Stefan Piasecki

“Like flies on the windscreen?”

Reflexions on Death and Dying in Video Games

Abstract

This article examines the meanings of death and dying in digital games and how they are conveyed through rules, narrative, aesthetics, and interface. It focuses on the key difference between the typologies of “mechanical death” and “reflexive death”, linked to ludic mechanics (e. g. respawn, permadeath), narrative functions and ethical implications. A genesis of screen death is traced historically from arcade games to the present day and illustrated with selected indie and AAA titles. The selective sample aims to reveal the breadth of death semantics for research and practice. It becomes clear that death in the game can be simply an obstacle but also a moment of insight.

Keywords

Video Games, Death, Dying, Mortality, Moral, Religion

Biography

Prof. Dr. Dr. habil. Stefan Piasecki is a social and media scientist whose work brings together political science, media studies, and religious education in a distinctly interdisciplinary profile. He first earned his doctorate in political science at the University of Duisburg-Essen, followed by a second doctorate in media studies at the University of Leipzig. He later completed his habilitation in religious education at the University of Kassel, further deepening his engagement with questions of culture, belief, and communication. He serves as Professor of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Applied Sciences for Public Administration in North Rhine-Westphalia. In addition to his academic responsibilities, he acts as a youth media protection advisor at the FSK in Wiesbaden, contributing his expertise to questions of media regulation and public responsibility. His research focuses on the dynamic interplay between media, religion, and society, particularly on how media environments shape cultural meaning and social transformation. Alongside his scholarly publications, he is also the author of novels and contributes regularly to major German news magazines, bridging academic analysis and public discourse.

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Introduction

All living beings experience death, and thus all conscious life forms must face death.[1] This article examines meanings that death and dying can have in digital games and how these meanings are (re-)produced and mediated by rules, narrative, aesthetics, and interface. Starting from a game-historical perspective (from the arcade era to the present) and a theoretical distinction between mechanical death and reflective death, the essay links ludic mechanics (respawn, permadeath, economic sanctions) with narrative functions (a conflict-based plot impetus – the element that drives the causal chain; a mourning motif/figure – the character(s) in whom patterns of social and individual mourning are condensed; a dilemma – a decision-making situation between incompatible options that may not provide an ideal-typical resolution), as well as with ethical implications (desensitisation, ascriptions of responsibility, pedagogical potential). After outlining a conceptual framework of mortality in games, the text traces the history and typology of screen life and death, from simple representations of life / resurrection as "1-Up" and death as "Game Over" to today's complex narratives. Case studies of indie and AAA titles show how technological and creative advances foster differentiated storytelling that can embrace or avoid complexity. While triple-A titles benefit from higher production budgets and tight schedules, independent games can be developed with a higher degree of freedom, but often lack stable funding.

Methodologically, a sample of games was chosen to illustrate a range of death semantics and allow comparisons across ludic, narrative, aesthetic, and ethical levels. While not comprehensive, the examples provide core insights. Relevant games were identified through personal experience (40+ years) as a player and former game producer, references in literature, and online reviews. Limitations (non-representativeness, selection bias) are addressed through transparent criteria and theoretical grounding. A basic typology of digital death – mechanical vs. reflexive – frames the findings and the conclusions for research and practice: deaths that do not require further attention from the player are referred to as "mechanical", and those that are relevant to the further course of the plot are referred to as "reflexive".

1 The title of this article was inspired by the song "Fly on the Windscreen", which deals with the many forms and occasions of death, on Depeche Mode's 1985 album *Black Celebration*.

This distinction also makes hybrid forms recognisable. Enemies that must be eliminated on the way to victory in a level (whether zombies or spaceships) do not require further engagement with their demise. If the death of a character results in a change in the plot or an ethical dilemma for the player, there is a need for reflexive engagement.

What ideas, motifs, and constructions about death and dying do games produce or reproduce? Opponents must be eliminated and obstacles overcome – often en masse, faceless and without victim status. Killing, destroying, and eliminating often take place without remorse. For decades, there has been a concern that young people in particular[2] – who may not yet have a firmly established worldview – play games in which killing is central. The potential impact is becoming more significant as religious education – at least in many Western countries[3] – declines while questions about origin, meaning, and the end of life remain. Games indirectly address such questions, as they always touch on existential interpretations with the beginning and end of their narrative. In the age of "liquid modernity", in which lives are constantly changing with the help of technology,[4] religion is also becoming digital.

However, much of what has been reported about the target groups for games is no longer valid. Thus, in Germany, the average age of gamers today is 39.5, and over 36 per cent are older than 50. Gamers and developers are more diverse and multicultural than ever before.[5] The same applies to games and their content. This text addresses the phenomenon of "screen death" from a contemporary perspective and supplements existing studies, including those by Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl,[6] Frank Bosman,[7] Matthew Pulis,[8] and Frank Furtwängler.[9] Like films, games are learning spaces. Just as nuclear-war films[10] convey hypothetical knowledge about nuclear scenarios, games provide insights into mortality. The difference is that games require

2 Böhm 2015.
3 See Pew Research Center 2018.
4 Price Grieve 2013, 105; after Zygmunt Bauman.
5 Numbers for Germany: https://www.game.de/marktdaten/games-verbinden-generationen/ [accessed 29 August 2025].
6 Palkowitsch-Kühl 2016, 75–96; he takes an educational approach.
7 Bosman 2018.
8 Pulis 2021; he formulated a Catholic position on Bosman.
9 Furtwängler 2010, here 210–213; he takes a philosophical approach.
10 For such movies, see Nanz/Pause 2013, 9.

active participation in virtual roles, as characters that may seem alien but serve as vehicles for existential reflection.

