Death in *Fortnite*: *Fortnite's* Theological Representation of Death and Its Perceived Effect on Youths in Malta

Matthew Pulis
University of Malta
matthew.pulis.02@um.edu.mt

Abstract

This essay is the fruit of open-ended, interview-based research amongst a small group of Maltese, Catholic, and Gen-Z participants which attempts to reflect how *Fortnite* engages their perception of death. I shall be categorising *Fortnite* in a new ludological category presenting the fun experience outliving the character's death. This new fourth category is somewhat similar to a Christian understanding of death. Two main theological themes emerge from the data: reincarnation and post-mortem afterlife. These will be theologically engaged within the third part of the essay. Games are theological spaces; thus, a number of practical take-homes are offered in the conclusion.

Keywords: death in games; youth ministry; gaming; reincarnation; afterlife; death

Fortnite as an Act of Togetherness

Fortnite's success lies in the interplay between: a non-violent third person shooter; colourful cartoonish-looking; non-gore; fought in an (innovative?) Battle Royale genre; and tactical-building while scavenging resources.[1] The ludological style is

integrated in a free-to-play 'games as a service' model, where Epic makes money through the selling of battle passes and vBucks which allows the player to purchase emotes and skins.[2]

Cultural theorist Johan Huizinga argues that we are *Homo Ludens* – we are born to play. It is not just a matter of how we play in our everyday life but playing defines our culture, and ultimately our own being. In fact, Huizinga describes play as 'stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'.[3] This stepping out has sparked Huizinga's concept of the 'magic circle' where a temporary world, within the ordinary world, is created and 'dedicated to the performance of an act apart'.[4] Within the magic circle, everything is, in some way, transformative. 'Each time a person leaves the magic-circle they bring meaning and experience.'[5]

Fortnite is built to achieve this feeling of togetherness, of a mutual withdrawing and rejecting real life norms. Huizinga goes on to argue that play becomes a sacred space, which continues to shed its radiance on real life. Thus, like every other cultural setter, *Fortnite* shapes the lives of its players. Although it is not a religious game, it is imbued with theological nuances.

Fortnite: Battle Royale's gaming experience is quite straightforward. One hundred individuals are dropped on an island from a flying-bus with nothing but a pickaxe allowing them to forage building material which they can use for protection. A deadly storm ravages the island, and one needs to escape it not to die. The island is strewn with weapons and resources. 'Whether by a deft flick of an opponent's

---

[1] *Fortnite* offers three main modes: Save the world, a cooperative shooter-survival mode; Creative, where players create custom worlds; and Battle Royale (BR). Unless otherwise noted, when speaking of *Fortnite*, I will be referring to the BR-mode where a hundred players are pitted against each other, at times in teams, until the 'last man standing' (LMS) wins. The game goes through ten-week seasons introducing several limited modes, skins, emotes and weapons.

[2] 1.'Games as a service' typically receive a long stream of periodic new paid-for content; 2. vBucks are in-game currency.

[3] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Vince Vader, 'Huizinga's Magic Circle', *Gaming Conceptz*, 2012, <http://gamingconceptz.blogspot.com/2012/10/huizingas-magic-circle.html>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

shotgun, the encroaching storm, or self-inflicted error (by falling down from a structure), death is the necessary banality that gives this game its arc and form.'[6] As ludologist Li Chan comments, death is ubiquitous in the game.

This essay is the fruit of open-ended, interview-based research amongst a small sample group of Maltese, Catholic, Gen-Z participants which attempts to reflect how *Fortnite* engages their perception of death.[7] After briefly introducing the methodology, I shall be offering a critical engagement of Frank Bosman's thanatological representations in games and proceed to highlight a fourth category spearheaded by *Fortnite.* I advance with an analysis of how death is portrayed in this game, emphasising the link between the player and the avatar, and the humour portrayed in the killing itself. Battle Royale as a genre emphasises permadeath, which is both a ludological and a theological concept.

From the interviews I shall be teasing out two intertwined thanato-theological themes, which will be the subject matter of the concluding journey. Given that the selected group of Gen-Zs form part of a Catholic parish, their understanding will be contrasted with the Catholic Tradition. Having a clearer understanding of the theological footprints in *Fortnite,* I shall attempt a number of takeaways from this project which can be used in practical ministry.

Methodology

Design and handling

Interviews began after I received ethics approval. Having explained the research and acquired their(/legal guardian's) permission for research, I conducted the interviews via *Facebook Chat* and recorded using *AnyCap*. Transcripts were AI-transcribed by

---

[6] Min Li Chan, 'The Most Interesting Part Of "Fortnite" Is What Happens After You Lose', *BuzzFeed*, July 2018.

[7] As per APA and PEW, I am understanding Gen Z as those born after 1997. Cf. American Psychological Association, 'Stress in America - Gen-Z', 2018; Michael Dimock, 'Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins', Pew Research Center, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

otter.ai. All services were password protected, and once I finished using the software, I downloaded the data to my password-protected desktop and deleted it. As I sifted through their answers, I applied Glaser's Grounded theory to code my notes.[8]

Stages of the interview

The interviewing process had five stages:

i)   I explained the interview and they agreed to participate.

ii) I introduced the player to a series of tests.

    a. profiled the respondent's Catholicity as per CARA's methodology, where students' practice, morality and social thought is measured against the Magisterium.[9]

    b. reworded Barr's Bartle's player-type taxonomy to make it relatable to *Fortnite*-players.[10] Understanding the player-type allows us to interpret the input from the player's perspective.

iii) The respondent played one round of *Fortnite*, where they were asked to stay in the game until the game was finished.

iv) Queried for self-esteem and worldview to continue building an introductory profile of the player.[11]

    a. Used the 10-item 4-point likert Rosenberg's self-assessment scale.[12]

    b. Applied 17-item De Witt's ranked-questions research to explore their worldviews.[13]

v)   Actual virtual face-to-face interviews which were split into three main stages:

---

[8] Barney Glaser, 'The Future of Grounded Theory', *The Grounded Theory Review* 9.2 (2010).

