

Death-Themed Games and Playing the “Good Death”

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It will not be news to many games scholars that encounters with death and dying in video game environments are common occurrences for many players. Death has been found to serve a huge number of ludic purposes in games, including narrative, mechanical and aesthetic purposes (Curtis 2015; Harrer 2018). In many of these cases, however, it may be said that death has a representational purpose in service of other affective aims: the death of a player-avatar and the resultant loss of progress or items may read as a punishment for inadequacy (Dooghan 2023), while the spectacle of power achieved by slaying other avatars can be understood as a type of reward for mastery (Phillips 2015). As such, death functions as a stand in: a representational manifestation of mastery (or lack thereof) and a feedback loop at work. Thus, when games emerge that specifically seek to spur reflection or contemplation on death, dying or other surrounding topics (such as grief), they can be categorised as death-themed games (Luo et al. 2025; Evans 2024). Death-themed games are distinguished by this alternative treatment of death in which death is not something to remediated or averted. These games ‘create interactive systems and mechanics that encourage players to reflect on and consider death, dying, and grieving in a positive and empathetic light’ (Evans 2024, 188), making the representation of death on aesthetic and mechanical levels more than incidental, but a point of deeper meditation.

Scholarship on death-themed games has identified a strong and welcome potential for these games to aid in communing with death and the dead. Wilde (2024, 1) uses games that treat death in this way to explore the potential for these games to ‘reconceptualise death in posthuman ways’, while Nicolucci’s (2019, 189) analysis of death-themed game *A Mortician’s Tale* (Laundry Bear 2017) describes how it is able to present a playable encounter with death that could help adolescents ‘look at death in all of its mysterious biological, intellectual, social, and affective realism’. Yet, it is still important to clarify that death-themed games too are equally subject to configuration and organisation around particular cultural values, fantasies and politics. This research examines such configurations in death-themed games by charting where and how they intersect with what is referred to as “good death”. This is a discourse on dying that is formulated mostly in palliative care contexts, but has expanded to pervade wider culture outside of healthcare. The idea of “good death” places various notions of “goodness” on certain aspects of the dying experience. I use

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the dominant definition of “good death” as it exists in the 21st century Anglosphere, for which individualism and a high level of control for the dying person over their dying process has been found to be ‘the dominant theme’ (Cottrell and Duggleby 2016, 688) in defining goodness in dying. This includes control over timing and place of death, control over symptoms, and control over activities while dying. Sociologist Tony Walter (1994, 48), who has written extensively on death and dying in Britain and North America, views this as a turn towards the self of the dying person as authority leading and ‘authoring’ their own dying process. Yet, much of this research on “good death” also recognises that the values embedded in this dominant definition are culturally subjective. Other ideas around what is “good” for a dying person have existed across human civilisation, many in tension with or even contradictory to the individualistic “good death” described above (Latham 2016). “Good death”, therefore, accounts for modes of dying that align with and uphold a certain set of highly subjective values. Death-themed games, however, through persuasive procedure design and creative works risk transforming this subjectiveness into a form of intrinsic goodness in their representations, a contention which this research uses game case study analysis to examine further. This research uses literature in both game studies and death studies to form an interpretive lens through which a curated selection of death-themed games are analysed, including *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus 2020), *I Am Dead* (Hollow Ponds 2020), and *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales 2008). This allows the author to deliver analysis on game design as a playable “good death” in death-themed games, as well as death-themed games that have been assessed as diverging from typical “good death” portrayals. Findings so far have suggested that the designed game systems present in many death-themed games imbue a particular mode of dying with a kind of intrinsic goodness which can even be represented as necessary to fully complete the process of dying. These representations frequently share much with the dominant notion of “good death” as I have described it here. Meanwhile, games that implement slowness, boredom or loss of control can be seen to deny this goodness and, to a degree, sidestep the notion that a “good death” should be or must be achieved. This paper forms part of a chapter of the author’s PhD thesis, with scope for aspects to develop into further games analysis research papers. This research will complement the existing literature so far on death-themed games by introducing the critical perspective laid out here and identifying another point of intersection between video games, death studies and the health humanities.

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