Playing to Death

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The authors discuss the relationship of death and play as illuminated by computer games. Although these games, they argue, do illustrate the value of being—and staying—alive, they are not so much about life per se as they are about providing gamers with a playground at the edge of mortality. Using a range of visual, auditory, and rule-based distractions, computer games both push thoughts of death away from consciousness and cultivate a perception that death—real death—is predictable, controllable, reasonable, and ultimately benign. Thus, computer games provide opportunities for death play that is both mundane and remarkable, humbling and empowering. The authors label this fundamental characteristic of game play *thanatoludism*. **Key words**: computer games; death and play; thanatoludism

Mors aurem vellens: Vivite ait venio.
—*Appendix Vergiliana,* "Copa"

Consider here a meditation on death. Or, more specifically, a meditation on play and death, which are mutual and at times even complementary presences in the human condition. To be clear, by meditation we mean just that: a pause for contemplation, reflection, and introspection. We do not promise an empirical, textual, or theoretical analysis, though there are echos of each in what follows. Rather, we intend an interlude in which to ponder the interconnected phenomena of play and death and to introduce a critical tool—terror management theory—that we find helpful for thinking about how play and death interact in computer games.

Johan Huizinga (1955) famously asserted that "the great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start" (4). But he could just have easily substituted the word *death* for the word *play* and the assertion would still ring true: the great archetypal activities of human society are all per-

meated with death from the start. Death is embedded in conventional wedding vows ("till death do us part"), forms the centerpiece of large public ceremonies (e.g., the Many Mouths One Stomach All Souls procession), and constitutes celebrated parts of geographic identity (e.g., Death Valley). In countless films, television programs, and comics, death plays a major role, and even more death-related books fill libraries (both public and personal). Death, in other words, like play, is omnipresent, figuring in all manner of defining events, occasions, places, and personae, from the macabre to the transcendent.

Sigmund Freud (1959) said as much: "In the very structure and substance of all human constructive efforts, there is embodied a principle of death" (273). Here, too, play makes an indistinguishable substitute for death, and again Huizinga (1955) provides a textual and conceptual mirror: "Civilization arises and unfolds in and as play. . . . Law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom, and science, all are rooted in the primaeval soil of play" (ix, 5). Play is as inseparable from life as life is from death, and each is inescapably mundane in the sense of being part of the everyday human experience. To offer a commonplace but still quintessential example, consider the death and play involved in food preparation, where one snuffs out the life of plants and animals and subsequently manipulates the carcasses to create pleasurable flavors and texture palettes.

But play and death are more than merely interchangeable in some ontological jiggery-pokery. They are, in fact, interrelated and interlocutory, dialogic in their ability to illuminate and inflect one other. And it is precisely this dialogue that we mean to parse in our meditation, especially its symbiosis. We are also curious about what it would mean to move from thinking about computer games and death—already the subject of diverse and fascinating extant (e.g., Carter, Gibbs, and Wadley 2013; Klastrup 2007; Tocci 2008; Christiansen 2016; Anderson 2015), as well as proposed work (e.g., Soderman, Costantino, and Chang 2016)—to thinking with computer games about death.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge, as a key prompt for this curiosity, Sherry Turkle's (2007) stimulating introduction to *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. In her introduction, Turkle writes, "We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with" (5).

Computer games are nothing if not lovable objects. They are playmates and social enablers (e.g., de la Hera Conde-Pumpido and Alencar 2015), grails for educators (e.g., Gee 2004), and they can even spark panic in response to their considerable charms (e.g., Grossman and DeGaetano 1999). They are magnetic in their ability to command attention (e.g., Entertainment Software Association 2005) and routinely inspire panoplies of devotional objects (e.g., Geek Crafts 2016) and phenomena (e.g., Penny Arcade 2016). Computer games are objects of—and a medium for—adoration.