[9] Mark Gray and Melissa Cidade, 'Catholicism on Campus: Stability and Change in Catholic Student Faith by College Type', 2010.

[10] 1. Matthew Barr, 'The Bartle Test of Gamer Psychology', 2018; 2. Richard Bartle, 'Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs', *Journal of MUD Research* 1.1 (1996), p.19.

[11] For both tests, I used third-party instruments and asked the participants to share only the results.

[12] Robert F. Winch and Morris Rosenberg, 'Society and the Adolescent Self-Image', *Social Forces* 44.2 (December 1965), p.255.

[13] Annick de Witt, 'Worldview Questionnaire', Institute for Cultural Evolution, 2017, <https://www.culturalevolution.org/worldview-questionnaire/>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

  a. Open-ended questions about *Fortnite*:

    i. Asked questions related to the game just experienced and used it as a springboard to discuss a memorable kill and death in *Fortnite*.

  b. Open-ended questions about death:

    i. Teased out existential understandings of death. I asked them whether death is understood as irreversible and to recount an experience of having witnessed someone dying, which is not uncommon in Malta.

    ii. Explored the emotions felt during the loss of a loved one.[14]

    iii. Discussed the interviewee's own death asking them to imagine themselves able to say any last words to loved ones in different scenarios.[15]

  c. Queried *Fortnite's* thanatological representation and merged its representation with one's own understanding of death, and Christian thanato-theology.

Meeting the participants

Before proceeding with the research question, let us meet the respondents. Table 1 summarises the results obtained in stages i to iv above:

Table 1

Description	Fairy18M	Dawn19M	Carmex17M	Palmolive16F	Lux17M
Fortnite game time (hours per week)	5-10	1-5	5-10	1-5	20-30
Non-*Fortnite* gaming	5-10	5-10	-	-	30+

---

[14] Cf. Hospice UK, 'Talking about Death and Dying', Dying Matters, <https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/TalkingAboutDeathDying>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

[15] Kumagai Tomohiro and Ohbuchi Ken-Ichi, 'The Effect of Mortality Salience and Collaborative Experience on Aggression of "Third-Party Victims"', *Tohoku Psychologica Folia* 62 (2003), pp. 109–19.

Time with friends (hours p/w)	30+	10-20	20-30	5-10	20-30
Gaming hours	7-9pm	8pm-12am	11pm-1am	9pm-12am	Scattered
During recess time	Increases non-*Fortnite* gaming but keeps same social activities	Increases other hobbies to 20-30 hrs p/w	Same patterns	Reduces sports and increases non-*Fortnite* gaming	Decreases non-*Fortnite* gaming and increases *Fortnite* (sometimes up to 4am)
Catholicity / Moral / Spiritual understanding					
Mass attendance (monthly)	Rarely	Sundays	Sundays	Sundays	Sundays
Attends youth group (monthly)	Multiple times	Multiple times	Multiple times	Multiple times	Weekly
Prayer life (minutes per/day)	None	5-15	<5	15	5-15
Anti-Abortion	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Agrees	Fully Agrees
Anti-Discrimination	Agrees	Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees
Death penalty	Agrees	Agrees	Undecided	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees
Anti-Same-Sex marriage	Agrees	Fully Agrees	Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees
Pro-Social Welfare	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Undecided	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees
Sunday precept	Disagrees	Disagrees	Agrees	Agrees	Fully Agrees
Need for Prayer life	Undecided	Disagrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees
Relationship with Christ	Undecided	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Fully Agrees	Agrees
Player type					
Achiever	29%	29%	10%	*60%*	29%
Explorer	59%	*59%*	10%	10%	*65%*
Killer	*76%*	53%	*60%*	5%	*65%*
Socialiser	35%	*59%*	20%	25%	41%

Post-game					
Self-esteem	Slightly high (19)	Low (8)	High (24)	High (24)	High (26)
Strongest worldview	Integrative	Postmodern	Postmodern	Postmodern	Traditional
Lowest worldview	Traditional	Modern	Modern	Traditional	Modern

Thanatological Representation in Games

Ludologist Frank Bosman describes three categories of how videogames portray death.[16] The aim of this section is to engage Bosman's categories whilst listening to the participants' theological voices. In discussing the meaning of each of these ludological mechanisms of avoiding death, I am interested in juxtaposing the apparent fear of death exhibited in games with embracing 'sister death' as the gateway to the eternal embrace of totality.[17]

Bosman's Narratological Embeddings

The avatar's death in videogames is one of the most prominent feedback systems. Quoting Aarseth, Bosman asserts that death, or its absence, communicates to the player their '(in)ability to achieve' targets embedded in the game.[18] Bosman outlines three categories of narratological embeddings, each with further sub-types.

The actual death embedding takes death seriously because the avatar dies. The continuity of play is narratologically safeguarded through cloning or by bringing in a replacement: either from a parallel universe, or a new avatar altogether. The second category avoids death altogether by using workarounds: either death happening within a simulated environment, or through a last-minute

---

[16] Frank G. Bosman, 'Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games', *Gamevironments*, no. 09 (2018), pp. 12–52.

[17] Carlo Calleja, 'Against the Hegemony of Thanatopolitics: Non-Violence as a Catholic Response to Euthanasia', in *Lumen Et Vita Symposium: Memento Mori*, 2017.

[18] Bosman, 'Death Narratives', p. 16.

help device. The third does away with death: either through resumed from the last save-point, or starting again.

