

Death and Dying in Games: A Catholic theological engagement of Bosman's typology of narratological embeddings of player's death

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1. Introduction

Videogame-related scholarly work rarely focuses on the death of the player's avatar. Death in this reflection is not considered 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." [i] Videogames may be the only narrative medium where the player's death is "entirely routine" and often leads to frustration [ii] even though they have the capacity to trigger existential reflection. [iii]

The aim of this essay is to theologically engage Frank Bosman's three-categories of how videogames deal with death, while juxtaposing the apparent fear of death exhibited in games with embracing "sister death." [iv]

2. Narratological Embeddings

Bosman asserts that death or its absence communicates to the player their "(in)ability to achieve" targets embedded in the game. [v] In examining videogames Bosman outlines three categories of narratological embeddings (NE), each with further sub-types as per Figure 1.

The Actual death embedding takes death seriously because the avatar dies. The continuity of play is narratologically safeguarded through cloning (1A); and by bringing in a replacement:

Type	Description	Primary example(s)
1	Embedding: Actual death. A. The player's avatar is replicated by cloning or copying. B. The player's avatar is replaced by an avatar from a parallel universe. C. The player's avatar is replaced by a new avatar.	<i>Borderlands</i> series (2009-2014) <i>Bioshock Infinite</i> (2013) <i>Zombi</i> (2012)
2	Embedding: Death avoided. A. The player's avatar is placed within a simulation context. B. The player's avatar is saved by an external force at the last second.	<i>Assassin's Creed</i> series (2007-18) <i>Prince of Persia</i> (2008)
3	No explicit narratological embedding. A. The player's progress through the game is preserved for next try. B. The player's progress through the game is lost.	<i>Watch Dogs</i> (2014) <i>The Binding of Isaac</i> (2014)

Figure 1. Typology of NEs [vi]

either from a parallel universe (1B) or a new avatar altogether (1C). The second avoids death by using workarounds: either death happening within a simulated environment (2A); or by a last-minute aid (2B). The third does away with death: either resumed from the last save-point (3A); or restarted again, thus, permadeath (3B).

I. Actual Death

1) Cloning

In this category, death happens, but its effects are quickly removed. In *Borderlands*, [vii] following death, the avatar is cloned at a New-U station, which the avatar would have previously passed by.

Here the narratological similarity between the killed avatar and the new-*you* can convince the player that they are playing with the same avatar. This description echoes the same theology as one lives in the sacrament of Baptism. Theologically we speak of a new ontological creature.[ix] Miller postulates that the neophyte is the same being which experiences “a total change”, and thus, “while it is still you, you are no longer the same.”[x]

Borderlands speaks of death as dismemberment, which can be nuanced as the effect of sinning: dismemberment from the ecclesial-community. While similarities are noticeable, a stark ontological difference remains. *Borderlands* speak of a “reconstruction of your original body, which died the first time you respawned,”[xi] while in Baptism, the old you remains, and changes to the new you.



Figure 2. Avatar being cloned at a New-U station [viii]

2) *Parallel Universe*

The dead avatar is replaced with another copy from a parallel universe. This way of death-coping relies on the hypothesised existence of a parallel universe. Bosman focuses on multi-universe travel rather than also including time-travel within the same universe. In *Bioshock Infinite (BI)*, [xii] all the versions of Elizabeth kill Brooker pan-universes. This suggests that moral responsibility is not world-bound but spans across all “counterparts in the multiverse since they are all part of a Transworld individual.” [xiii] Hence, “identity is a necessary condition for ascribing responsibility.” [xiv] The Christian theology of the soul is tightly knit with the question of free will and morality. Aquinas roots free will in two spiritual faculties of the intellect and will. This ultimately makes the human an image of God, and thus, called for freedom for excellence. [xv]

When Brooker dies in *BI*, he finds himself back in his office. Moving out from the office he find himself a few metres away from the location of death, ready to continue the mission. The new Brooker doesn’t remember his death.

This cheating-death representation is also theologically flawed. It shares much of what was discussed earlier: the new Brooker is ontologically different from the deceased one. Holding to the doctrine that each soul is an individual act of God, thus the multiverse replacement is not the same person because God’s act of loving-into-being is an individual one. [xvii] In a many-world interpretation, one can remain alive in other universes even if one dies in the current one. Theologically, I deem this as logically jarring with the current theological understanding spanning from creation, the Paschal mystery and anthropological theology.