We do not apply the term adoration carelessly (nor do we do so with meditation, for that matter). Like many words—*awesome, terrific,* and *fantastic*, for example—*adoration* has had most of its unearthly overtones extinguished. Foodies adore food trucks, denim enthusiasts adore their selvage, and eBay auctions for the Beanie Baby named "Adore Bear" (in mint condition!) start at just three dollars. With its roots in prayer and sacred dialogue, however, adoration historically signaled a complex exchange with an enigmatic power, an exchange tangled with hope, fear, desperation, and courage. To adore was simultaneously to love and to plead, to exalt yet to approach, to hallow and to demand. Understandably, such devotion was almost without exception warranted and not easily won because the adored demonstrated mastery over death itself. Martyrs, saints, angels, demons, and all manner of deities from countless pantheons evoked adoration (and, in many cases, they continue to evoke it) precisely because their proximity to—yet supremacy over—death offered those not so powerfully situated an experience of ultimate security, a foothold from which to launch a leap of faith that death is dodgeable. But as the epigraph that begins this article reminds us: *Mors aurem vellens: Vivite ait venio.* "Death pulls at the ear: 'Live,' he says. 'I am coming.'"

For the purposes of our meditation, our reflection on play and death, we enter into our own adoration of games, in the uncanny as well as more ordinary sense of the term. We endeavor here to contemplate games as relics capable of powering joy and fear alike, as bridges connecting the human drive to live (and be victorious) to the human reality of death, inexorable and inescapable. And because the reality of death can be terrifying, we enlist the aid of terror management theory (TMT) to help explain why the recollection of one's own mortality—through game play or any other mechanism—is often a bridge more to be avoided than traversed. To this point, TMT uses principles of social psychology to identify links between a range of affective and behavioral responses (e.g., prejudice, apathy, addiction, the defense of self-esteem) and the fear of death. In

so doing, it provides a useful means for meditating on play and death, for contemplating the interrelations among the real human pleasures and performative possibilities of game lives lost, levels ended, life extensions exhausted, and so on.

For convenience, we group computer games' numerous death-related pleasures and performative possibilities under the name *thanatoludism* (or death play). We also consider some of the principal meanings death has come to convey for scholars of games especially. Moreover, we glance at technologies designed to cheat game death, and ultimately we exit our meditation by suggesting that death in games occupies a curious liminal and affective space and grows increasingly consequential—thus triggering more defenses against the terrors that death inspires—the closer the player comes to it during play. Death appears, in other words, as an asymptotic experience. Death in games always approaches the zero line of real mortality—the actual death of the player (not the avatar)—yet never crosses it, not even when the player's character cannot be rescued or revived and the game must be restarted (i.e., "permadeath"). Death, in other words, is frequently invoked but never confirmed—though, of course, there have been occasions when players have died as a result of too much play (See Spragg 2018 for a troubling list of game-related deaths). Such asymptotic or near-death experiences are both part of what makes games enjoyable and, just as often, boring. In well-designed games, surfing at death's door—whether as Dig Dug (*Dig Dug*) fighting Pookas or as a contestant in *Upsilon Circuit*—can prompt powerful feelings of danger, loss, and quiessence, feelings sympathetic enough to those surrounding actual death to activate the central nervous system in stimulating but thankfully muted ways. In less well-designed games, such feelings are easily dampened by the psyche's defenses, flattening presumptive terror into predictable tedium.

Before moving deeper into this meditation, a brief word on thanatos—the death instinct—is in order. Having already quoted Freud, it would certainly make sense for us to continue deploying his theories about the death drive—and to some extent we do. The idea that the "most universal endeavour of all living substance…[is] to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world" (Freud 1950a, 86) and that life therefore "consists of a continuous descent toward death" (Freud 1950b, 66) contours the conceptual landscape of our meditation. But our reflection is also informed by Herbert Marcuse (1974) and his ingenious adaptation of Freud, *Eros and Civilization*. Whereas Freud is primarily concerned with unpacking the mental apparatus, Marcuse's attentions—like those of his fellow Frankfurt School theorists—concentrate on culture and its transforma-

tions, something he explored most famously in *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964). For Marcuse, culture forms the page on which the dynamics of the life and death instincts are written, a page to be rewritten, ultimately, in service to intellectual, physical, and spiritual liberation.