At face value, *Fortnite*'s thanatological representation can be classified as Bosman's latter category since permadeath does happen. However, as the interviewees expounded, and is aptly summarised by *Fairy18M,* the death of the avatar is not the death of the playing experience: 'Fun in *Fortnite* remains after death.' *Fortnite* is more of a social network rather than only a game.[19] Hence, due to its networking-ability, it should be categorised in a new fourth category: 'humour and fun outliving death.' The player's avatar is killed but a post-mortem experience remains. Before delving into this fourth category, let us engage each of these subtypes.

1. Actual Death Embedding

Cloning

In this first sub-type, death happens, but its effects are quickly removed. After the avatar is killed, a new avatar, visibly similar and sporting the same loot pre-kill, replaces the previous avatar to continue the game.

Parallel universe

> First person to get 50 kills wins the game. The moment the person dies, he loses all his items. And respawns instantly as a different character (without the previous loot). Always the same amount of people in one lobby. If one person decides […] to exit the match early, other people (can) join the ongoing lobby (at the expense of starting disadvantaged).

---

[19] Pulis, 'Fortnite - The Gender-Equal Social Network Rich in User Experience: An Initial Survey of Fortnite's Success Story, Unisex Attractions, and Disruptive Nature', <https://www.academia.edu/44162345/Fortnite_The_unisex_social_network_rich_in_user_experience_An_initial_survey_of_Fortnites_success_story_unisex_attractions_and_disruptive_nature?source%3Dswp_share&sa=D&ust=1601413686465000&usg=AFQjCNEzHMqsK1EMra94wMJpFiSozJ_x-w>, last accessed 29 September 2020.

This subtype is what *Dawn19M* described when asked how he would re-design *Fortnite* to match his theological understanding. Similar to cloning, the avatar dies but the old avatar is replaced with another copy from a parallel universe. This way of coping with death relies on the hypothesised existence of a parallel universe.

Next avatar

This narratological variant confirms the death of the avatar but allows the player to interact with a new avatar which would have been already present.

Theologically this thanatological representation is more correct than the previous two but still tends to dilute the existential meaning of death as interpreted by the likes of Heidegger and Kierkegaard.[20] 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'.[21]

2. Death Avoided

In this second category, death 'is avoided altogether' at the last instance.[22] Bosman offers two scenarios, either through simulation or a last-minute saviour.

Simulation

This sub-type presents death as some type of simulation, and so when the avatar is about to be killed the player can resume the game from that point so as to be able to make different choices in order to avoid death.

Carmex17M interprets *Fortnite*'s thanatological representation as part of this subtype. He speaks of the avatar as being only a hologram representation because when the drone 'sucks up' the hologram into oblivion, there are no apparent

---

[20] Filiz Peach, 'Death, Faith & Existentialism', *Philosophy Now* (July 2000); Dan Dixon, 'Death, a Minor Annoyance or an Invitation to Play?', *Breaking the Magic Circle Seminar, Tampere, Finland*, 2009, pp. 1–12.

[21] Lisbeth Klastrup, 'Why Death Matters: Understanding Gameworld Experience', *Journal of Virtual Reality and Broadcasting* 4.3 (2007), p. 4.

[22] Bosman, 'Death Narratives', p. 34.

setbacks neither to the gameplay, because it is just a matter of restarting another game, nor to the profile.

External saviour

Games in this subtype would feature a last-resort helper who comes to the player's rescue to avoid the last killing blow, such as portrayed in *Prince of Persia*.[23]

 I interpret this second category, especially the latter subtype, as echoing the transhuman attempt to avoid death at all costs. I accuse such games as robbing the player from the possibility of reflecting on the seriousness yet creatureliness of death in real life.

3. No Explicit Narratological Embedding

Death is void

According to Bosman, this subtype encompasses games which feature no explicit death narratives but enable the player to save their progress and when the avatar is killed, the game is resumed from the last save point. In these games, a penalty is sometimes imposed, but it can easily be classified as — at most — a nuisance to the player.

 Strictly speaking *Fortnite* does not represent death as void, because the player is forced out from the arena once killed; however, *Palmolive16F* interprets *Fortnite* as forming part of this category. She notes that *Fortnite* trivialises death and renders it a 'number'. *Fairy18M* furthers that death is rendered a 'joke' because it just asks you to respawn:

> This is not final like it's a joke […] death in real life, it's just final. The end nothing more to it. […] In Fortnite you just respawn and start again. [24]

Comparing such a rupturing event to a (totally) reversible mistake does not do justice to this ontological event. Jason Tocci concludes that trial-and-error

---

[23] Ubisoft Montreal, 'Prince of Persia', Prince of Persia (Ubisoft, 2008).

[24] Interestingly *Fairy18M* believes that it would be possible to reverse death in the future.

videogames propose an illusion of boundless choices in life, whereas using games to explore moral choices 'can show us how to grieve, what the value of life is, how to prepare for our death and that of our friends'.[25]

Lux17M, agrees with this pedagogical value of gaming, and speaks of *Fortnite* as: 'one game that is trying to help people to understand death. […] And it's like trying to get people to change maybe their lifestyles and be more careful of how they live.'

Permadeath

The last subtype involves the ludological concept of permadeath. 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.[26]

Only *Lux17M* categorises *Fortnite* in this subtype. He speaks of death's representation as 'more realistic because once you're dead [in real life] there's no one that [… can] revive you again', and again: 'once you're dead, you can't bring back your life'. In his answers, he shows that he is a firm believer of the permanency-representation of death.

When asked what he would change in *Fortnite*'s thanatological representation, *Lux17M* emphasised the accuracy in depiction and added 'slight white light [which] gets brighter [… appearing] from the middle of the screen. And then that's it. And even maybe having your body still lying on the floor?'

