

Games Against Death

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Lance Reddick died unexpectedly of natural causes on the 17th of March 2023 at the age of 60. He was a celebrated actor, known for his roles in TV dramas such as *The Wire*, *Bosch*, *Oz* and *Lost*, and the *John Wick* movie franchise. He also did voice acting for the Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO) *Destiny* and *Destiny 2* for over ten years. He played the role of Commander Zavala, an important non-player character (NPC). Zavala is responsible for major plot points within the game and provides players with daily missions and other tasks to complete. Reddick was active within the player community. He played the game and his player character was often noticed by other players out and about in the game world and he frequently contributed to online discussions about the games.

In the days following the news of Reddick's death, hundreds of *Destiny* players spontaneously gathered around the Commander Zavala NPC in the game's main social hub, The Tower. Many congregated in silence around the NPC. Others used various game mechanics to create earnest commemorative performances. They used emotes such as "kneeling", "saluting", and "standing guard" to mark their respects. Others emulated candlelight vigils with spell, weapon and other visual effects. In the game's lore and narrative, Zavala is a protector and leader in humanity's last stand against alien invasion and is he often referred to informally as "Humanity's Shield" by the player community. Many players used the "Humanity's Shield" emote – which surrounds the player's kneeling avatar in a protective glowing shield – as an appropriate mark of respect for Reddick. One of Zavala's catchphrases from the game, "Eyes up, Guardian", became an aphorism frequently shared amongst players to acknowledge and respond to Reddick's death. The catchphrase is a significant part of the game's call-to-action and encapsulates the game's themes of hope and human resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity and loss. *Destiny* players also shared memories and tributes on the game's subreddits and across other social media platforms.

In the book *Death, Ritual and Belief*, Douglas Davies (2017) argues persuasively and passionately that humans use language and other symbolic actions to resist "the finality of death". He calls these symbolic performances "*words against death*". The death of a person is challenging in at least three ways. It can remind us of our own mortality and the inevitability of death, it can lead to the psychological pain of grief

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and lose, and it can damage the social fabric through the loss of a valued member of the community (Davies 2017). For Davies, “*words against death*” are “human adaptations” to the challenges posed by our awareness of mortality and death. When they are effective, *words against death* reframe death in ways that offer *comfort, meaning* and *continuity* to the living. They are found in the formal rites of the major world religions as well as informal, idiomatic and vernacular ritualized practices. “Funeral rites, liturgies, séances, talking about the dead and grief therapies” are all examples of *words against death* for Davies (2017, 5).

The actions of the *Destiny* players described above can be seen as “words against death”. Players created a collective vigil to express their grief and share it with others. They expressed their sense of loss by repurposing game elements, speaking meaningful phrases and performing evocative actions. Through these activities, players created impromptu rituals of commemoration. They chose to congregate at a place that was significant to their relationship with Lance and the game to perform “ritualized” (Grimes 2014, 194) actions and activities in the company of others. Through their collective and repetitive ritualized actions, they temporarily claimed a sacred space for mourning around the Commander Zavala NPC. Players celebrated and remembered Lance’s life and work, and by acting together, they expressed solidarity with other *Destiny* players. These ritualized actions can be seen as efforts to counter the “sting of death” by sharing feelings of grief, collectively showing respect for the departed, and affirming the continuity of the *Destiny* community.

Ritual performances by players in games are an important example of how games are mobilized to oppose the profound and potentially overwhelming emotional, existential and social problems associated with death. *Games against death* can also be found in a range of other practices including thanatosensitive design (Harrer 2018), game memorialization (Gibbs et al. 2012), and machinima memorial videos (Nyhlm and Summerville. 2008), to name a few.

In this presentation, we will argue persuasively and passionately for *games against death* as a way to encapsulate and characterize the underappreciated but powerful roles that games can play for people grappling with the overwhelming experiences of death and mortality. In contemporary, “de-ritualized” Western societies (Souza 2017) where traditional rites and ritual have lost much of their hold on mortality (Sumiala and Jacobsen 2024), games offer new and inventive ways for people to resist the finality of death and find comfort, meaning and hope for the future. *Games against death* help the bereaved find solace and emotional comfort, existential meanings, and a sense of hope and continuity for the future.

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