Computer games are quintessential cultural objects of life, death, challenge, and change and, in fact, trade substantially on the terror surrounding death—think of Ms. Pac-Man (*Ms. Pac-Man*) being hounded relentlessly by Blinky and the other ghosts, or the gradually darkening screen and the player character's desperate calls for help after being mortally wounded in *Gears of War*. As such, games make curious yet keen lenses for contemplating the connections between play and death. With this sense of the death instinct's pervading potency in mind, we look now to TMT for an explanation of how such an all-consuming terror might itself be mortified—through game play—into little more than a vague infelicity.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT) was developed by Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeffrey Greenberg to explain "the role of the unconscious fear of death in just about everything we humans do" (Greenberg and Arndt 2012, 400). Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (1998) saw in their reading of Ernest Becker's (1997) *The Denial of Death* an opportunity to imagine the fear of dying as a predictive theory. For Becker, "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (ix). Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski recognized practical merit in this understanding of human history, and Greenberg and Arndt (2012) later described TMT as founded on two basic observations:

> The first is that humans are animals with many systems designed to keep them alive, including a fight-or-flight response to impending threats to their continued existence. The second is that the cognitive abilities of humans have led to the awareness that death is inevitable and could come at any time due to a host of potential causes. The theory posits that this knowledge, in an animal built to avert death, creates an ever-present potential for intense anxiety, or terror, which must

be managed continuously. The terror is managed by sustaining faith in a view of the world and oneself that denies the precarious and transient nature of one's own existence. (402)

TMT was initially dismissed as squatting somewhere between speculation and spuriousness. As one reviewer of Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski's initial 1998 article put it, "I have no doubt that this paper would be of no interest to any psychologist, living or dead" (Greenberg and Arndt 2012, 399). However, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski subsequently initiated a program of evidence gathering that now counts hundreds of empirical studies as documentation for the numerous ways human behavior changes when facing death.

At its core, TMT argues that any stimulus that heightens human awareness of death (mortality salience)—for example, cancer warnings on tobacco products, survey questions about burial urns, or even the word *death* flashed instantaneously on a computer screen—tends to produce both ad hoc and systemic mitigating responses. Ad hoc or proximal defenses are immediate reactions to such reminders—throwing oneself into a new project; attending to the catering details at a wake; whistling past a graveyard. Such reactions are meant to suppress thoughts of death quickly, or if that is not possible, then at least to rationalize them as momentarily insignificant with such thoughts as "I'm in good health," "I don't drink and drive," "My neighborhood is safe," and so on. Systemic or distal defenses, on the other hand, are formations meant to protect against reminders of death by establishing an inner and persistent sense that one's life is "meaningful, valuable, and enduring," that is, that one's mortal existence is part of a death-defying larger context (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1998, 839). Theologically driven belief in an afterlife is one example of a proximal defense, but so too is a more scientific appreciation that one's body will return to its elemental compounds at death, thus contributing to an eternal cycle of life. Moreover, researchers such as Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, and Faucher have sought to demonstrate TMT's underlying psychosocial mechanisms by testing what they call the "mortality salience hypothesis." This hypothesis states that "if a psychological structure functions to buffer awareness of death, inducing people to think of their death should increase their need for this psychological structure" (Hayes et al. 2010, 701). By inducing the experience of mortality salience in subjects (i.e., heightened death awareness), then watching to see if they attempt to manage (consciously or otherwise) any resulting anxiety by deploying proximal or distal defenses, TMT can be tested for validity and reliability.

Research has now amply demonstrated that human beings will go to great

lengths to avoid thinking about death. Thus, from predictable cultural phenomena, such as religion and shopping, to unnerving but equally measurable reactions to breastfeeding, feelings about national soccer teams, and human-android relations, TMT illuminates a wide range of behavioral and performative activities. In one study (Cox et al. 2009), for example, test subjects were reminded of their mortality by completing Donald Templer's Death Anxiety Scale, then tested to see how amenable they were to engaging in the risky behavior of suntanning. The study showed that a mortality reminder serves as a powerful deterrent to risky behavior but for one exception—as the mortality reminder faded from consciousness, subjects became increasingly willing to engage in risky behavior and even dangerously overcompensate if there was a chance that doing so would raise their sense of self-worth (i.e., their proximity to immortality). Other studies link mortality reminders—and the proximal and distal defenses deployed against them—with increased hostility toward political candidates (even from one's preferred party), with greater donations to approved charities, and with the negative evaluation of imported products (see Greenberg, Soloman, and Arnolt 2008). TMT has also prompted fascinating work in the areas of health management and intergroup violence, areas with intriguing possibilities for game studies because so many computer games are driven by one or both of these mechanics.