The two thanatological themes of 'white light' and 'corpses' are both nuanced. A firm believer in afterlife, *Lux17M* described God as a white light, which is very telling. 'Corpses' lying on the floor is a contested theme. While for *Lux17M* corpses

---

[25]1. Jason Tocci, '"You Are Dead. Continue?": Conflicts and Complements in Game Rules and Fiction', *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2.2 (2008) pp. 187–201; 2. Markus Schulzke, 'Moral Decision Making in Fallout', *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 9.2 (2001); Daonso, 'Video Games and Morality: The Question of Choice', *The Artifice* (March 2017); Angeline Khoo, 'Video Games as Moral Educators?', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 32.4 (2012) pp. 416–429; 3. Joe Humphreys, 'Playing Video Games? No, I'm Doing Philosophy', *The Irish Times* (19 September 2017).

[26] Frank G. Bosman, 'The Word Has Become Game: Researching Religion in Digital Games', *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 11 (December 2016).

add to the reality of the game, *Carmex17M* spoke of the sacrality of the corpse which should be covered and treated with respect. A mid-way between these two points is the erection of tombstones, such as those in *World of Warcraft*.[27]

Some indie-games have ventured past permadeath and two games pioneered the idea of perma-permadeath: *Upsilon Circuit* and *One Life*.[28] Unfortunately, both ended up defaulting.[29] This perma-permadeath 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 of the law of death, the uniqueness of the event can only be transformed through Christian hope. Hence, while game (perma-)permadeath acknowledges the existentially scandalous event of dying, it lacks the resurrective-ontological transformation.

Recap

This section teased out philo-theological underpinnings between each of the three categories of represented death in videogames. Issues such as cloning would raise existential and anthropological questions; replacement from a parallel universe jeopardises identity and ensoulment; and next-avatar would trivialise 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, influence counter-Christian values. The third category espouses the philosophical scandal of death but avoids seeing it as a 'good thing, inasmuch as it is for us the beginning and the way of changing for the better'.[30]

Having reviewed Bosman's categories, it is clear that the respondents have failed to reach an agreement in categorising *Fortnite* in one particular type. I believe

---

[27] Blizzard Entertainment, 'World of Warcraft', Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

[28] The two referenced games are 1. Robot Loves Kitty, 'Upsilon Circuit' (Robot Loves Kitty, 2017); and 2. One Life Survival, 'One Life' (2015).

[29] Nathan Grayson, 'One Year Later, Those Two Perma-Permadeath Games Aren't Doing So Great [UPDATE]', *Kotaku* (October 2016).

[30] International Theological Commission, 'Some Current Questions in Eschatology' (Vatican: Vatican Press, 1992), para. 6.2.

that this is so because *Fortnite* has created a new category of its own. Whereas other games' success lies in remaining alive to reach the end goal, *Fortnite* aims to offer a space of social interaction. As we will explore in the paragraphs to come, the real 'fun' starts post-death.

Fortnite's New Category: Humour and Fun Outliving Death

Thanatological humour

Dawn19M's and Fairy18M's statements that 'Death is not serious as in real life' and 'It's funny. How silly death can be' are both a clear exemplar of Thorson's laughing at our own mortality.[31] Through humour, the player suspends belief and detaches themselves from the violence exhibited in the game. Keith Durkin sees humour as the quintessential example of this detachment because humour acts as a defence mechanism allowing anxiety-coping associated with dying.[32] Durkin suggests that the more we are exposed to death, especially through the lens of humour, the more we reduce our anxieties and accept this scandalous phenomenon.

    Fortnite is rich in thanatological humour. *Palmolive16F* describes death as irrelevant because whatever the outcome of the game is 'you're just a sort of number'. Furthermore, all respondents recounted their *Fortnite*'s worst death experience laughing at the experience and speaking in terms of a glitch:

- *Fairy18M*: stuck his plunger to the wrong tree and ended out in the killer-storm;
- *Lux17M* and *Dawn19M*: fell off a building;
- *Palmolive16F*: sniped while hovering;
- *Carmex17M:* glider clipped a building.

---

[31] James A. Thorson, 'A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Morgue: Some Thoughts on Humor and Death, and a Taxonomy of the Humor Associated with Death', *Death Studies* 9 (1985), pp. 201–16.

[32] Keith F. Durkin, 'Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture', in *Handbook of Death & Dying* (California: SAGE, 2003), pp. 43–49.

Fairy18M's describes *Fortnite*'s representation of death as a 'joke' because of its ubiquitous presence. Durkin and Bryant confirm *Fairy18M*'s theory and note that the inordinate amount of attention afforded to thanatological themes in pop-culture helps to desensitise us.[33]

Beatrice Marovich notices a similarity in Saint Francis' canticle. He creaturises 'Sister Death' by making it a means through which we can comprehend our immortality.[34] Quoting Dastur, she argues that through playing with death, Francis is taming the Heideggerian anxiety and offers a new joyful theological understanding of 'Sister Death'. Death essentially becomes the 'very foundation of our existence'.[35]

While it may be argued that *Fortnite* attempts to bring a *fun* understanding of death while watering down our thanatological understanding, *Fortnite* presents another issue not yet tackled in our reflection. Death is not presented as the 'ultimate' (*Fairy18M*) existential event but as a mere change of experience.

Post-mortem experiences

Interviewer: So you said [that] when you're playing with your friends you try to […] extend your game by helping them win their game? And in the meantime, you socialise and speak about random stuff?

Palmolive16F: Yes, exactly […] Thinking about you after the game or between games, talk about anything. I mean, sometimes even our parents come […] over and they start talking to each other.

