Fighting Against Return: a taxonomy of time loops in digital games

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This extended abstract presents a foundation for future, broader research aimed at advancing a taxonomy of potential configurations of time loops in the video game medium, particularly those concerning the rebirth of one or more characters after a game over.

As Annander (2023) argues in a game design manual, the loop is a fundamental concept as it pertains to the cycle with which mechanics and dynamics alternate during gameplay. A digital game exemplifies this principle by requiring the player to learn the dynamics of action, which can lead to various errors. In these instances, the player undergoes a performative loop that fosters a process of self-improvement, which Juul defines as the "failure-improvement cycle" (2013, 60). This concept is especially applicable in cases where the player's errors result in the virtual death of the avatar, which is generally capable of resurrecting at a previous checkpoint, thereby resetting its virtual memory of each failed attempt.

As Quijano (2019) argues, game over is often an etymological illusion: a protagonist's virtual death during gameplay can represent a form of "chronotope" (Bakhtin 1981) that marks a different degree of knowledge polarization between the player, who retains the memory of the failed attempt, and the character, who erases every previous death from its imaginary mind. In countless video games, the various gameplay phases that do not finalize the progression of the player/character are overwritten. Nevertheless, Quijano posits that digital games based on narrative time loops are different.

Mukherjee (2017) explains that the mental act of remembering previous failed attempts by a player can create connections with the imaginary memory of a character. In fact, there are several cases where video games narratively contextualize the theme of the loop, presenting imaginary worlds in which one or more characters remember having died previously. Therefore, Annander points out that the loop can also involve narrative progression, becoming a "Meta-Loop" (2023, 16).

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Each video game can implement radically different narrative justifications for why characters find themselves inside a loop and the practices they must carry out to escape from the cyclical temporal cages that envelop them. Consequently, the taxonomy in this research overview does not claim to encompass all the possible ways temporal loops can be used in narratives. Instead, it aims to demonstrate how loops can be implemented in relation to the "navigable spaces" (Domsch 2013, 63) that the player must traverse.

Although space and time can be studied individually with specific analytical tools, they are interdependent: from the imaginary creation of a virtual world, developers must consider their symbiosis (Case et al. 2024), and players perceive their connection (Igarzabal 2019). Based on further academic literature in addition to the key references cited in this extended abstract, focused both on the design of spaces and on temporality, the research will advance three typologies of (space-)time loops, examining them in depth through emblematic case studies.

The first category is the *no-time-morphology loop*, observable in video games that do not have a "rigid diegetic temporality" (Meneghelli 2014, 55), where the death of a character who retains the memory encounters new rebirths that bring about radical morphological changes in space, owing to the procedural generation of environments. Two case studies in this category will be considered: *Dead Cells* (Motion Twin 2018) and *Returnal* (Climax Studios, Housemarque 2023).

The second category is the *timing-exploration loop*, present in video games with a rigid diegetic temporality, in which, after each death or failure inherent to a temporal reset, the character retains the memory and continues to move within the same navigable space but with different exploratory stimuli. I will analyze *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital 2019) and *Twelve Minutes* (Antonio 2022) in this category.

The third category is the *hybrid loop*, which represents a blend of the two previous categories, where the death of a character occurs within environments that do not modify their basic morphology but require considerable "spatial manipulation" (D'Armenio 2014, 45) and specific exploratory practices by the player, without a diegetic time limit. The case studies in this category will be *Deathloop* (Arkane Studios 2021) and *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy 2023).

The taxonomy of (space-)time loops I intend to develop in this research does not claim to be exhaustive. Given the constant evolution of gameplay and narrative in digital games, the three categories outlined above may include further hybrid forms or additional categories.

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