It is important to note that—in the context of TMT—proximal and distal defenses are not necessarily to be viewed as detrimental, delusional, or otherwise neurotic. Rather, according to TMT researchers, proximal and distal defenses are among the psyche's natural defenses, deployed to keep the organism healthy, confident, productive, optimistic, and strong. Such protective measures can, however, be overused, when they cause people to reframe their mortality salience as active xenophobia or ignore safety policies they perceive as inhibiting.

With the parameters and possibilities of TMT clarified, we turn now to the fundamental question of thanatoludism: how might death reminders in computer games constitute a fundamental part of what makes games fun? In pursuing this line of inquiry in our meditation, we briefly reflect on why death—real death, not the temporary death found in most games—is typically no fun at all.

Thanatoludism

It is tempting to imagine game death as an instantaneous and transitory occur-

rence at the border between playing and not playing: Pac-Man is absorbed by Inky (*Pac-Man*); Leon Kennedy's head is removed by a chainsaw (*Resident Evil 4*); Guitar Warrior destroys the would-be challenger with power chords (*Total Distortion*). If Freud, Huizinga, Becker, Marcuse, Turkle, and the Terror Management theorists are correct, however, such an imagining would be well off the beam. The moment of game death may be specific—many games track player character deaths for reasons ranging from targeted marketing to server load balancing to enhancing player immersion through data visualization—but the upstream and downstream effects of game death are continuous. Games proffer selectable difficulty levels, such as "Kamikaze" (*Mobile Sudoku*) and "No One Shall Live" (*Rise of the Triad: Dark War*), in-game screens detail weapon load outs and their potential lethality, and user interfaces depict countless variations of life-force meters. Indeed, computer games, almost from their inception, have used a veritable acoustic and visual riot to inform players that their "deaths" (i.e., play cessations) looms or have been confirmed, or both. Such mementos mori (or death remembrances) function as constant prompts that death through play—and only through play, given that death can only finish a life that play has started—is imminent and omnipresent.

On the other end of the equation—the after play, so to speak—is the game designer's cruelest gesture, a failure banner hung specially for the player. On-screen messages announcing player character death—"You Died" (*Dark Souls*; *Resident Evil*; *Minecraft*); "You are dead" (*Resident Evil 4*); "Se acabo la caza de brujas" (*Bayonetta 2*); "The End" (*Missile Command*); "Mission Failed" (*Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*); and of course "Game Over" (*The Legend of Zelda*; *Conker's Bad Fur Day*)—are the proverbial nails in the coffin when play ends. Such interruptions make the often disappointing denouements after failure all the more grinding, fostering the kind of ruined *petit morts* and *kenjataimu* that spur some players to try again and others to call it quits.

Clearly, death permeates games well beyond the moments immediately before and after the instant of death. Almost everything about computer games is morbid, from their common play mechanics of survival, time limits, energy reserves, and domination to the fact that games specifically impose a set of engagement rules that exist beyond the real vicissitudes of death-directed life. And this is true of all games, not just those mediated by computers. Board, tabletop, card, and backyard games (among others) serve as powerful examples that play is a special world, always embedded in life but in some ways also existing beyond it. Huizinga (1955) frames this aspect of play as "the direct opposite

of seriousness," which is to say, it is the opposite of most of life (5). Games—as rigorous formations of play—are, so to speak, moments of life stripped of seriousness, of its mortal terrors, of death. Games approach death but do not encroach upon it.

In this regard, play with and around death—or thanatoludism, as we call it here—might reasonably be understood as a function of terror management. If humans will do anything to avoid considering the terror of their own mortality—in the near term by garish distraction, in the long term through the development of coping systems that affirm an individual's persistent continuity—then computer games are an exemplary mode of psychic defense, both proximally and distally. And computer games are routinely criticized for both functions. When games help push away the tedium and horror of daily existence, they are said to be "mindless distractions." When they assail players not only with depictions of monstrousness and human savagery but also of opportunities to actively simulate such brutality, they are said to be indifference engines, anesthetizing players to the mortal terrors that provide the backbone of empathy, morality, and ethical behavior. Such critiques only strengthen the idea that thanatoludism is play with a purpose (usually unconscious)—namely, to minimize, control, and otherwise disempower individuals' gravest fears.