In *Fortnite*'s post-mortem socialising, *Palmolive16F* often tries to help her teammates win the game, although she acknowledges that her 'game is finished, […] can't do anything, only experience'. *Fairy18M* cements the idea that when one's friends join

---

[33] Keith F. Durkin and Clifton D. Bryant, 'Thanatological Themes in the Tabloids: A Content Analysis', in *Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association*, 1995.

[34] Beatrice Marovich, 'The Mystical Text When Death Became a Creature: Saint Francis & Sister Death', *Glossator* 7 (2013), pp. 95–116.

[35] Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death? An Introduction to Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 44.

in the game, the game changes. The game transcends a mere survival objective while trying to win the *Victory Royale*, but transforms itself into an 'experience' as highlighted by *Palmolive16F* above. For *Fairy18M*, the focus becomes the 'chit-chat [… amongst] real-life friends':

> seeing your [friends] keeping the fight going, [...] can be fun, because […] you can [still] assist, […] you can see someone that they haven't seen from their screens, maybe someone who's far away […]. So it's fun to still be helpful. […] To communicate, […] it's fun to […] to keep the conversation going even after you die, you can still speak to the rest of [them].

Dawn19M, who plays 'for fun', furthers:

> you […] watch only [those] that are still alive [and not] the ones that died. […] I mean, people say that [deceased] relatives […] are <u>watching</u> [over] them from heaven. […] And [in Fortnite this] is more obvious, since the person that is still alive can <u>hear</u> you. But in life, I […] feel that the person not so much as hears you but <u>feels</u> you since some people say that […] your consciousness [… is] affected by third parties, like […] dead relatives.

Comparing this post-mortem experience to heaven, *Dawn19M* notes that although the avatar is killed, the player is still able to help her friends, and the 'fun'-experience is extended post-mortem. He likens this experience to the soul, which as Christians we speak of as the communion of the heavenly souls who intercede for us during our journey. He highlights a stark sensorial difference: in life we 'feel' the saints helping us, in *Fortnite* friends 'hear' and 'watch'.

The above theology is further spelled out by both *Carmex17M* and *Lux17M*, although they refrain from linking the 'peace'-enjoying souls to assisting us. However, it must be noted that both have spoken of praying for the intercession of their deceased relatives. In describing how he imagines the moment of death, *Carmex17M* imagines the soul as '(getting) lifted from the *player* and is able to see what other people are doing. Maybe in heaven you get to see what people are doing

below.' What struck me was that as he was speaking about the ontological experience of death, he was still using the terminology of a 'player'. When questioned about this, his reply was that we are all 'players in life'.

Lux17M has a similar understanding. His final early moments are described as: 'the soul [that] can see everything [...], once you're next to God you can see all over the world: picturing the world but from a different perspective'. Considering that once the avatar is killed, a type of drone comes and sucks the player into oblivion, *Lux17M's* imagery is surely influenced by this depiction. Once the avatar is sucked, the player gets a God's eye view on the island and can follow the remaining battle from each avatar's perspective.

In *seeing* their real-life friends, as described by *Lux17M* and *hearing* them as described by *Dawn19M,* the players remain engaged in the game, possibly better than whilst they were playing. Surely it is becoming evident that the above reflections help us further understand that *Fortnite* offers the player more than a mere Third Person Shooter but a Social Network where collaboration and sharing of experiences allow the game to both create a new world for the player and also destabilise the one known so far.

In sum, what all participants agreed upon is that the experience of the game surely does not end with the avatar's being killed. While *Fortnite*'s thanato-ludological representation forces the player to quit the battle arena if their avatar is dead, the experience differs. I interpret this humorous-thanatological representation of permadeath as a fourth category, where the experience of fun outlives death. As I have been developing through this essay, it is becoming ever more evident that *Fortnite* is more than a game, but a social network, where the fun experience outlives the avatar's death.

The above quotes highlight that the respondents understand death as an existential interruption despite its frequent depiction in games as ludologically neutral. However, *Fortnite's* prolonged post-mortem experience might challenge this idea. Through manipulating the experience of 'fun', the onto-thanato-theological

understanding is being challenged. Stemming from the interviews, I identify two main themes which will be further developed in the next section:

1. It is worrying that despite their Catholic upbringing, respondents have been pollinated with non-Christian reincarnation theology;

2. *Fortnite*'s post-mortem afterlife echoes a pancosmic theology.

Fortnite's **Thanato-theology**

Reincarnation

> *Fortnite* does not teach you to value life because you're still going to be playing the same game as the worst player that there could ever be […] life is a game. But life's not that sort of game. You only get one shot at playing, […] reincarnation […] makes a lot of sense in my mind (be)cause (of) the fact that you have a chance to live a good life. - *Palmolive16F*

One strong theological theme which emerged in the interviews is reincarnation. Although the respondents are all practicing Catholics, three out of five espouse this theology. I attribute this to a law-abiding catechesis rather than one which aids in fostering a personal relationship with Christ.

Catholic Malta is heavily influenced from Saint George Preca's sin-obsessed theology.[36] Members of his society are responsible for most of our catechism and thus his theology shaped our pop-theology. The beatification-biography issued by the Vatican highlights that he 'persuasively illustrated how ugly sin was. He never shied away from openly preaching about death, judgement, hell and heaven.'[37] Furthermore, he urged his members to repent of their sins four times a day.[38] When people are thought to observe the law for fear of punishment, it is no surprise that these youth would allow reincarnation theology to influence them, and de-personalise God to postpone God's judgement.

---

[36] See 'George Preca', *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Preca>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

[37] John Paul II, 'Blessed George Preca (1880–1962) – Biography', Vatican, <http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20070603_preca_en.html>, last accessed 30 July 2019.

[38] Mansueto Zerafa, 'Sectarian Traits in the Society of the Christian Doctrine' (1994).

