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Imagine this scenario: You've just struck the killing blow against a demonic cult leader. As you go to collect a dangerous object from his remains, your former ally holds you at gunpoint and retrieves “the sample” for herself. She takes off in a chopper, tossing you the keys to a jet ski, and warning that you have just three minutes to get away before explosives level the island. You drag the president's daughter behind you, watching the clock tick down. Mounting the jet ski, you make your way through a cave, pieces of rock falling around you. You speed toward the exit and the climactic finish, suddenly jerk a little too far to the left, and smash directly into a wall.

You are dead. Would you like to continue? Choose “Yes,” and you're back on the way to that jet ski – with only three minutes to escape! Well, not really. This might actually take awhile.

That was, at least, this author's experience playing through the climax of Capcom's *Resident Evil 4*. Much of the game clearly draws upon the narrative tropes and affectionately remembered clichés of Hollywood action and horror films. Sometimes it succeeds quite well at this sort of storytelling, according to generally positive reviews. Sometimes, however, the conventions traditionally associated with games get in the way of those associated with storytelling.

This article is about death in videogames, but not in the way most critics and scholars may be concerned with this issue. Here, the object of analysis is not the characters the player kills, but the death of the player's own character. Death is considered here not as morally problematic or dangerous to audiences, but as an unnecessary narrative disruption due to the typical game structure of trial-and-error, die-and-retry. Videogames may be the only narrative medium in which the death of the protagonist isn't just devoid of drama, but is entirely routine. If players have any emotional reaction, it is usually frustration rather than reflection.

This article, then, is not exactly concerned with death or violence per se, but with how games' rules interact with their ability to tell a story. Sometimes these elements conflict, but sometimes they may complement one another. The way death is typically handled in games happens to be a source of frequent complaint among many gamers, and so provides a handy set of examples to draw upon. As such, this paper considers whether games can even work as stories at all; how old conventions of protagonist death disrupt a sense of coherent narrative; how game designers have attempted to get around this problem; and how videogames can handle (and have handled) character death in meaningful ways, demonstrating that the rules and fiction of a game can work together even with emotionally challenging subject matter.

Theorizing Games

A number of theorists have engaged in debate about whether videogames should be considered as stories or as rule-based systems of play – perspectives often referred to as “narratology” and “ludology,” respectively (Aarseth, 1997, Aarseth, 2004a, Atkins, 2003, Frasca, 2003, Jenkins, 2004, Juul, 1999, Juul, 2005, Wibroe et al., 2001). This article does not mean to reopen this debate, but to build upon the middle ground already suggested by others. Notably, this expands upon ideas explored by Jesper Juul in *Half Real* (2005).

In his earlier work, Juul (1999), along with other ludologists, contended that the enjoyment of gaming is located primarily in the engagement and mastery of rule systems. According to this perspective, it shouldn't matter whether Pac-man is a yellow puck or a Mexican immigrant, or whether he is chased by ghosts or immigration police (as in *El Migrante*, a student-made version of the game); the background story and imagery is little more than dressing. In *Half Real*, however, Juul concedes that some deliberate choices along these lines could deliver an additional level of meaning in games, such as satirical connotations. Identifying two distinct sides of videogames, he thus contends that “*Rules and fiction interact, compete, and complement one another*” (Juul, 2005; emphasis added).¹

When rules and fiction conflict with one another, rather than complementing one another, it is usually the fiction that suffers, becoming *incoherent*. The example Juul offers is when Mario dies in *Donkey Kong*; we may be able to imagine our own diegetic reasons for why Mario is resurrected for two more tries, but none are offered by the story itself. This trope is only coherent when considered with regard to the game's rules: The game would be too difficult otherwise. Thus, Juul suggests, “Focusing exclusively on coherent worlds and well formed storytelling is a misunderstanding of what games are about.” According to this view, games are really about achieving goals and a sense of mastery, “not exploration of interpersonal relationships” or revelation of plot (Aarseth, 2004a). Juul suggests that “The goal [of a game] has to be one that the player would conceivably want to attain” – and so a game based on *Anna Karenina*, presumably ending in the protagonist's suicide, would not work (Juul, 2005, Aarseth, 2004a).