Selection of Games and Research Method

This study on computer games in which death and dying play a major role is based on a selective sample. Three practical research-based reasons justify this selective approach:

(1) Lack of formal category systems. There is no consolidated category scheme for "games involving death", which means that a complete survey cannot be carried out using established taxonomies. The identification of relevant cases is therefore a methodological necessity, in order to make the phenomenon accessible. This approach corresponds to the paradigm of theoretically based case selection in qualitative research.[11]

(2) Variation across cases. The aim is breadth rather than representativeness: the sample combines indie productions and AAA titles, different genres (shooter, adventure, role-playing, strategy) and various death logics (respawn, permadeath, narrative death, "game over" as feedback). The contrasts to be worked out between mechanical (quantifiable) and reflexive (narratively framed) dying serve as a guiding difference for a contrasting case selection that covers typical and extreme cases.

(3) Content overview, not statistical representation. This study examines ways of interpreting and designing death (ludic, narrative, aesthetic, ethical) as a phenomenon (e. g. death as game feedback or as a marker of meaning). The use of the chosen examples is appropriate because death in games is both a structural principle (trial and error) and a space for experience (grief, dilemma, responsibility).

The criteria for inclusion were therefore: (a) explicit death events or mortality regimes, (b) recognisable narrative or ethical framing, (c) relevance to the "mechanical vs. reflexive" typology, (d) historical and media-cultural significance (e. g. arcade heritage). Titles in which death occurs only marginally and without systemic or narrative effect were excluded.

The explanations below utilize the following ludonarrative observations in a qualitative comparison: rule regimes (respawn, permadeath, economic

11 See Flick 2012, 304–320. The limits described there for film, photography, etc. are extended in the case of games, as player reaction must be taken into account.

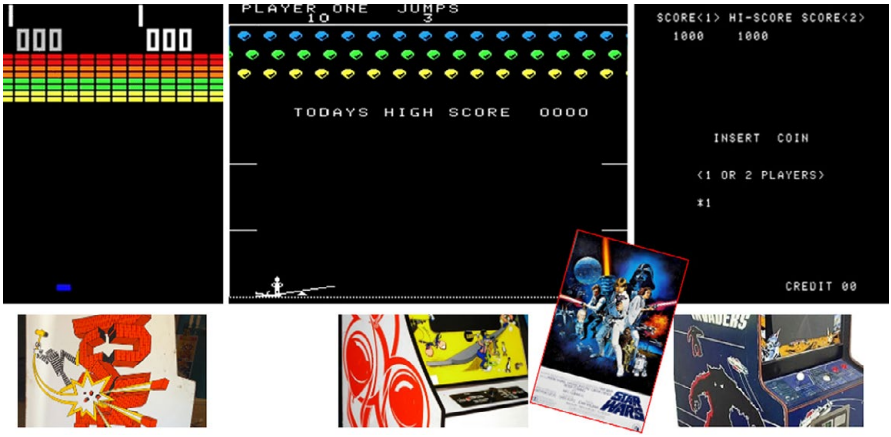

Fig. 1: Slot machines Breakout (1976), Circus (1978), Space Invaders (1978), film poster Star Wars (US 1977). Collage made of screenshots by the author.

sanctions), audiovisual staging (camera work, sound), interface signals (timer, "You Died", fade to black), and narrative functions (catalyst, catharsis, dilemma, mercy/punishment).

Genesis of Screen Death

The manner in which death is depicted on screen – how it is portrayed, and how it is justified – has changed over the decades as the medium has developed. Screen death follows the binary logic of on/off and functions "not as morally problematic or dangerous to audiences, but as an unnecessary narrative disruption due to the typical game structure of trial-and-error, die-and-retry".[12] It is experienced as an interruption that forces a restart, is quantifiable, and enables success monitoring – a circumstance that can seem cynical in the real world. Developers have been using this mechanic since the early games of Spacewar! (MIT/Tech Model Railroad Club, US 1962) to Halo 3 (Bungie Studios, US 2007) and all the way to Fortnite (Epic Games, US 2017). In an early game like Space Invaders (Taito, JP 1978) the disappearing objects were only recognisable as "aliens" thanks to the accompanying artwork (fig. 1).

With increasing graphical complexity, the existence of the game character had to be justified narratively: obstacles were interpreted as "danger",

12 Tocci 2008, 187.

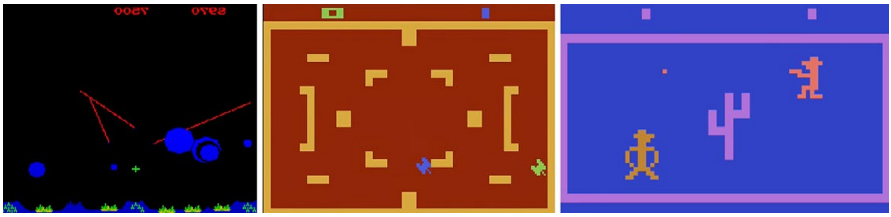

Fig. 2: Missile Command (1980) and Combat (1977) as well as Outlaw (1976), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

their disappearance as "death". While early games featured abstract blocks or balloons (Breakout [1976], Circus [1978]), film successes such as Star Wars increasingly created a social framework for interpretation, such that opponents were interpreted as spaceships or aliens. The simple mechanics thus took on additional meaning in light of narrative contexts: threats had to be warded off, worlds had to be saved.