This reincarnation phenomenon is not limited to Catholic Malta. Twenty-four per cent of American Catholics believe reincarnation is possible.[39] Even 'Christian' variants have embarked on this false theology, quoting Matt. 11.14 as their proof, despite Elijah appearing with Moses in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17.3). Some would claim that Jesus suggested another lifecycle to Nicodemus (John 3.3), but it is aptly evident Jesus is speaking of the new Spirit-induced-creation through the *anōthen* (3.1, 5).[40] To refute any doubt, scripturally one can refer to Heb. 9.27: 'it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement'.[41]

Reincarnation is not only refuted scripturally but also theologically.[42] Reincarnation is normally upheld by a pantheistic view of god, and thus speaks of an impersonal and universal god, which is what *Daisy19M* hinted by his definition of heaven as a place of 'nothingness' and devoid of God: 'forget[ting] everything about this life. And we'll just be reborn again […] but we don't know our past life.'[43] This definition also jars with eastern karma law which teaches that one's thoughts, words, and deeds have an ethical consequence, fixing one's path in future existences.[44] Eastern reincarnation is also tied with the law of *samsara* which sees one working out their way to attain unity with the divine, but *Daisy19M* does not offer an escape route from his *samsara* cycle:

> sort of being reborn depends on what kind of life you live. If you live a good life: you go to a 'better place' and finally go to heaven. [… Or else] you get another shot at [making a] better life.

Palmolive16F's understanding sees one life impeding on the other, until 'the good mentor' judges that one lived a good life. These understandings can be attributed to a 'New Age' understanding of Christianity. This 'New Age' theology features in many games and Anne Allison highlights a perpetual transformation which 'extends

---

[39] Roper Center, 'Paradise Polled: Americans and the Afterlife' (2019).

[40] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Il Vangelo Di Giovanni, I*, Commentario Teologico del Nuovo Testamento, trans. Gino Cecchi, (Brescia: Paideia, 1973).

[41] NRSV Catholic Edition.

[42] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2000), para. 1013.

[43] For further discussion on an 'impersonal and universal god', see Patrick Zukeran, 'The Mystery of Reincarnation: A Christian Perspective' (2000).

[44] John Boyer Noss, *Man's Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 90-91.

into the cyber frontier (and) promises companionship and connectedness, albeit in a commodity form'.[45] In Christian understanding, this theology has been condemned from patristic times.[46] This is lived out through Irenaeus' denial of transmigration of souls and Tertullian's questioning the logical fallacy as to why souls shouldn't return to their previous bodies.[47]

Theologian Michael Kerper outlines a strong dualistic undertone in reincarnation theology, which is very evident in *Fortnite*, and may have contributed into the respondents' espoused theology.[48] Through the centuries, philosophy has toiled to discuss the human as a 'spiritual entity' or 'consciousness' with little to no connection with the body. *Palmolive16F* speaks of her experience in *Fortnite* as a conflation of selves: 'then find your body in the next game. [… The] Soul will take the same you because you and skins are like changing clothes'. Elsewhere, she notes that 'the you is the username'. In other words, while the avatar's look can easily be skinned, what unites each gaming experience to the previous one is the fact that the log-in name, the username, and consequently the player using the login, are the same.

Carmex17M furthers this idea and notices that when being sucked up by the drone, there are no apparent setbacks neither to the identity, because it is just a matter of restarting another game, nor to the username. He proves this by declaring that although his account can be sold in the thousands due to legendary rare skins, he wants to keep his username.

Apart from a theological representation of reincarnation, *Fortnite* is perceived to be gnostic too, preferring the identity over the body. *Carmex17M* notes that 'once you are dead, a robot comes in and scans you and puts you back in the lobby. [There] is not an actual corpse.' *Dawn19M* highlights this better by comparing *Fortnite* with other games and notes that while 'most of the other games, after you

---

[45] Anne Allison, 'The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism', *Mechademia* 1.1 (2006), pp. 11–21.

[46] Marie Dixon, Todd Aglialoro, and Tim Ryland, 'Reincarnation', in *Catholic Answers* (2019).

[47] 1. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* II.33; 2. Tertullian, *Apologia* XLVIII.

[48] Michael Kerper, 'Can Catholics Believe in Reincarnation?', *Parable Magazine* (Manchester, September 2010).

die the body is still on the ground, and there is blood and the usual normal things. But in *Fortnite* the […] moment the character dies, it disappears.' This lack of corpses shows complete disregard to the killed avatar; by straight away enabling the player to enjoy the post-death new experience of fun, this has left the respondents baffled. Christian theology has a rich tradition of caring for the corpse. Moreover, Maltese Catholic tradition has a rich burial culture. Very often our funerals see higher attendance than I observed in serving in an English parish, and many would pay their respect to the corpse before closing the casket. Irrespective of the age, we tend to remain close to the corpse, and it is a very common scene to see children kissing the cold corpse of their dead relatives before driving to mass. Even the drive from the mortuary to the church to the cemetery is a processional cavalcade, and it is common to take a detour to some memorable place of the deceased. It is no wonder that the Maltese respondents were surprised at *Fortnite's* lack of portrayal of the corpse post-death.

In Genesis, God breathes into the body causing human life. This act is simultaneously material and spiritual, as is Jesus' resurrection.[49] But, whereas Wittgenstein speaks of the body as 'the best picture of the human soul' and the importance to define humanity as an embodied species, *Fortnite* opts to devalue embodiment.[50]

This dualism is a phenomenon espoused in other Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) presents the avatar's soul roaming a parallel universe in search of its corpse. This is highlighted by 'release the spirit' prompts after death, which shows that there is a separation between the body and the spirit at the moment of death, echoing dualism.[51] In this meta-world, only spirits are visible and recognisable. This post-death world is neither a welcoming place nor a resting place. Akin to Sheol, it is the place where the dead are dead, inert, lifeless and engage in no activity.[52] *Daisy19M* defines this

---

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Part II, p. 178.

