'Remembering How You Died': Memory, Death and Temporality in Videogames

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ABSTRACT

Death is an intrinsic part of gameplay. On considering the role of killing, dying and negotiating the 'undead' in videogames, one cannot be faulted for noting in them an obsessive engagement with the act of dying. It is almost a prerequisite that the player's *avatar* has to 'die' many times in the process of unravelling the plot. Instead of the traditional tying and untying (*desis* and *lusis*) of narrative plots, held sacrosanct since Aristotle, videogame narratives are characterised by 'dying and undying'. The sense of an ending, as literary theorist Sir Frank Kermode calls it, is constantly frustrated by its absence in videogames. Western conceptions of ending, whether Hellenic or Judaeo-Christian, are based on *telos* and a linear temporality. In a culture where death is a grim finality and where resurrection is only possible by the divine, videogames seem to shockingly trivialise death by adding to it the perspective of multiplicity. Videogame theorist, Gonzalo Frasca, observes that from the perspective of real life, this reversibility can be seen as something that trivializes the "sacred" value of life. This paper argues against such a conception and in doing so, it shows how videogames point to a different but equally serious view of death and endings that has so far been largely ignored due to an occidental bias.

In Vedantic and Buddhist philosophy, belief in reincarnation is the norm rather than the exception. The multiplicities of death(s) is, therefore, not trivial. This, however, is not to claim a straightforward connection of the videogame endings with the rebirth cycle in these world-views, especially since there are many differences within and between them. Not to consider them at all, however, would skew the analysis, given that the characteristics of videogames though considered 'trivial' in a Western paradigm, actually connect to ideas that pre-date ideas of linear history. The videogame protagonist, also called *avatar* (which requires a separate discussion), dies, lives and lives again; thus replaying the cycle of his or her existence. Within the context of the game-narrative, each death or ending is important: often, as Michael Nitsche states, death can be a way of exploring the game or of obtaining information about 'future' possibilities. That apart, each ending is connected to the assemblage that the game narrative forms. Despite their other mutual differences, in Vedantism and Buddhism the key idea of rebirth does not trivialise the event of death. Instead of a transmigration of an essence, Buddhism believes in a moment-to-moment process of rebirth dependent on the encompassing circumstances. The *Gita* states that the newly moulded inner nature will be expressed in a new form. The 'new' form is called *avatar* in Hinduism; gods are often (re)born in different reincarnations or *avatars* and this is part of the divine play or *lila*. The term *avatar* is rather freely used in game criticism as meaning 'player embodiment' which is only a part of its original significance; its key connotations of reincarnation and immanent existence have so far been ignored.

While these non-Western perspectives indicate an alternative reading of death in videogames, their heavily moral and religious implications make any easy equation problematic. Their ideas of immanence, nevertheless, connect well to games where the same *avatar* re-experiences the game-world but differently, each time – a complex case of difference and repetition. This, importantly, also connects with current ideas in Western philosophy, such as Gilles Deleuze's understanding of immanence and temporality. The *avatar* in the game experiences events, including death(s), as actualisations within a virtuality of events. The actualisation takes place from within a combination of possible events, which in turn are determined by their spatial and temporal environments. Further, even as an actualisation takes place, the other iterations of the gameplay (such as other instances where the same section of the game was played) still remain quite 'real'. In the Deleuzian sense, this is a real virtuality or one that is never past either in relation to a new present or in

relation to a present that it once was. For Deleuze, the different actualisations are like the dice-throws in a 'Divine Game', where they are multiple but at the same time partaking in the One. Following this, he proposes that the idea of death be treated less as a severance than an effect of mixture or confusion. Traditional conventions of death are influenced by the idea of time as a chronological progression. When faced with phenomena such as videogames, where chronological progression gives way to more immanent structures; firmly believed in conceptions about death, memory and event are greatly problematised. With this in consideration, this paper will attempt to build upon the discussions on temporality already started by critics such as Jesper Juul, Barry Atkins and Nitsche. Carrying these forward both in terms of game studies, contemporary philosophical discourse and non-western ideas on nonlinear history, this discussion will attempt to understand the importance of in-game death: as both immanent and imminent.

Author Keywords
Death, Endings, Time, *Avatar*, Oriental Philosophy, Deleuze

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