Technically, the meaning remained limited to eliminating objects before they reached the edge of the screen, but the moral framing ("killing") gave this process weight. The survival of a character determined points, duration, and costs (through coin insertion). Thus, screen death became game mechanics, economic structure, and narrative component all at once. Players interpreted the rudimentary representations according to their own context: in Missile Command (Atari, US 1980) they could experience the Cold War, in Combat (Atari, US 1977) the Second World War, and in Outlaw (Atari, US 1976) the Wild West (fig. 2).

Death and survival in games were already provoking reflection in the arcade era. Kevin Recher[13] mentions the death sequence in Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, JP 1985) as possibly "the most famous death in videogame history". Here, Mario does not simply die, he falls off the screen. (In fact, this variant that involved making the character disappear and forcing the player to restart had already been used in Donkey Kong Jr. [Nintendo, JP 1982, arcade]). But where does the character really disappear to? To the afterlife? To limbo? After all, he falls down and does not ascend to heaven. In Donkey Kong [Nintendo, JP 1981]), the dying Mario at least receives a halo (he falls on his back), while in Donkey Kong 3 (Nintendo, JP 1983, arcade) he just tips over. Initially arcade visitors are unlikely to have asked themselves questions of this kind, but in the 1980s debates on violence and the prohibition of its

13 Recher 2016, 82.

depiction broadened the discourse in society, in Germany in particular in light of the banning of River Raid (Activision, US 1982) where it might be accessible to adolescents.

The application for its proscription and the justification for the ban referred to assumptions about the game's effects and its interpretation of war/training that went far beyond what was actually depicted.[14] Game developers were happy to engage with interpretation, but initially found the graphics could not fully support their ideas. Jane McGonigal celebrated the milestone of ten billion kills in the game Halo 3, a number reached in April 2009. The players fought for 565 days to achieve this total figure, which corresponds to one and a half times the world's population. On average that means 17.5 million kills per day, 730,000 per hour, 12,000 per minute.[15] She argued that modern generations unaccustomed to war could now catch up with their grandfathers' experiences of war and could pass on their own experiences to others. She thus highlighted experiences beyond the medium and in the real world.

Research and Analysis

Digital games have long trivialised topics such as death and mortality, portraying them primarily as a mechanism that marks the player's success or failure. In this paradigm, death is seen as a temporary setback – a learning experience in which failure forces repetition until success is achieved.[16] Regardless of platform and content, death has been an integral part of digital games for decades. Studies have suggested that 79 per cent[17] or even 90 per cent[18] of games contain physical aggression. Player characters often end up as either victims or victors; threat scenarios justify the action, whether in shooters or world simulations. Death functions here as a metric, especially in action and role-playing games: success is killing others, failure is being killed. Although there is no real intent to cause harm,[19] the experience of

14 Insightful on this topic is Fränkel 2025.
15 McGonigal 2011, 95; see also Piasecki 2017, 412; 686.
16 Andiloro 2025, 6.
17 Vorderer/Bryant 2006.
18 von Salisch/Kristen/Oppl 2007.
19 Vorderer/Bryant 2006, 348; von Salisch/Kristen/Oppl 2007, 65.

violence remains central. And not all deaths are the same, for the narrative context is of central importance. In combat-oriented action games, death becomes largely meaningless because it is so frequent. It primarily fulfils a technical function: storylines are turned on or off, missions are completed, game progress is measured – "screen death" becomes a quantifiable event, not a reflective experience.

Meaningful death does also exist. As early as Planetfall (Infocom, US 1983)[20] and, later, Heavy Rain (Quantic Dream, FR 2010) death is a serious narrative moment. Here, mortality is not only reproduced mechanically but also recognised emotionally – to the point of placing the player in a position of mourning. It is necessary to distinguish between death events as components of game narration in terms of content. A distinction should be made between *mechanical* death and *reflexive* death. The former uses screen death as a technical function, the latter gives screen death narrative meaning. Hybrid forms are highlighted here separately, using the example of Bioshock Infinite (Irrational Games, US 2013).

"Mechanics of Dying": Quantifiable Death

In many successful games, fighting – and thus killing or dying – is a central goal. Christian Wessely, who links games to Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey", recognised an extreme intensification of the narrative in level-based action games that justifies an equally extreme counterattack.[21] The hero's journey of the player-controlled protagonist becomes a matter of survival, for the protagonist and for the entire game world. It seems, then, that "death" (as an in-game state) and "killing" (within its rules) are central to the medium. Developers and players form an alliance to create the game experience (see fig. 3): what some prepare, others destroy, and game systems follow a digital on/off logic – existing or erased. However, the era in which the game was developed is significant: Wessely referred to straightforward shooters such as Doom (id Software/Midway Games, US 1993–) and Quake (id Software, US 1996–2021), which dominated the 1990s. At that time, the technical conditions for more complex representations were not yet in place.

