Making Friends with Death: Posthuman Post-Life Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore autoethnographic experiences of playing videogames that centre death, dying, and grief, including *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020) and *Gris* (Nomada Studio 2018), to consider how videogames can offer perspectives on the crossroads of life and death that allow us to reconceptualise death in posthuman ways.

Death in videogames has been written about from a variety of perspectives, through, for example, death and memorialisation, and dealing with death through videogames (see, for example, Arnold et al. 2018), videogames about death and dying (see, for example, works on *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012)), and (auto)biographical games about death and dealing with death (see, for example, Gallagher 2022 on *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016)). Other texts deal with how death might be designed through game mechanics (Klastrup 2011), or specifically about grief (Harrer 2018), or about games and the afterlife (Recher 2015). Of course, many games include death as a central device or motif, such as first-person shooters, or horror games. However, other games include death in more of a thematic or narrative way, for example, *A Mortician's Tale* (Laundry Bear Games 2017) follows a mortician in preparing a corpse for burial or cremation, whilst *Last Day of June* (Ovosonico 2017) explores grief from the perspective of a husband left behind and wanting to change the events leading to the death of his wife, June.

From a humanist, capitalist, and neoliberal perspective, death is quite literally the enemy of progress; 'death is the cessation of the very "acting subject", […] Death, when it comes, will brutally interrupt our work before our task is done, our mission accomplished' (Bauman 1992: 2, 4). Yet, this interruption is surely only so brutal if our constant focus is progress. If our focus was less individualistic and less anthropocentric, might this change our attitude towards death? This paper adopts a posthumanist perspective, to consider how critical posthumanism, steeped in feminism, new materialism, and rhizomatic relationality, can offer an alternative perspective on death through the medium of videogames.

Braidotti (2013: 121) believes that '[w]e need to re-think death, the ultimate subtraction, as another phase in a generative process.' As Arnold et al. (2018: 23) state, '[m]edia can become central to how people understand, represent, and engage

with their own mortality and with the mortality of others'. Games such as *Spiritfarer* and *Gris*, I argue, allow us to take up Braidotti's suggestion of making friends with death as 'an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor' (2013: 13) and accepting our place in a wider postdualistic world.

Becker (1973: xvii) suggests that '[t]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man'. *Spiritfarer*, on the other hand, embraces exactly that element of a final destiny, and destination, as you ferry spirits of the dead to the afterlife. Meanwhile, *Gris*'s evocative score, the re-incorporation of colour into an aesthetically beautiful world, and game mechanics that specifically cause barriers for the players and quite literally move them backwards, demonstrate a tension in grief as at once an affective experience of overwhelm, as well as a process of discovery. I argue these games demonstrate postdualistic relations with death, where death is not the "end" but 'part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces. [This] dissolves death into ever-shifting processual changes, and thus disintegrates the ego, with its capital of narcissism, paranoia and negativity' (Braidotti 2013: 137).

Yet this reading can be complicated – as Maycock (2024) argues, *Gris* represents a simplified perspective on dealing with death that leans heavily on the idea of "five stages of grief", neatly contained and determined. *Spiritfarer*, with its focus on spirits, could be argued to be reinscribing Cartesian dualisms that critical posthumanism rejects. This paper will therefore explore these tensions to consider how far videogames (can) go in reconceptualising ideas of death, dying, and grief in ways that can allow us to '[make] friends with the impersonal necessity of death' (Braidotti 2013: 13). The paper will therefore be of interest to scholars working across posthumanism and videogames, to further extend our understanding of critical posthumanist perspectives through analysing gameplay. It will also be of interest to scholars with particular interest in the affective affordances of videogames when dealing with sensitive issues such as loss, grief, death, and dying, to consider the multiple narratives and ideologies present in games that tackle these subjects head on.

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