Given that play exists as an experience within, yet phenomenologically isolated from, everyday life (and thus, also, death), the function of computer games seems surficially universal: by playing with and around death, players are able to avoid confronting the real thing. In embodying space heroes, private investigators, musicians, pilots, cooks, apocalypse survivors, and countless other abstract and concrete characters—from the days of *OXO* (1952) to those of *Shenmue III* (slated for release in 2019)—gamers seemingly inure themselves to death's perpetual whisperings. Recasting death as play—rule bound, controllable, relatively inconsequential, and reasonable—holds death's ghastly countenance at bay, for a time.

But what happens when death is rendered chaotic, uncontrollable, consequential, or unreasonable by games? Jason Rohrer's *Passage*, for example, invites players to confront the inexorability of death in a 100 x 16 pixel side scroller in which the player character journeys from youth to old age to death in a mere five minutes. In *One Single Life*, players are tasked with jumping from one building to another, with the penalty for failure being that the game must be completely uninstalled and reinstalled should the player wish to try again. With games such as *DayZ*, *ZombiU*, *Fire Emblem: Shin Monshō no Nazo ~Hikari to Kage*

no Eiyū~, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, *Uplink*, *Air Traffic Controller*, *Dark Souls*, and *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*, player death or the failure to accomplish a play objective means starting the game over more or less from scratch, a feature colloquially known by the portmanteau "permadeath." *Rogue Legacy*, for its part, complicates the concept of permanent death by introducing a hereditary element to play. When the player's character dies, that character's offspring is able to pick up where the forebearer left off, albeit with a genetically altered set of characteristics. The apex of permadeath is surely *Upsilon Circuit*, marketed as part computer game, part game show. Designed so that player victories in a puzzle- and monster-filled dungeon give online viewers a set of points to distribute to the player's skill trees, the game also regulates who can join. One play per person. No repeats. Ever.

Ostensibly, games in which player character death is permanent rather than temporary provide both opportunities for a heightened sense of consequential play and stronger inducements to mortality salience than less decisively terminal titles do. After all, bad decisions, poor performances, and misfortune tend to hasten one's demise in both virtual and real contexts. We are somewhat skeptical, however, that such games can, in fact, subvert the mechanisms of terror management, that by forcing players to practice extreme vigilance about the care of their avatars, players are somehow distracted from raising proximal and distal defenses and detaching from considerations of real death's dreadfulness. Rather, we suspect that this updated form of thanatoludism may be old wine in a new skin. Jim Rossignol, the developer of *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*, hints at this when he suggests that the mechanic of permanent death is about something far more mundane than raising player awareness about mortal brevity—namely, it is about boredom. Permadeath, says Rossignol, "heightens excitement. If the player is risking something—in the case of most games the time you have invested to reach a certain point—then taking risks with that investment is more thrilling. If you can just hit a key and get everything back, it's less of a thrill to succeed, and less of a horror to lose" (Griffin 2014, n.p.).

We do not disagree, but from a TMT perspective, Rossignol would seem to have perceived only a symptom (boredom) of a deeper and ongoing process (terror management). How is it possible, we might ask, that players immersed in a storm of light, sound, and twitch responses could be bored? One possible answer is that players' past proximal and distal defenses have become so practiced that the dangerous delights once afforded by conventional computer game play have become enervated. Consequently, such games no longer do

the work they are meant to do, namely, they no longer provide a playground at the edge of mortality. This ultimate optimization of terror management—the obliteration of terror—may be desirable in the contexts of phobia counselling and community building, but it is the proverbial kiss of death for play. Thus is born a new intensification of play—permadeath—which makes death matter again by renewing the adoration (loving and pleading) triggered by the tension between mortality salience and a set of struggling proximal and distal defenses. Curiously, this innovation is double-edged, at once restoring the thrill of play and sharpening the spurs that animate mortality salience (and the defensive reactions it triggers). We surmise that the latter reaction formation is one reason why so few permadeath-based games have become best sellers. They trigger the consummate proximal defense, namely, complete avoidance.

In summary, computer games tend to provide players with multiple opportunities to mount proximal and distal defenses against thoughts about death, even though games do so by recycling an array of signs denoting and connoting life, death, and rebirth. Such repetition—combined with the stock characters, tired plots, humdrum environments, banal mechanics, and cliché-riddled scripts that seem to pervade all but the rarest games—is tailor-made for terror management. By simultaneously distracting and desensitizing players to real death, computer games offer an elegant psychic camouflage, allowing gamers to hide fears of death among an innocuous multitude of attenuated mortality primers.