20 Murray 1997, 54.

21 Wessely 1997, 195.

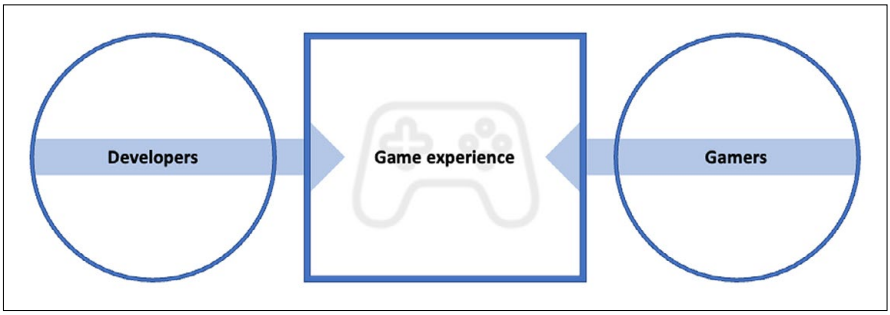

Fig. 3: "Play alliance" – Developers and gamers interact in their actions and interests in the course of a game. Illustration by the author.

Market distribution today is similar to that in the early days of screen games: fighting and competitive games have always had a high share. Early titles such as Tennis for Two (Brookhaven National Laboratory, US 1958), Spacewar! (1962), Computer Space (Nutting Associates, US 1971), Pong (Atari, US 1972), Gran Trak 10 (Atari, US 1974), Night Driver (Atari, US 1976), Space Invaders (1978), and Pac-Man (Namco, JP 1980) required players to defeat opponents – even in sports games, success meant asserting oneself and winning. In arcades, limiting playing time had an economic purpose. Computer Space introduced the high-score list, which quantified and made success visible: shooting down opponents determined the score.[22]

What, then, is the benefit of *quantifiable* death in games?

Quantifiable death fulfils various functions (see fig. 4). Technically, it structures the game: without screen death, many level designs would lose

Bring about destruction	**Avoid** destruction
Achievement objective: Killing a character or a group (or destroying weapon carriers or buildings) is important to win a stage or the game	Avoidance goal: analogous to biological existence, one's own ability to act ends with death in the game. This must be avoided in order not to end the game prematurely
Destruction target: a (hostile) world or group etc. must be destroyed	Redemption goal: a world (or city, culture or nation etc.) must be saved

Fig. 4: Death states in the game can ensure the achievement of objectives by preventing or promoting them. Illustration by the author.

22 Piasecki 2017, 566.

Fig. 5: Some games, whose sole purpose is to kill all opponents, leave behind a literally "empty" world whose existence has become meaningless, from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

their excitement, and dangerous situations would be eliminated. Cheats such as invulnerability show that the appeal disappears when mortality is ruled out. At the same time, death justifies the goal of the game itself: only the threat of the player's destruction – and thus the end of the game – gives the narrative content meaning. Opponents must be overcome and tasks solved, with elimination or deactivation the simplest means, both technically and narratively (fig. 5).

"Reflection on Dying": Qualifiable Death

The examination of death and dying in digital games opens up a wide field of narrative and ludological approaches. While in many games death primarily functioned as "game over" or a mechanical obstacle *(mechanics of dying)*, more complex works, especially since the 2010s, have taken advantage of the opportunity to use the event of "death" as a narrative resource, even as an integral part of the narrative that opens up reflections on mortality, ethics, and the meaning of life *(reflection on dying)*. Technically improved sound, higher graphics resolution and greater colour depth, and more system memory have enabled more complex games and created the basis

for "agency" – a term that describes the interactive possibilities for players to act, make decisions, accept the consequences, and to do so against the backdrop of a playful responsibility that in turn is emotionally constituted in the real-world personality construction of the players. It is no coincidence that many differentiated and modern theoretical discourses in *game studies* have developed since the 1990s. Janet Murray described "agency" as the "satisfying power" of performing "meaningful action" in an interactive environment and then witnessing the "results of our decisions and choices".[23] In doing so, she emphasised the connection between decision, action, and experienced consequence.

Jesper Juul argued along similar lines, emphasising that players make decisions that affect other events within the game framework and its rules.[24] How players interpret the game, its content, and its rules is largely beyond the control of the designers.[25] Espen Aarseth[26] emphasised that games must be understood as "ergodic literature": the player is actively involved in the production of meaning, not largely passive as in other forms of media. This individual involvement is also related to the issue of death and restarting, as these mechanisms are narrative markers in most games.[27] Andrea Andiloro refers to digital games as a "death medium",[28] but he recognises the game BYE (Before your Eyes, GoodbyeWorld Games, US 2021) as an encounter with inevitable and unpredictable death events that goes beyond the innovative control concept,[29] for it focuses, literally, on the user interface in addition to the game content. In the game, which is controlled by eye-tracking technology, the recently deceased Benny is on his way to the afterlife, accompanied by a ferryman who wants to hand him over to the gatekeeper of the transition between worlds for judgment.