[51] Hanna Kim, 'Religion and Computer Games: A Theological Exploration of Religious Themes in World of Warcraft' (MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012).

lifeless afterlife as 'nothingness'. But *Fortnite*'s post-mortem differs from *WoW*. This 'nothingness' is not present in *Fortnite* because the player outlives the life of her avatar, in *post-mortem* socialising.

Post-Mortem Afterlife?

> People say that [their dead] relatives […] are watching [over] them from heaven. […] And [in Fortnite this] is more obvious, since the person that is still alive can hear you. - *Dawn19M*

> Extend your game by helping them win their game. And in the meantime, we socialise and speak about random stuff. - *Palmolive16F*

> The soul can see everything […] once you're next to God you can see […] over the world. So say you are picturing the world but from a different perspective. - *Lux17M*

> If there is an afterlife, it can be metaphorically compared to someone taking your soul and I don't know putting you in heaven or something or hell. - *Fairy19M*

Perhaps the strongest theological influence *Fortnite* might inspire the youth with is that death is not final. While *Fairy18M* speaks of *Fortnite*'s representation as 'a joke' because it 'is not final', his argument cements the idea that *Fortnite* is portraying a change in the mode-of-experiencing fun rather than permadeath.

Games tend to represent a counter-Christian theology of vulnerability. As one proceeds in the game, one becomes stronger, and in MMORPGs, the higher the level, the higher the esteem by the community. However, in the book of Genesis we find that the fullness of the *imago Dei* is found in vulnerability.[53] We are created fragile creatures, and called to collaborate, as opposed to the technological lording of

---

[52] George Mendenhall, 'From Witchcraft to Justice: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament.', in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroship Obayashi (Westport: Greenwood, 1992), pp. 67–91.

[53] Giovanni Cucci, 'The Cultural Challenge of Video Games', *La Civiltá Cattolica* 3.6 (2019), pp. 90–110.

creation. However, post-lapsarian death shattered the good creation, and we learnt that even as we are living, we are dying. As mortality salience increases, we crave power.[54]

But as a counter model, the Church presents us with the vulnerable icon of the Cross as the way to deal with our *prolixitas mortis*. Rather than looking inwards and finding the power within our self-esteem and worldview, we are called to evaluate death through the baptismal lens and remember our participation in Christ's death and call to the newness of life (Rom. 6.4).[55] Thus, as Rahner claims, 'life is changed not ended'.[56]

Rahner hinges his thanato-theology on the anthropological understanding that we are ontologically free, historical, and relational.[57] Death is at the heart of all three, and thus death cannot be suffered passively but must be approached as a human act.[58] Being an act, along the centuries the Church has prepared its faithful to train their *ars morendi*: the art of accepting one's mortality, embracing it, taming fear, and achieving maturity.[59] Hence, death becomes both a 'natural' and a 'personal' act, whence it hits the whole person, in body and soul.[60] *Carmex17M's* theological interpretation is a form of this interpretation: 'maybe the soul gets lifted from the player and is able to see what other people are doing. Maybe in heaven you get to see what people are doing below you on earth.'

The above quote has echoes of 'Pancosmicity', which is understood as the state of the soul prior to the *eschaton*. In this state, the person may already enjoy the

---

[54] Peter Belmi and Jeffrey Pfeffer, 'Power and Death: Mortality Salience Increases Power Seeking While Feeling Powerful Reduces Death Anxiety', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 101.5 (2016), pp. 702–20.

[55] Paden R Goldsmith, 'Violent Video Games and Aggressive Behavior: Mortality Salience and the Hostile Attribution Bias' (2014); Luca Chittaro *et al.*, 'Mortality Salience in Virtual Reality Experiences and Its Effects on Users' Attitudes towards Risk', *International Journal of Human Computer Studies* 101 (2017) 10–22; Beth Anderson, 'Playing with Death: The Potential for Violent Video Games to Induce Mortality Salience' (Senior Thesis, University of Puget Sound, 2015).

[56] Karl Rahner, 'On the Theology of Death', in *Quaestiones Disputatae 2*, trans. C. H. Henkey (New York: Crossroad, 1961), p. 35.

[57] Michael G Lawler and Todd A Salzman, 'Karl Rahner's Theology of Dying and Death: Normative Implications for the Permanent Vegetative State Patient', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77.2 (2012), pp. 141–64.

[58] See Part 11: Dead as the Consequence of Sin in Rahner, 'On the Theology of Death', pp.32-51.

[59] Anthony De Mello, *Sadhana, a Way to God : Christian Exercises in Eastern Form*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1978).

[60] Lawler and Salzman, 'Karl Rahner's Theology of Dying and Death', p. 147.

beatific vision, albeit the soul is separated from the body. Only at the *eschaton* is the fullness of perfection reached when the soul is united with the resurrected body.[61] In the resurrected state we retain a pancosmic relationship with the universe because it was the locus of our experiences and identity. Hence, our identity is forever linked with our universe, as was Jesus', post-resurrection.

Fairy18M notes that *Fortnite* 'lowers the expectation of the difficulty and the scariness […] of dying'. His insight shows that *Fortnite* normalises and, thus, through fun and humour, creaturises death.[62] In a Rahnerian way, *Fortnite* reminds the player that every moment is a participation in one's death. Therefore, positively, the gamer can reflect on the pre-lapsarian state in which death is peacefully conceived as one's acceptance of God's self-communication, rather than the 'no' which stems from futile self-absorption.[63]

I argue that *Fortnite* presents itself as a gentle reminder that death is 'obvious' (*Carmex17M*), and suggests that through a renewed *ars morendi* we are to embrace death and playfully engage life in an altruistic manner rather than fearing to play.[64] Death transforms not halts. As *Fairy18M* expounds, 'fun in *Fortnite* remains after death'. Hence, *Fortnite's* theology promotes moving away from a position of resisting death to acknowledging that death is an inevitable event, embracing it, and playing until it is your turn.