One last element of death play warrants reflection before we conclude our meditation. Up to now, we have focused on what seems to us as players to be the most tangible thanatoludism in computer games—the scene and context of a player character's death. Less palpable, perhaps, but no less interesting is when death takes someone else in a game. Thus, we turn to that phenomenon and the opportunities the death of others may present for circumventing proximal and distal defenses and, so, for surprising players at an affective level.

Playing with Death

As a reminder, we have been picturing the constellation of play and death in computer games against the backdrop of suppressing death anxiety by distracting players with immediate tasks (proximal defenses) and through habituating players to a predictable vision of death that swaps playful engagement for grave

apprehension (distal defenses). Such a picture may help explain why, to return to an earlier suggestion, human beings adore games. Games quite literally ease the mind, serving as a digital salve for terminal thoughts. This may also offer insight into why some computer games, although intense, do not cleave to conventional understandings of "fun." By referencing the in-born terror of death (according to TMT) but making it relatively inconsequential by recasting that terror in a sphere for play, game developers capture player attention by insinuating (but not instantiating) death.

This macabre panic-pleasure cycle (mortality salience → proximal or distal defense → repeat) is not the only emotion engine in the game industry of course. For decades, the industry held the weeping gamer to be the Holy Grail of story-driven game design. In the early 1980s, for example, an Electronic Arts advertisement in Electronic Fun with Computers and Games Magazine asked "Can a computer make you cry?" (Patterson 2009). Twenty years on, the goal was the same: David Jaffe, developer of the *God of War* and *Twisted Metal* franchises, described a key objective of his design work as ensuring that "players at the end of the game are actually choked up—if not crying—because we've done our job so well" (Totilo 2005a). And just a few years later at the Game Developers Conference, Clint Hocking, one of the Ubisoft designers responsible for *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, celebrated *Passage* as a milestone in game development, one that did not require millions of dollars and hundreds of developers. Chastising himself and his audience of industry veterans, Hocking asked: "Why can't we make a game that fucking *means something*? A game that *matters*? You know? We wonder all the time if games are art, if computers can make you cry, and all that. Stop wondering. The answer is yes to both. Here's a game that made me cry. It did. It really did" (Fagone 2008, n.p.).

What is to be made of affective responses that seem to break free from the management of terror, expressions that—to date, at least—mainly link and manifest as tears and fears? What happens when a player is choked with emotion? Or scared stiff? Or angry? Is the corollary between game death and real death strong enough that the death of a cherished nonplayer character taps into the most profound feelings of loss that attend the death of a flesh-and-blood loved one? When literary characters die, this certainly seem to be the case. Oscar Wilde, in "The Decay of Lying," wrote of a character in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, "One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able completely to rid myself. It haunts

me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh" (1905, n.p.). Literature is not alone in this provocation. Recalling Turkle's notion of thinking with things, such affective responses are often evoked by the end of beloved television series or the release of new music boxed sets, and they can even emerge from the completion of projects—the last knot pulled taut on an elaborate macramé wall hanging, the final coat of varnish on a piece of fine furniture, the season's last harvest from a backyard garden. Games are certainly no exception. Recall the infamous Serenity Now funeral raid in *World of Warcraft* when a group of players attacked another group who were visibly mourning a friend and how the attack not only outraged many people but was perceived as a violation of respect for a gamer who had passed away in real life.

Consider too, the prevalence of online memorial sites for both deceased game characters and actual players, sites that, according to Anna Haverinen (2014), date back at least to the early 1990s. Validating the ritualized mourning and bereavement practices of online gamers, Haverinen observes that although

> virtual memorials are only made of pixels and abstract ideas, created in the mind and displayed on a (computer) screen, they have also transformed the way people perceive physical objects. The belongings of the deceased often become imbued [with] some kind of deeper meaning, and photographs are often especially meaningful for the mourner. In gaming worlds, screenshots and videos are cherished and used in the memorials for others to enjoy and remember. But it is not only the visual material that is preserved, as chat discussions, messages and other things the deceased player "had said" online become meaningful objects that are often passed along to others. These virtual "objects" become loaded with memories of the person and representatives of the personality, whether imagined (characters) or real (actual people). (171)

Here, Haverinen is particularly interested in the death nexus binding the virtual and real, ultimately suggesting that the longer that nexus is traversed, the harder it becomes affectively to distinguish them. Not surprising, then, is the fact that related professional literature such as Carla Sofka, Kathleen R. Gilbert, and Illene Noppe Cupit's (2012) *Dying, Death, and Grief in an Online Universe: For Counselors and Educators* or Bill Webster's (2016) "Loss in Cyberspace" are increasingly familiar among psychotherapists tasked with aiding clients bereaved by in-game death.