This article contends, however, that this view is focused on what games have traditionally been like, not what they could be like or even where some seem to be moving already. Failure in videogames – whether conceptualized as death and “rebirth” without narrative explanation, or simply as trial and error – typically hails from the traditional conventions of board games and sports. Some modern games, however, have begun to show a comparable debt to the traditions of narrative games and narrative visual media, attempting something like a hybrid between *Dungeons and Dragons* and Hollywood cinema (King and Borland, 2003). Such games focus on single-player narrative “campaigns” (the use of the word borrowed from tabletop role-playing games) in addition to or instead of elements such as puzzles or multiplayer competition. Some games, such as *Bioshock*, have even opted to avoid multiplayer modes entirely, explaining that such efforts would divert from the developers' focus on creating games with compelling stories (Kolan, 2007).

As graphic and sound technology improve, story-oriented games have come to more closely resemble movies, and not just for brief cut scenes. Given that narrative potential has been dismissed by some theorists, it is worth asking what players are getting from these experiences, and how different conceptualizations of videogames inform or impede with their design. In the sections that follow, this article will consider how players often value certain games for their narratives, sometimes prioritizing their experience of fiction over rules, and how some modern games have dealt with this shift.

Reconsidering Narrative Engagement

Dying and retrying a scene may not be a major disruption to a game like *Donkey Kong*, in which the narrative is little more than a scenario explaining what the player is about to do. For games even marginally more complex than shooting or dodging every object in sight, however, traditional elements of spectatorship can be key to the gaming experience (Atkins, 2003, Newman, 2002, Simons, 2006). The sort of appeals that theorists like Juul (2005) and Aarseth (2004a) emphasize – mastery and exploration, rather than spectatorship and narrative involvement – represent only some of the appeals of videogame play.

To some extent, the anti-narratological perspective taken by some ludologists has been a reaction against some fairly far-reaching understandings of “narrative” in games. One could argue that the narrative experience of games exists not only in gameplay itself but in transmedia extensions such as *Halo* novels (Jenkins, 2003) or in the back story implied by an *Asteroids* arcade cabinet (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Let us not be too quick to dismiss the function of narrative in the experience game itself, however, just because the simple “save the princess” quests of classic Nintendo games offer little in the way of actual plot and character (c.f. Aarseth, 2004b). Given that some scholars still doubt that games would be improved by more coherent fiction in the style of other narrative visual media (including Juul, 2005), it may be worth considering what players get out of playing games that already appear to be designed with involved stories.

Playing Games for Story

Taking a glance at some opinions culled from videogame players’ discussions online, it is not difficult to find examples of players expressing enjoyment of videogame stories and a desire for narrative coherence. Consider, for example, a discussion at the Team Xbox Forums in which players offered their opinions on which Xbox games have the “best” stories. Games with single-player campaigns garner multiple nominations by players, including *BioShock*, *Mass Effect*, *Halo 3*, *Lost Odyssey*, among others. Some players even make a distinction between the quality of a game’s story and its gameplay (or, in other words, its fiction and its rules). One player notes of *Lost Odyssey* that “if you don’t like random encounter turn based jrpgs [Japanese role-playing games], you probably won’t like this one. but the story is good” (onyxsun01, 2008).

These stories act as more than just flavoring for the challenges; many players actually engage with narrative elements in games that place an emphasis on storytelling. A survey by Bowen Research (2005), for example, suggested that players rank certain genres of games more emotionally powerful than others, with role-playing games (like the *Final Fantasy* series) and cinematic action games (like the *Resident Evil* series) mentioned more frequently than genres lacking more involved storytelling, such as puzzle games.

Given that narrative in games can indeed matter to players, it follows that when games that otherwise encourage narrative engagement behave in ways that makes their fictional worlds incoherent, this bothers players more than our present theory has accounted for. Sometimes this is simply a matter of objects or characters in the game behaving in distracting ways, such as when players and reviewers complain about sandbags being indestructible (Reed, 2008), walls being unrealistically impossible to climb over (Griffiths, 2008), or enemy characters being oblivious to their comrades' corpses in a franchise known for "realism" (Kelly, 2008). Among the most frequent complaints, however, are those suggesting that the way a game presents challenges – and deals with failure – disrupts the desired narrative experience.

Challenge and Narrative Disruption

Death and failure may be problematic in story-oriented games for a couple basic reasons. For one, trial and error interrupt narrative progression, forcing the player to spend more time focusing on a game's rules than on its fiction. And, even beyond the simple matter of where the player can allocate attention, experiencing frustration over the how the game handles player failure often overshadows emotional engagement with the story. Consider here a few examples.