Figure 3 - Booker and his corpse [xvi]

3) *Next avatar*

Here the avatar's death is confirmed but the player continues to interact with a new avatar which would have been already narratologically present. *Zombi*, [xviii] according to Bosman, is not espousing permadeath, because the player can scavenge the old avatar for lost items and benefits from any experience gained by the deceased-avatar, hence featuring a narratological not a ludological permadeath. "Death is not avoided, but -again- rendered meaningless." [xix]

This thanatological representation still tends to dilute the existential meaning of death. [xx] Death is represented as a "risk-free" activity similar to other "repeatable activities that occur as part of the *everyday life* in the gameworld" as opposed to being the "ultimate end to our actions and corporeal existence that cannot be repeated." [xxi]

Post-dying, *Zombi* expresses thanatological humour: "Hats off to you. I didn't think you'd last this long." [xxiii] Through humour, the player suspends belief and detach themselves from the carnage and violence exhibited in the game. Durkin sees humour as the quintessential example of this detaching because humour acts as a defence mechanism allowing anxiety-coping associated with dying. [xxiv] Hence, the more we are exposed to death, especially through the lens of humour, the more we reduce our anxieties and accept this scandalous phenomenon.



Figure 4. There's always another survivor lurking [xxii]

Marovich notices a similarity in Saint Francis' canticle, where he creature-ises "sister death" by making it a means through which we can comprehend our immortality.[xxv]

II. Death avoided

1) Simulation

The first style of this second category which avoids death, uses a simulation device, such as that found in *Assassin's Creed (AC)*. [xxvi] In *AC* if the ancestor dies prematurely, the simulation is 'desynchronised' and the simulation is rebuilt before the fatal incident. This type of death-avoidance mocks death in the sense that narratologically it reduces death to a mere ludological feedback loop only instructing the player to improve their skills.

2) External saviour

Games such as *Prince of Persia*[xxviii] would feature a last-resort helper which would avoid the last killing blow.

I interpret this second category, especially the external saviour, as echoing the transhuman attempt to avoid death at all costs. Pope Francis warns against this theology and speaks of true



Figure 5. The animus rebuilds your memory [xxvii]

wisdom exhibited by a palliative child who, befriended death, and accepted its finality. By so doing, he lived.[xxix] Gregory translates Francis' words in gaming. "Instead of worrying about the death or the failure of my character to achieve what the game thought was necessary to win, there was another approach to the game – living." [xxx] Through her bold acceptance rather than fearing death, cancer-stricken Gregory experienced that by accepting the limits of her avatar, she learnt to take risks, and enjoy what the game had to offer. Dixon accuses games exhibiting death-avoidance as robbing the player from reflecting on the seriousness yet creatureliness of death in real life.

III. No Explicit Narratological Embedding

1) Death is void

This category encompasses games which feature no explicit death narrative but enable the player to save their progress and post-death the game is resumed from the last save point. A penalty is sometimes imposed, but it can easily be classified as – *at most* – a nuisance to the player. Rendering game-death as futile jars with the real-life death. Comparing such a rupturing event to a (totally) reversible mistake does not make the slightest justice to this ontological event. Tocci reflects on this subject and concludes that trial-and-error video games

propose an illusion of boundless choices in life.[xxxii]

2) *Permadeath*

The last of Bosman's types involves the ludological concept of permadeath. Games such as *The Binding of Isaac*[xxxiii] allow for a few tries, and the player is then forced to restart the game from scratch. Bosman argues that in this subtype, death, is far from meaningless, even though the game would offer an "endless amount of retries" in contrast to death's permanency." [xxxiii]

Multiplayer games tend to use this style in different methods: 1-death team-death match and the more advertised: Battle Royale. Games such as *Fortnite*, [xxxiv] employ the same ludological mechanics by forcing the player to quit the current game if they are dead. Some indie-games have ventured past permadeath and two games pioneered the idea of perma-permadeath: *Upsilon Circuit*[xxxv] and *One Life*, [xxxvi] although unfortunately, both ended up defaulting, [xxxvii] though other games are running mods which espouse the same ludology. This genre understands the death of the avatar as fatal: the player cannot play the game again.

Permadeath asks the player to value life, to reason and to make the best judgement to be successful yet safe. Acknowledging the subjectivity to the law of death, the uniqueness of the event can only be transformed through Christian hope. Death is not a leap into the void but a transforming-gateway to Christ's embrace. [xxxviii] Thus, while game (perma-)permadeath acknowledges the existential scandalous event of dying, it lacks the Resurrective-ontological transformation.

3. Conclusions

The aim of this reflection was to tease out theological underpinnings between each of the three categories of representing death in videogames. Issues such as cloning would raise existential and anthropological questions; replacement from a parallel universe would raise questions related to identity, and ensoulment; and next avatar would be trivialising such an existential event. The second category espouses theological issues in seeing death as avoidable rather than embraceable due to the Paschal-salvific event. Thus, creating counter-mechanisms to avoid death, nuance counter-Christian values. The third category espouses the philosophical scandal of death. Contrary, Gregory of Nyssa positively sees death as being a "good thing, inasmuch as it is for us the beginning and the way of changing for the better." [xxxix]

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