These are relatively grand mementos mori, and, as such, their scope seems to include potentially unflinching recognition of mortality. Putting aside for a moment the traction these complex reactions to game death appear to hold,

there is the opposite end of game death to consider as well—that is, micro-mourning. Rather than sustained mourning sessions involving virtual placards, wreaths, and candle burnings, micromournings are rapid deployments of grief fired off through social media, in-game chat, and private expostulates such as "I can't believe that just happened," "You've got to be kidding me," and "How the hell did she just die?" These short-lived but earnest outbursts—especially when they are punctuated by "rage quits" (i.e., the unceremonious, even violent, ces-sation of play due to frustration with in-game events)—might indicate that the mechanisms of terror management have been circumvented, allowing (if only for a moment) expressions of deep confusion, helplessness, and grief. Research on the relationship between emotion and death—from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's (1970) examination of the dying's affective stages to Michelle Barrett's (2017) case study of the emotional cost of care imposed on nurses who endure the quotidian vitriol suffusing critical care units—would seem to bear this out. At the very least, such scholarship makes it clear why mortality salience might well trigger outward expressions of hostility. Death, so uncontrollable, unavoidable, and unfair, makes humans angry.

Were it as straightforward as this, however, it seems that any frustrating game—whether so by great design (e.g., *Ori and the Blind Forest*) or random play mechanics (e.g., *Tharsis*)—would be always on the verge of subverting the com-plex structures responsible for managing mortal terror. Similarly, if a game only required a long-term commitment to embrace—rather than retreat from—the death drive, then games such as *Wasteland 2* and *EVE Online* would attract mark-edly different players than more casual games such as *Candy Crush* and *I Am Bread*. Instead, players have a tendency to attack game aggravations in more or less the same ways, first through trial and error, then through synchronous and asynchronous dialogue, and finally through brute-force workarounds. Indeed, in the most extreme cases, players deploy sophisticated cheat technologies—for instance, hardware such as the GameShark and Game Genie (circuit board-based cheat systems for game consoles), elaborate strategy guides, and POKE instruc-tions (i.e., code that modifies game software after it has been loaded into memory in order to bend or break the game's rules)—to help manage their reactions.

We freely admit that if players—ritualizers and the micromourners alike—were to be utterly shaken from the play sphere as the result of an in-game death, then thanatoludism might have lost its grip. The player—having ceased playing—could then square up to the terror of disappearing from the universe forever. Examples of such occurrences are as rare as hen's teeth, however. TMT suggests

that distal defenses are what drive tears shed over dead nonplayer characters and the creation of in-game memorials to real, perished players. Hosting virtual memorial services and constructing hagiographies not only immortalize the deceased character—and its player, if such is the case—but also the mourners. Such rituals rewrite the permanence of death, not for the deceased but for the living. In so doing, the death play terra firma out of which such rituals spring get extended, making subsequent deaths that much easier to play with rather than flee from.

Requiescat in Pace

Marcel O'Gorman (2015) observes that the immersive qualities of a medium rely heavily on the "strategic maneuvers" inherent in that medium to confront users with their own finitude (3). We agree, but would append the caveat that users, in turn, will tend to deploy everything in their compass to avoid such a confrontation. As long-time computer gamers, we have experienced our share of game death and the range of emotions it can prompt. We have been moved by story arcs from Telltale Games, enraged about Ryu Hayabusa's performance in the *Ninja Gaiden* franchise, and reduced to tears of laughter at the inventive ways poor Larry Laffer meets his end in *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*. Reflecting on this range in the context of TMT suggests that games produce asymptotic or near-death experiences because their deepest mechanic is the play of mortality salience—death awareness—itself. In this capacity, games rake at the player's finitude, then lend a semblance of control over and response to that terminus wherein one may contemplate (or, more likely, energetically ignore) mortality's meanings. What happens next is a drama of proximal and distal defenses played out both inside and outside the game. Strangely, then, in playing to death, the player brings the game to life.

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