In the aforementioned forum discussion about the best game stories, one player reflects, "[I] would have enjoyed the story in [*Call of Duty 4*] if [I] hadn't played it on the hard difficulty. So play *Call of Duty 4* on easy or medium and see what you think of it" (MageVortex, 2008). The game's story itself remains unaltered by difficulty level; what would change is the challenge presented by enemies, and, most likely, the number of times that the player dies and has to retrace steps. This player does not seem resentful for having given more attention to the game's challenges than to the story, but acknowledges that such a shift in focus took place.

Others, meanwhile, often find game challenges frustratingly distracting from the narrative. Such considerations figure into an ongoing conversation among reviewers and critics about the different appeals that games hold for different players. For example, Jerry "Tycho" Holkins, writer of popular gaming webcomic Penny Arcade, once remarked that the desire to "excel" – i.e., to achieve a sense of mastery through practice and trial-and-error – was not really as important to him as "fantasy." His partner on the comic, Mike "Gabe" Krahulik, followed up by offering a personal anecdote:

I was getting frustrated because some of the boss battles [in *Metroid Prime: Corruption*] were really giving me a hard time. I realised I don't play games for the challenge. I don't need or want to be punished by a game for making mistakes.

[...] I play to see the next level or cool animation. I don't play games to beat them I play games to see them. [sic] (Holkins and Krahulik, 2007)

These sentiments have been echoed by other critics and developers. In a game journalists' roundtable hosted by *Slate Magazine*, videogame and tech writer N'Gai Croal sympathetically quotes game designer David Jaffe's expression of frustration at playing (and repeatedly failing at) one particularly difficult game. On his website, Jaffe had exclaimed: “I DON'T F——ING WANT TO BE CHALLENGED BY MY F——ING ENTERTAINMENT. HERE'S 60 F——ING BUCKS. ... ENTERTAIN ME GOD DAMMIT!!!” Clarifying how he might differ from Jaffe, Croal concedes that being “fiercely challenged” does not bother him when games lack a narrative, but it can get frustrating when “I'm trying to get from point A to B in a story or a game world” (Croal, 2007). This may be largely why players do not generally feel like it is “cheating” to use a strategy guide or “walkthrough” to get past a particularly difficult part of single-player games (Consalvo, 2007): Participating in and progressing through the story is a greater personal goal for such players than mastery of rules through practice.

Such considerations have led a few developers to consider whether death is necessarily the ideal failure scenario in videogames. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, developers Peter Molyneux and Eric Zimmerman note that death is a strange artifact of the medium's history that often makes no sense in modern games. Molyneux noted, “A fight has to cost the player something, or it loses its meaning. Previously, that cost was time and tedium [in replaying a level]. But is that the right cost?” (Bevan, 2008). Game developers with a degree of creative freedom may openly choose to defy such conventions. According to an article at gaming website *The Escapist*, indie game developer Jason Rohrer (*Passage*) “envisions gaming as a medium that provides full narratives without the interruption of death” (Newman, 2008).

These are, of course, the opinions of hardcore fans and people who work with games for a living. Nevertheless, considering the experiences of players offers a way to reach beyond abstract theorizing of how games work. Some audiences do indeed care about not just progressing through challenges, but progressing through a story. This engagement with story can be broken by fictional incoherence – previously theorized as unproblematic in games – including failure and frustrating repetition. This may be more important to some players than to others, and is certainly more of an issue for games designed to emphasize story, but it should be evident that it is no longer safe to assume that the desire to master challenges is necessarily the primary or sole appeal of contemporary videogames.

Mechanics of Death and Failure

According to the strict ludological (or at least the anti-narratological) perspective, the frustration elicited by trial-and-error is evidence that games cannot fully handle cinematic narrative at all – that this is just the way games are. Recent developments in narrative-oriented games suggest, however, that this is just the way games *have been*, not necessarily the way they must always be. This section considers a number of ways that recently published games diverge from – and suggest alternatives to – long-standing traditions in how games handle error, failure, and death.

