is subjugated to the power of death' (Palani 2018, 183) and precarity of survival is induced 'as a mode of existence' (Emerson 2019, 5). One's life can be confiscated with no recourse under these conditions and the living dead are rendered without humanity as their 'existence and life are stripped of their salient meaning' (Murray 2006, 191). Bare life, as experienced by *homo sacer* and the living dead, are theorisations of bodies that are denied subjecthood through their relegation to nullity, to the point at which the distinction between living and death as separate ways of being begin to lose meaning. This is what Mbembe describes in slave life: he

calls the slave's humanity a 'shadow', resulting from the triple-loss of home, rights over one's body, and political status, amounting to 'absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)' (2019, 75). Mbembe uses this confiscation of subjecthood to call slave life 'death-in-life' (ibid). The slave, of course, is not actually an object; rather, a human being who is objectified on the basis of skin colour or ethnicity, and is thus alienated from subjecthood by the dominant, discriminatory definitions of humanity constructed by the slave owning class. The occupation of territories and the enslavement of populations, Mbembe explains, 'meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood' (ibid, 79). Agamben makes a similar observation in his assessment of bare life in prisons, institutions, and in camps, likewise indicating that those detained at these sites exist at a crossroads of sorts in that they are 'lacking in all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence', and so are 'situated at a limit zone between life and death… in which they are no longer anything but bare life' (1989, 159). The precarity of existence offered by bare life, then, accelerates the blurring of subject/objecthood that is otherwise reserved for the dead body. This reflects that these modes of existence offer death in life through which the actual death of the individual becomes unimportant as the person in question is already deprived of their rights over their own lives and bodies.

The egregious discrimination that dehumanises colonised and enslaved populations, reducing their lives to bare life, points to a narrow and exclusionary category of humanity. Baudrillard (1993), offering insight into the 'increasingly racist' definition of humanness (126), exemplifies the immortal soul as something through which the separate categories of fully human and the less-than-human (or those living in death) are realised: 'some, the only "real human beings" have the right to immortality; others have only the right to death' (129). Though the material and biological reality of their life remains, meaningful and full inclusion in the category of living humans, conceptualised here as possessing an immortal soul, is confiscated from the living dead through their exclusion. This exile of the subjugated from the category of humanity and into the category of inhumanity or nullity also echoes Baudrillard's observations that the dead are exiled from communities of the living as no longer equal or worthy partners in exchange (164-165), reflecting the idea that deadness always threatens to emerge from the living dead, culminating in a similar exile. Judith Butler (2004) identifies something which I compare to living death or bare life in a failure to mourn. Butler notes how death-in-life strips the actual death, when it comes, of meaning as a significant change in states of being: 'They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were", and they must be killed since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness' (33). This observation makes apparent that what counts for a 'grievable death' is contingent on what is deemed a 'liveable life' (xv). What is regarded as a 'liveable life' does not belong to those for whom life is ruled by the power of death. It is not one that, through its colonisation, imprisonment, enslavement, or denigration, is detained at the crossroads between life and death. The subjecthood that may be maintained or (to a degree) restored by mourning, the practice of encountering death as the irreparable absence of a person who was but is no longer, cannot be found when dealing with those whose lives are written off as already gone or even non-existent; those who are regarded as essentially dead already.

In speaking to notions of bare life and living death, *Happy Wheels* shapes a mode of gameplay in which the lines between life and death as represented states of being blur and impose on each other. Avatars thus can simultaneously represent a living

subject and a dead object. The loss of subjecthood that this essay has considered so far relates to objectification occurring at the moment of bodily destruction. However, a theorisation which accounts for a necropolitical reading further sees death encroaching upon life. Such a reading allows us to better understand the ways in which ludic forms of death resonate with real world necropolitical ways of seeing. The playful smashing of bodies that *Happy Wheels* allows, even encourages, presents bodies that are designed for destruction, and so their deaths are not worth marking or even reflecting upon. While, of course, the simulated bodies in *Happy Wheels* are not real, the impulses that are nurtured by these kinds of mechanics could spill over (some may argue that they have already spilled over) into cultural consciousness, normalising a perception that accepts certain lives as not only expendable but non-existent, which robs these lives of a meaningful death (Schwartz 2015, 106). In *Happy Wheels*, this violence that more often than not ends in death sees that the character body exists in relation to its death. There is a fusion of the living and dead body as play, injury, mutilation and death intersect to create characters that exist in their capacity for destruction; perpetually primed for violent extermination. This denial of meaning sees that death is not and cannot be marked, resulting in a dissolution of life and death as separate states of being, and in which life, death, and transitions between these states become blurred and unimportant as death is meted out in meaningless excess. Life and death impose upon each other to the point at which there is a total collapse in meaning. This absence of meaning and the precarity which cannot be transcended situate these game bodies as living dead, right on the line between level domination and destruction.