Juul points out that failure in a game can be both frustrating and meaningful and is closely linked to the game's defined goal.[30] Gordon Calleja, by contrast, differentiates between *immersion* and *incorporation*, emphasis-

23 Murray 1997, 126.
24 Juul 2011, 137.
25 Juul 2011, 139.
26 Aarseth 1997, 1.
27 Aarseth 1997, 113.
28 Andiloro 2025, 14.
29 Andiloro 2025, 15.
30 Juul 2013, 86.

ing that reality does not have to be *physical* reality, for it can also be the *perceived* reality of a virtual environment. Death in the game can therefore have real emotional effects.[31]

Death in games no longer merely interrupts the flow of the game, as was prominently the case until the early 2000s, for it is increasingly used as a means of profoundly structuring the plot, character identity, and player experience. Death is by no means merely an interruption; it is a productive factor in storytelling.

Restart, Respawn, Resurrection, Permadeath?

At their core, digital games are rule-based systems for achieving predetermined goals, a structure that was already fundamental to early arcade games. The decisive change lies in the audiovisual design and increasing depth of gameplay made possible by technological innovations and complex game design. Games thus not only set tasks but also create spaces for experience in which players are actively involved in narrative and ludic processes. As Dylan Holmes[32] points out, games can be understood technically as a sequence of puzzles within a frame narrative, with questions of life and death becoming central design elements.

Modern game servers analyse players' reactions and dynamically adjust speed and difficulty.[33] In this context, screen death functions as ludic feedback that marks the progress of the game and at the same time structures the narrative.[34] It becomes a break in the flow of the game, prompting reflection on previous strategies. While death can occur abruptly, as in What Remains of Edith Finch (Giant Sparrow, US 2017, see below), it is deliberately anchored as an integrative structural principle.

As an interface between consumption and production, death fulfils several tasks: it is system feedback (screen message), a narrative marker (explanation), and a structural principle (rule of the game). Examples of such functions are found in Fortnite, where respawning is regulated by a time display, and GTA V (Rockstar North, UK 2013), which integrates death and

31 Calleja 2011, 183.
32 Holmes 2012, 30.
33 Piasecki 2017, 404–420.
34 Bosman 2018, 16.

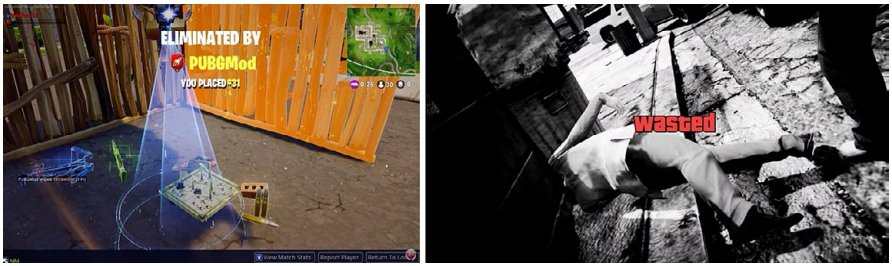

Fig. 6: Respawn sequence in Fortnite (2017), death sequence in GTA V (2013), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

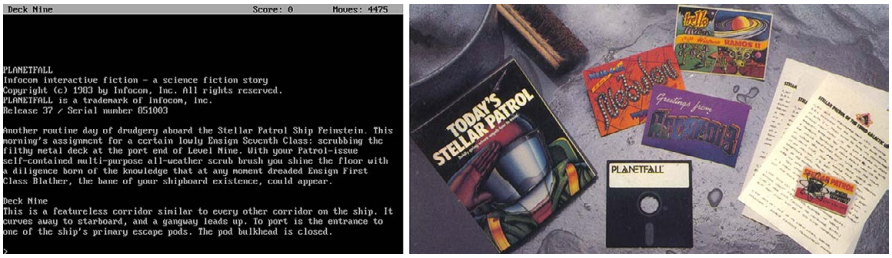

Fig. 7: Text adventure Planetfall (1983) and the Feelies included with the game, from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

return into an economic-narrative logic with a loss of money and weapons (fig. 6).

"Permadeath", by contrast, marks the permanent loss of a character and, in extreme cases, can prevent the player from playing again ("restart").[35] This final form of death is rare in games, but screen death is not without emotional impact. As early as 1983, players reported reactions to the death of the NPC robot Floyd in Planetfall. Although the character was irrelevant to the plot, he was found endearing, so his death led to grief and tears.[36] This text adventure had no graphics – the effect was created solely by a few lines of text, not by music or visual staging (fig. 7). Early text adventures came with 'feelies' – cards, magic stones and other items – so that haptics could compensate for the lack of graphics.[37]

Infidel (Infocom, US 1983) had was similarly affective, but produced other emotions. The text adventure put players in the role of an American

35 Bosman 2018, 19; 43.

36 Holmes 2012, 34.

37 More on https://t1p.de/bepq1 [accessed 18 June 2025].

grave robber who discovers a treasure but then dies when a tomb chamber collapses. This portrayal of American heroism sparked fierce reactions and debates through BBS's with developer Michael Berlyne. While Berlyne saw it as a reflection of American behaviour in the world, many players felt cheated because they were denied the success they had paid for.[38]

