

Oedipus at the Crossroads: Tragic Agency in Contemporary Videogames

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INTRODUCTION

This paper brings videogames into conversation with tragedy and argues that videogames provide a unique venue for the enactment of the tragic experience as a way to reflect on human frailty and finitude. While there is a growing interest in the representations of ancient Greek civilization in videogames (Cook and Draycott 2022; Rollinger 2020), few have explored the videogames themselves as an enactment of a mode of ancient aesthetic experience that is most akin to ancient Greece – tragedy. A quick search on the internet offers many lists of “most tragic video games ever,” but the adjective “tragic” is often simply a synonym for “sad.” The deeper meaning of “tragic,” however, is intimately connected with tragedy as a literary genre that originates in ancient Greece that explores, among other themes, the clash between human agency and external forces. Tragedy is, for the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, the supreme political art, for “it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others.” (Arendt 2018) While ancient tragedy is regarded by many as the most sublime artform about the human condition, George Steiner, a renowned literary critic, has famously argued that the tragic worldview is essentially a pre-modern product under a theological framework and is now dead, for the modern, progressivist rhetoric does not have space for the possibility of tragedy. (Steiner 1961) This paper contends that the tragic spirit finds a rather surprising place of rebirth in the blossoming field of videogames and that the unique aesthetics of videogames allow us to rethink tragedy and its relevance in our contemporary world. The framework of tragedy, I would further argue, is particularly important for reflection on the role of games at the crossroads, because it itself is an art about the encounters and clashes between contending forces, values, and worlds – between past, present, and future, between family and polis, between war and peace, between individuals and communities.

This paper first traces the debate on the death(s) of tragedy and shows how the fate of tragedy has a special weight on our ways of perceiving and inhabiting the world. Drawing from Aristotle and George Steiner, I give a minimal account of tragic agency as the total failure of human action in the finality of fate. I then turn to games and argue that games, as an art of agency, provide us with a unique venue for the contemplation of human agency and, more specifically, cases in which such agency

fails. (Juul 2013; Nguyen 2020) I will give a close reading of a group of games that I call tragic games – e.g. *Bloodborne*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and *The Stanley Parable* – that seek to philosophize on agency through the experience of play. First, I will argue that *Bloodborne* offers a more radical experiment on the player’s agency than other games from FromSoftware and orchestrates an Oedipal recognition of the player’s own sin that results in the final relinquishment of agency. Second, I will argue that in *What Remains of Edith Finch* translates ineluctability into an organic combination of gameplay mechanics and narrative, enabling an experience of necessity and fate. Finally, I will argue that *The Stanley Parable* dramatizes the determinism of gameplay and interrogates the concepts of freedom and agency, parabolizing the fate of modern individuals.

Though the specifics of the tragic experience in the above-mentioned games differ, they together raise the question of the meaning of agency in games – not the satisfaction of taking meaningful actions, but rather the frustration thereof, in striking contrast to other forms of ludic agency that are fun, joyful, or empowering. (Bodi 2024; Bogost 2016; Jagoda 2020) The kind of tragic agency in question has to do with how the player – not just the character she plays in the game – confronts and shapes her own ending, and how the endings themselves become questionable. It is in this provocative confrontation with the player’s agency itself that the philosophical nature of games comes most to the fore. To put it differently, agency is negotiated not only in how the player plays the game, but also in how the game plays the player, and how the player comes to reflect upon her own agency in this process. It is in the examination of human agency that games as an artform come closest to tragedy. Moreover, games as a medium also go beyond tragedy in that they transform tragic agency from an object of reflection into an affective, first-person experience. The players are not simply watching the tragedy unfold but are themselves active agents in this process. They are the tragic heroes on the stage, exposed and vulnerable even more, for they are without an audience. The paper will end with some final reflection on how games can be a fruitful site for thinking and rethinking real-life tragedy – whether concerning past events or future possibilities.

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