Since Christ died our death and his spiritual being was released to the whole world, our death opens us to a relationship with creation, and *Fortnite's* death releases the player to focus more on socialising. Christian theology thus demands that we 'do' death differently because our theology 'does' life differently.[65]

---

[61] Rahner, 'On the Theology of Death', pp.20-26.

[62] Marovich, 'Saint Francis & Sister Death'.

[63] Robert Masson, 'Rahner, Karl: World, Body, Life, History, Time, Person, Human', in *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (London, Routledge: 2001).

[64] Wanda Gregory, 'Dying In The Game: A Perceptive Of Life, Death And Rebirth Through World Of Warcraft', *Gamevironments* 9 (2018), pp. 265–76.

[65] CNA Daily News, 'Death in the Modern Age, and How to Prepare as a Catholic', *Catholic World Report* (2 November 2017).

Conclusion

As we explored at the outset of this essay, within the magic circle, meaning is made. While these youngsters are gaming, their theology is being formed. From their answers it is evident that they are thanato-theologically interpreting *Fortnite* through their espoused theology.

Where a strong fear of God's judgement is present, the respondents interpreted the need to re-start the battle through a reincarnation-theology mindset. For those respondents who believe in enjoying the beatific vision, they interpreted *Fortnite's* post-death experience as 'feeling', 'seeing' and 'hearing' what their friends are experiencing, and where possible, 'intercede' for them. These four verbs here echo what Catholic tradition ascribes to the heavenly Church's role.

Christian theology has always exhorted 'not (to) grieve as others do who have no hope' (1 Thess. 4.13). While death remains fearful, when it is creaturised and mortalised as 'Sister Death', it can be played with because it is reconcilable through the Paschal mystery.[66] By presenting the actual battle as *only* one of the ways to experience fun, *Fortnite* presents death as a gateway towards a more engaged social-networking. During the battle, socialising is limited to emotes and a few chats, but after the player is forced-out from the arena they can engage in richer socialising.

This socialising permeates the 'magic circle' of the game and, through humour and play, *Fortnite* helps the player to theologically transform the death experience into a 'positive good'. Humour-rich and fun-filled, *Fortnite*, transports the player, even if only fleetingly, into a world of meaning-making. While it negatively presents a gnostic understanding of the body/spirit dualism, it transforms death as a way of deeper socialising. A 'good death' can be truly an experience of 'peace' and 'not scary' (*Dawn19M*) if understood 'positively'. One can posit that *Fortnite* purifies the instinct of 'friending'. 'Friendship grows in an embodied mutuality', and thus, it springs the player into seeking more meaningful relationships.[67]

---

[66] Rahner, 'On the Theology of Death'.
[67] Nadia Delicata, 'On Becoming a Christian: Towards a Renewal of Contemporary Christian Formation' (Toronto School of Theology, 2011), p. 322.

As Rahner speculates, death releases the person to be perfectly unionised with all, and to be in reconciliation with God and creation.[68] Similarly, *Fortnite* releases the player from the anguish of avoiding death, to better socialise in the social-network inherent in the game. In sum, *Fortnite* robs death of its destructive nature, and liturgically 'skins' it with a hope-filled social-friendship.

As evident from the foregoing essay, games are also a good starting point to initiate theological discussions with our youths. Rather than discussing their thanatological understanding and correct where needed, this exercise helped me as a researcher and minister to this group to start from their starting point, by being unobtrusive in my assessment, and giving them the space to explore their theology. As we discussed later in a group evaluation, they commented that they enjoyed the exercise and it helped them reflect deeper on death. As *Fairy18M* noted in the group discussion, 'if you were to tell us that we are going to discuss death and dying, I wouldn't have liked it, but the fact that we were discussing *Fortnite* while also discussing death, it made it more accessible.' The sense I got was that *Fortnite* became a language to translate the theological concepts.

As the interviews unfolded, it became evident that although it is not a Christian game, *Fortnite* is theologically forming its young gamers. From a ministerial point of view, and inspired by Craig Detweiler, I would like to present a few takeaways for our ministry with youths.[69] This should include gaming as an essential part of the *missio Dei*.[70] Considering the great deal of agency, the gamer is invited to unleash their imagination while learning issues of stewardship, morality, and conflict resolution. Through the thanatological cycle, the pedagogue can develop the doctrine of forgiveness and healing, which is crucial in a pilgrim's journey.[71] Games are also vital for learning new ways to navigate the messiness of

---

[68] Bibin Madathil, 'Karl Rahner's Understanding of Resurrection', Bibspaces (2017), <https://bibspaces.wordpress.com/2017/06/30/karl-rahners-understanding-of-resurrection/>, last accessed 9 July 2020.

[69] Craig Detweiler, *Halos and Avatars : Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

[70] Matthew Pulis, 'Gaming as an Essential Part of the Catechetical Framework: Addressing Gen-Z's Needs', *Knisja 2000* 31.130 (2019), pp. 69–79.

[71] This is evident in reading: Pope Francis, 'Letter to Priests' (Vatican: Vatican Media, 2019).

life. Moreover, given the many possible ludological and narratological outcomes, games help the disciple to realise that faith-living is not merely abiding by laws, but a personal relationship with Christ, which involves multiple mundane choices. Communal games bond players together via a shared accomplishment, which can be transformed into building an ecclesial community.

The gaming scene is ever changing. Similarly, the Church's vocation is to reform its *missio Dei* as the needs arise. Hence in this culture of flux, where is the Spirit leading us to explore?

www.theologyandministry.org