Immersion and Overcoming Doubt

Gaming enjoyment results from (comprehensible and credible) game rules, (appropriate) graphics, a gripping story, and an inherent sense of (self-)effective "metaleptic"[39] intervention, through a user interface, into a game world that is presented as self-sufficient and coherent. Ideally the immersive transition into the game world is not noticeable at all.[40] The game overwhelms the senses through immersion (or "spatial presence"[41]), which is understood as a spatial, mental, and emotional connection to the secondary (virtual) space that causes the real space to recede and be "forgotten" for the moment. It suspends natural disbelief[42] in the gaming reality. Games achieve immersion with minimal means. In the 1980s, players called low-resolution graphics "super-realistic" and perceived pixelated movements or text dialogues as lifelike and emotional.[43] At that time, immersion depended on graphics' quality and interface: the sharper and more intuitive they were, the easier for the new world to be believed. Limited computing power required constant reloading, preventing real-time analysis. Today, user guidance is largely seamless, and even highly abstract games such as Tempest 4K (Llamasoft, UK 2018), Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions (Lucid Games, UK 2014), or Akka Arrh (Llamasoft, UK 2023) create strong immersion without reference to real-world elements (fig. 8). Despite their artificiality, they enable presence, object deactivation, and the experience of losing lives.

38 See the transcript of the online discussion dated 18 July 1984: https://t1p.de/p9o9j [accessed 19 May 2025].

39 Montfort 2005, 30.

40 Buckingham 2006, 9.

41 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007.

42 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007, 513. The term originated in literary studies and was revised and taken up by film theory; see Elsaesser 2009, 16.

43 Wirth/Hartmann/Vorderer/Schramm 2007, 496.

Fig. 8: Akka Arrh (2023) and Geometry Wars 3:Dimensions (2014), from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

Forms of Screen-mediated Death and Loss

Since around 2010, the topos of "loss" has been impressively staged on powerful hardware. The more the image-based media became available, the more aesthetically pleasing their events could appear. Screen games can be effective through individual involvement via immersion (fig. 9). Right at the beginning, Heavy Rain shows how the player character Ethan loses his son Jason in a car accident.[44] In The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, US 2013) the traditional structure of right and wrong is overturned when in the face of a viral epidemic that turns people into zombies, a National Guard soldier shoots the player's daughter (who appears to be infected) as ordered, but the player then shoots the soldier (who was only following orders), a classic ethical dilemma of guilt and responsibility.

Some games do not elaborate on screen death. A timer may appear before respawning or a short "Game Over" message, sometimes followed by a high-score screen. Real-world concepts of death may be borrowed. GTA V

Fig. 9: Heavy Rain (2010) and The Last of Us (2013) are examples of the impressive use of the event "death", from left to right. Screenshots by the author.

44 Holmes 2012, 177.

Fig. 10: Red Dead Redemption (2010): It doesn't end well. In the end, there is death. Screenshots by the author.

allows the game camera to hover over the deceased game character for a moment, and the image changes to a black-and-white display. After a short black sequence, the character appears in front of the nearby hospital. This scheme is also a visualisation of socially established near-death experiences, which often contain states of limbo and fading consciousness.

Other productions feel compelled to provide more extensive explanations. In the Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft, CA 2007–) franchise, the games are embedded in an elaborately constructed universe of genetic relationships and continuity of memory.[45] Dead characters in Bioshock Infinite are brought back to life in biotanks. The obvious question of why only central characters (can) make use of such possibilities, and not the hordes of enemies, will not be explored further here. Karoline Anderson reports that in the face of excessive violence, players embed their own moral convictions into game characters in order to resolve moral dilemmas for themselves.[46] These were then also the subject of discussions about the game.

Darvy McDevitt counted that the game hero he controlled shot 910 people in the course of the Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar San Diego, US 2010) storyline[47] – and in the end was himself killed in a shootout reminiscent of the end of Bonnie and Clyde, when a good two dozen men shoot the character John Marsten (fig. 10). Death is omnipresent in the game, so the player's tragic end must be celebrated as a veritable high mass of blood. His death, thus the end of the game, is almost celebrated like a religious ritual of sacrifice.

45 See: https://t1p.de/hghip [accessed 17 May 2025].

46 Anderson 2022.

47 McDevitt 2010.

Case Studies for the Narrative Use of Death in Games

Below are examples of narratively complex games (AAA/indie, various genres) that show how diverse and profound death can be embedded in the narrative structure in order to mediate the connection between death, gameplay, and storytelling.

The selection of games is justified by their content: the Dark Souls series (FromSoftware, JP 2011–2018) prototypically depicts death as a ritualised learning process. Planescape: Torment (Black Isle Studios, US 1999) deals with identity and mortality, with death serving as the driving force for the plot. What Remains of Edith Finch offers poetic reflections on transience and memory in its vignettes of death. Spec Ops (Zombie Studios et al., US 1998–2012) and This War of Mine (11 bit studios, PL 2014) handle death as a marker of guilt and responsibility. GTA V and Fortnite offer a ludic-economic variant of death, but also show culturally traditional visualisations (floating camera, world transition and inevitability/timer, etc.). Heavy Rain and The Last of Us use death as an affective intervention (self-defence/guilt), while Portal 1 leads players into the paradoxical situation that the game's existence continues despite apparent narrative hopelessness.

These and other games listed show variants of ludonarrative approaches to death events. The distinction between mechanical and reflexive death observes "screen death" as system feedback and as a source of meaning. It then allows additional recognition of purely mechanical targets or qualitative contexts of meaning. The selection of games made here provides an overview of the range of forms of "death" and "dying" in the medium: learning through failure, grief as a source of meaning, morality in conflict, the economics of mortality, and aesthetic ciphers of the end. This synoptic perspective combines specific examples and systemic breadth.