Considering the treatment of these digital bodies shows how cruel necropolitical ideologies entangle with the mechanisation of death in video games. As such, it is worth noting that, though the avatars in *Happy Wheels* have no discernible characterisation, many of the bodies in *Happy Wheels* reference real marginalised groups with Black, disabled, or fat character models, as well as ones that are coded in appearance to be poor populating the roster. In other words, those most at risk in real life of having their lives and bodies devalued make up at least half of the character selection options. These marginalised groups are ones that Bonacci, the creator and designer of *Happy Wheels*, claims to have chosen as character models because he predicted players would find them 'completely inadequate' for the dangers faced in gameplay, and this was something from which he hoped the player might take some amusement (Bonacci in Holmes 2010, n.p.). Evidently, Bonacci's decision to design characters to embody marginalised identities was not coincidental. Finding such body types, which are under-represented in commercial video games and are certainly less represented than their (white, able-bodied, thin) counterparts across the wider field of video game media, in a game that focuses on the harm and destruction of these bodies, speaks to the real-life overt and covert devaluation of life that individuals face on account of their bodies. In describing how death is photographed in coverage of real-world conflicts such as war or genocide, Sontag (2003) describes how an emphasis on death as a spectacle is indicative of the othering that takes place against those who are dying: 'With our dead there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face. The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to see full frontal views of the dead and dying' (63). The unflinching gore that *Happy Wheels* makes central to its gameplay allows for such a full-frontal view. Sontag continues, arguing that placing death in the domain of the exotic continues to 'nourish the belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the backward or benighted – that is, poor – parts of the world' (ibid). Sontag's observation further points out how, in the death worlds that she refers to as poor parts of the world, there is a failure to recognise the

death as a meaningful loss of human life, owing to a failure to recognise those who are dying as fully human subjects. In *Happy Wheels*, it could be said that these characters that are designed for destruction are representative of those who are perhaps not seen as designed for death, but those whose earlier deaths are considered more inevitable and thus more acceptable. Caricatured by the bodies destroyed in the *Happy Wheels* gameworld environment are real groups of people who frequently face overt and covert necropolitical denigration in which their lives are persistently devalued in real-life (McPhail 2024; Núñez-Parra et al. 2021), and in video games (Gray 2023). This reflects Zeilinger's (2018) observation that death in gameworlds is perhaps most accurate in its tendencies to continue 'perpetuating real world inequities' through its representation of who dies and how these deaths are grammarised (16). *Happy Wheels* reflects the inequity that these marginalised populations appear to be considered bound for death in one way or another. I put forward that the deliberate attempts to make the characters appear, in Bonacci's words, 'inadequate' and therefore more open to the possibility of destruction, increases not only the acceptability of putting them to death but also the acceptability of this death becoming a spectacle. The technological and the cultural entangle in media here, with the deaths of the denigrated being most open to becoming spectacularised.

CONCLUSION

Video games provide access to death through grammarised modes of anticipation and response that are designed and mechanised as structures of perception. This paper has used game analysis with media and necropolitical theory to locate this grammarised death in *Happy Wheels* within existing cultural structures that continue to organise perceptions of death and allow it to be wielded as a tool of necropower. The version of death that players encounter in *Happy Wheels* is one that amplifies the instability of the deceased, making death a crossroads of subjecthood and objecthood. In pointing to the pornographic implications of these spectacles, as well as resonances with the necropolitical notion of the living dead, I have sought to highlight how the grammarised perception of death that *Happy Wheels* affords reflects the objectification of the body. Even the living body can be ruled over by its own potential for destruction and, in its ludic mechanisation, its subsequent consumption as a spectacle for player entertainment.

Considering game bodies that appear to exist in order to be destroyed, it may also be fruitful to consider non-player characters (NPCs) in Role Playing Games (RPGs) like *Fallout 4* (2015 Bethesda Game Studios) in which enemies seem to spawn in only to be reduced to assemblages of body parts not dissimilar to the ones in *Happy Wheels*. By analysing these death mechanics with theorisations of bare life and living death as I have done here as they pertain to NPCs, it may become even clearer how necropolitical strategies are used to structure ludic pleasure for gamers. It is, of course, possible for games media to engage with death and dying in ways that are sensitive and that seek to side-step spectacle in favour of acknowledgement and compassionate acceptance. These games are thought to offer ways of mechanising or representing death that provide alternatives to the relentless trivialisation discussed in this paper. Among many others, well-known games that are thought to achieve this include *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), *A Mortician's Tale* (Laundry Bear Games 2017) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017). There are even games that feature ragdolls but to an effect that upsets rather than excites, such as *LIMBO* (Playdead 2010), which uses ragdolls in its death mechanics to mount a procedural

argument on the nature of trauma in an increasingly industrialised world that often fails to recognise or care about the fragility of human life (Smethurst 2015). Permanent death (or permadeath as it is commonly called) has been noted to expose players to vulnerability through the irreplaceable nature of game characters (Keogh 2013). Empirical findings have stated that the parasocial grief that permadeath is able to foster for deceased avatars or characters may lead to an increase in reflective thinking around mortality (West et al. 2022). According to Butler, this recognition of vulnerability as the ethical demand of the other is essential to humanising the other and restoring significance to their deaths (139). These ludic encounters with death, therefore, could be examined as playful rehearsals of the death awareness necessary to question or even destabilise necropolitical structures.

Yet, it is still important to remember that all game media works come with design objectives that are no less influential on game design than Bonacci's mission to make death into a form of entertainment. Death, in its ultimate otherness, is found in games organised around the fantasies of the culture in which it was produced. As Michael-Fox et al (2024) observe in their discussion of death's representations in media 'the fictional can function to create spaces through which to negotiate the real' (8). As such, it is crucial to examine the structured perceptions around which death is negotiated. While recognising the potential value that media, game media in particular, offers as a tool through which death can be engaged with, it is equally true that *Happy Wheels* and games like it also make up points of encounter. Death in its mediatised form, which includes video games, is a configured experience that is framed by technology, cultural values, social and ethical issues and politics, meaning that encounters with death in media are specific and situated perspectives and ways of seeing which can be negotiated, embodied, and rehearsed by audiences and players. Using game analysis can help us to see how these cultural procedures can be made into technological and representational procedures in which video game players can participate. Even in its spectacular unreal, *Happy Wheels*, in its mechanisation of death, constitutes a space in which death as a fact of reality is negotiated.

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