Planescape: Torment: The nameless protagonist returns to the game after each death, a mechanism that therefore does not signal failure or "game over", but functions instead as a narrative resource. The loss of mortality is foundational for the narrative: the central task is for the protagonist to regain their mortality. Each death drives the story forward. In certain situations, dying even opens up new dialogue options and insights into the protagonist's past. Death is used not as a punishment but as a reflection on immortality, identity, morality, and the nature of dying.

Dark Souls: The repeated death of the player character in the Dark Souls games is an integral part of the gaming experience. It forces repeti-

Fig. 11: What Remains of Edith Finch (2017) (left), Spec Ops: The Line (2012) (right). Screenshots by the author.

tion, learning, and patient engagement with the game world. Death here becomes a ritual that confronts the player with the fragility of their character and at the same time enables progress.

What Remains of Edith Finch explicitly structures its plot around death: each episode recounts the life and death of a family member and traces different fates within a family in terms of unique, stylistically varied deaths.[48] Death frames the narrative – the player witnesses the fragility of human life as one family member after another dies. Death is thus both a poetic and existential narrative device and the main narrative theme, forcing reflection on transience (fig. 11). Dying is not only depicted within the framework of a "death medium", but also negotiated as a practice of memory culture.

Portal 1 & 2 (Valve, US 2007; 2011) offer an exploration of a death that does *not* occur. In both games, the character Chell finds herself in a laboratory complex from which she wants and needs to escape. GLaDOS, an artificial intelligence that controls the area, seeks to prevent her flight. In the course of the game Portal 1, GLaDOS releases a deadly poison gas, contaminates Chell and starts a countdown, creating an expectation that Chell either will die or must save herself. However, she does not die – at least not from this gas. This twist confounds classic player expectations and encourages reflection on loss, finitude, and the tension between ludic freedom of action and narrative determination. It also raises the question of whether GLaDOS is lying or exaggerating (a question *within* the game world) or whether the developers have forgotten the consequences or simply integrated them poorly (a question *outside* the game world). In Portal 2, Chell comes into contact with chemical substances and gels; they have positive or negative aspects, but they are not life-threatening. The narrative is thus in-

48 Ramanan 2017, https://t1p.de/soa9x [accessed 29 August 2025].

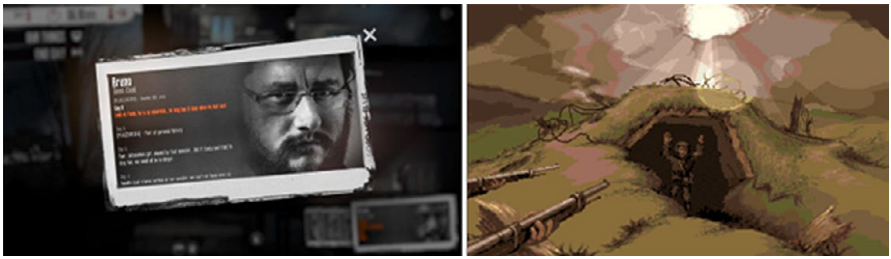

Fig. 12: This War of Mine (2014) (left), History Line 1914–1918 (1993) (right). Screenshots by the author.

tertwined with the ludic experience, and questions of relevance within the game refer to factors outside the game. The threat of death is a productive factor in the storytelling in both games and influences the player's actions.

War games inherently deal with killing and dying. Some of them focus on the fates of victims and perpetrators. A classic example is History Line 1914–1918 (Blue Byte, DE 1993), a turn-based strategy game in which cutscenes inform the player that tens of thousands of people lost their lives in the real historical battle on which the game scenario is based (fig. 12).[49]

Spec Ops: The Line (2012)[50], by contrast, reflects on the mechanics of the typical shooter genre: killings are staged not as heroic acts but as morally ambivalent actions intended to put psychological strain on the player (fig. 11).

This War of Mine takes a similar approach. It deals with death from the perspective of civilians in a besieged city. Players must organise food, medicine, and resources and make morally difficult decisions. They deal with the everyday consequences of war. Death often occurs as a result of hunger, disease, or moral decisions, forcing players to think about responsibility and guilt. The death of individual characters here not only follows the mechanics of dying, but also permanently changes the narrative.[51] The remaining characters react emotionally, which can trigger depression or suicide. Death thus structures the narrative progression and forces players to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, thus serving as a *reflection on dying*.

Bioshock Infinite is a philosophical first-person shooter with a pronounced narrative. Death in the game is not just a game mechanic ("Game

49 https://t1p.de/o6xif [accessed 29 August 2025].
50 https://t1p.de/qkhxi [accessed 29 August 2025].
51 https://t1p.de/8lmc7 [accessed 29 August 2025].

Over") but a central part of the plot. Death occurs in various forms, and the title character ultimately even accepts his own death as a kind of metaphysical purification (by drowning in his own baptismal water). The game thus transcends the usual mechanical death in shooters (respawn, restart) and at the same time represents a strong reflexive death, which it uses as a metaphysical-ethical plot engine. BioShock Infinite thus shows that games can mix the typologies of mechanical and reflexive deaths. Such is also the case with ICO (Sony, JP 2001). Here, the player must free Yorda from her captivity in a ruined castle and lead her to freedom. The setting and Yorda's often innocent and helpless behaviour encourage sympathy, but ultimately Yorda is only a cleverly embedded technical element that must be preserved until the end of the game and whose special functions must be used in a targeted manner.

The end of a game can defy expectations sometimes, depending on the design of the game world. Through the actions of the players, the actual purpose of the game can be ignored or distorted, as Juul points out.[52] Games like the GTA-franchise offer open worlds, in which gamers can follow the storyline or focus on other aspects like collecting items or just spending time sightseeing. Quests and the need to discover objects enable a sense of play that goes beyond mere survival and invites players to return.

Conclusion: Beyond "Game Over"

This article has examined the hitherto little-discussed topic of screen death. The explanations cover historical spans (from arcade logic to 1990s shooters to contemporary indie narratives) and design logic (trial and error vs. memorial storytelling), thus representing the typical variance of ludic representations of death. With progressing technical developments, a growing number of games now treat death and dying in more nuanced ways, and there has been some more in-depth reflection on the subject in the literature. A typology that distinguishes between *mechanical dying* (e. g. in action games) and *reflexive dying* (e. g. in more complex titles) is therefore possible, as is illustrated by narrative and ludic examples. This differentiation can help classify games. It also highlights borderline cases such as BioShock Infinite, where characters can maintain their strength with food or aids, but the enemy hordes do not have this option.

52 Juul 2007.

The analysis confirms that digital games translate mortality into rules, experiences, and narratives. Death has a dual function – as ludic feedback (failure, reset or restart, calculation of risks and benefits) and as narrative marker (grief, meaning, responsibility). This dual role explains why "screen death" was initially trivialised historically (arcade economy – insert coin; high scores – indicator of success; trial and error – learning path marked by life and death on screen) but has recently become increasingly aestheticised and problematised (individual losses, framing in memory culture, ethical dilemmas). What this means is that games highlight the loss of specific characters who were previously established narratively and in line with a culturally anchored film aesthetic. Practices of remembrance in a game (graves, memorials, diaries) give death a cultural context. Decisions with fatal consequences and no "just" solution (e. g. whom to save?) highlight moral tensions. In short: in older systems, death was primarily a game signal; today, it is more often charged with narrative and ethical significance.

Digital games communicate cultural, social, or religious content to players in a participatory manner.[53] Multifaceted, complex, multidimensional games use death not only mechanically, but also reflexively, as a catalyst for storytelling and reflection. Death thus becomes an immersive experience, a moral and narrative responsibility of the players.[54] It functions as a narrative resource and existential dimension of experience that encourages reflection on mortality and meaning. But only a comparative view across genres and production cultures (e. g. indie/AAA) reveals how dying shapes and influences the mechanics, dramaturgy, and affect of the game. This gives rise to ambivalence in terms of media ethics and pedagogy: repetition can desensitise, but structured staging can promote reflection, empathy, and a sense of responsibility – especially when games actually model consequences and impose ambivalence (e. g. victim/perpetrator shifts, civilian vulnerability).

In making death and dying visible, digital games allow them to be experienced in a playful way. Death takes on a double meaning – it marks boundaries and risks, but it also opens up narrative spaces. Unlike viewers of film or readers of literature, players of such games must actively deal with the consequences of death. Mortality is thus a central structural principle of the narrative and an expression of agency. Existential questions are part of the action.

53 Sisler 2013, 136.

54 Murray 1997; Aarseth 1997; Juul 2013; Calleja 2011.

The analysis here illustrates that death and dying in games structure narratives, open up perspectives, and encourage reflection. From the philosophical debate in Planescape: Torment to the paradoxical experience of a non-occurring death in the Portal-games to the personal stories in What Remains of Edith Finch, death is used as a central narrative medium, which is in accord with the theoretical approaches of Aarseth, Juul, and Calleja. Responsible design can help promote positive reflection and limit the negative effects of virtual death experiences.

The lack of established category systems for death and dying events in games can be remedied when the following indicators are identified and examined:

- *Distinction* between death as "reflexive" or "mechanical", or according to its function as "meaning-making" or simply "system feedback"
- *Application* of rule regimes (death event as respawn, permadeath, etc.)
- Audiovisual *presentation* (camera work, sound, blankout, etc.)
- *Interface signals* (timer, on-screen text "Game Over" or "You are dead", etc.)
- *Narrative functions* (catalyst for character transformation, catharsis, dilemma, punishment/mercy, etc.)

Analytical categories could be:

- *Ludic*: death as a difficulty regulator, learning loop, progress reset, loss of resources.
- *Narrative*: death as a plot engine, change of perspective, memory anchor, moral touchstone.
- *Aesthetic*: iconography (halo/blackout), "spectator camera", colour desaturation, musical coda.
- *Ethical/pedagogical*: desensitisation vs. reflection; attribution of responsibility; potential for religious/media education.

This article makes the case that (1) typologies (mechanical/reflexive/hybrid forms) are viable if they address ludic and narrative levels of experience together, (2) reception research should focus more on affective and moral negotiations (e. g. moral distress, grief work), and (3) cultural comparisons and platform ecologies (indie vs. AAA, single-player vs. live service) are central moderators of death semantics.

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