Historically, the very convention of a finite number of “lives” has its origins in earlier gaming traditions and in business concerns, not in formal demands of the digital medium. As noted earlier, trial-and-error setups have long been a fixture of board games and sports. Limiting the number of tries available to a player also served an economic purpose for early videogames: In the arcade environment, it was economically sound to allow only so much play time for a quarter. The point of these games was to see how well players could do within certain constraints, vying for the “high score” – a benchmark system initiated with *Space Invaders* – given a finite number of “lives” (Surrey, 1982). When games moved into the home and players could play as much as they wanted, however, the “game over” screen made less sense.

In considering the design of contemporary games, we can still see the vestigial trope of the “life,” but we can also see attempts to push for greater fictional coherence. In this, we may be able to increasingly locate the origins of this side of the medium in narrative gaming traditions rather than in board games and sports (King and Borland, 2003). Consider here, then, a number of approaches that game designers have employed to make failure and death make more sense in videogames’ at-home context.²

Relaxing the Death Penalty

Some games have dealt with this shift with only marginal changes, such as in making the penalty for death less harsh than an inevitable “game over” screen that forces players to restart the entire game. As games have grown longer, more involved, and more capable of storing the player’s progress, many games have adapted by offering the player a functionally unlimited number of lives (and deaths).

At first, home gaming consoles such as those made by Atari and Nintendo followed fairly closely to the arcade convention of limited lives, three being roughly standard (e.g., *Q*bert*, *Super Mario Bros.*). Some early Nintendo games introduced ways for players to pick up where they left off even after losing all their lives, such as by offering a limited number of “continues” that would allow the player to restart at an earlier point with a full set of lives (e.g., *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*). Some, meanwhile, simply allowed a limitless number of continues (e.g., *Ninja Gaiden*). A few offered players a password after the loss of all lives, which players could enter to pick up where they left off (e.g., *Metroid*, the *Mega Man* series).

Many – perhaps most – modern console games continue along these lines, though generally steering toward a functionally limitless number of lives. In the recent *Super Mario Galaxy* for the Nintendo Wii, Mario can still die, forcing the player to retry a level, but Mario literally has “extra life” mushrooms just sitting around the house. Actually running out of lives is nearly impossible, making the final “game over” unlikely. Many other, more narrative-heavy games – like *Resident Evil 4*, mentioned at the beginning of this article – may keep track of how many times the protagonist dies, but do not really hold it against the player. Such games automatically mark “checkpoints” in the player’s progress (where the player will restart if the protagonist dies), or allow players to save the game wherever they wish.

Juul (2005) describes such flexible game save options as a matter of consideration of the real-world player (i.e., making sure the rules aren't too hard) rather than as a matter concerned with storytelling. To the extent that players find it harder to enjoy a game's story when they have to repeat greater amounts of content, however, allowing players to save wherever they wish could be seen as a means to aiding fictional coherence.

Stalling Death

Some recent games have also introduced ways of making it easier for the protagonist to stay alive, making death a less frequent occurrence. Traditionally, many games have had a “health score” or “hit point” system in which the protagonist can sustain a certain amount of damage before dying, and must collect special items to be healed. In games like *Gears of War*, *Kane and Lynch: Dead Men*, and *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, however, this has been replaced by a system in which the protagonist will regenerate health automatically after escaping the source of damage. Under heavy damage, the “camera” angle may go askew or the colors might suddenly change, signaling that death is imminent, giving the player a chance to escape to safety; as long as the protagonist does not sustain too much damage all at once, the character will survive indefinitely.

Some games, including *Gears of War*, *Kane and Lynch*, and the upcoming *Faith and a .45* even allow characters to revive one another when on the brink of death. In *Gears of War*, two people playing cooperatively could go the entire game without seeing a character killed, as they can continually revive one another as needed by pressing a button over a kneeling companion. With a barked command to “walk it off,” both characters return to action with full health. Sometimes this is explained diegetically, such as when teammates give one another adrenaline shots to pull through firefights in *Kane and Lynch*. *Faith and a .45* has been advertised as functioning similarly, but with revivals triggered by a kiss.

A few games offer relatively novel means to put off death, such as *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*. In this game, the protagonist can use a mystical object to turn back time a few seconds, undoing an otherwise fatal mistake.

Diegetic Explanations for Rebirth

Sometimes, however, the protagonist cannot escape death: Even the Prince of Persia runs out of mystical sand eventually. When this happens, the narrator, in a move reminiscent of *1001 Arabian Nights*, speaks over the “Continue” screen, “No, no, that's not what happened.” The player may need to repeat certain scenes, but this move likely signals an attempt to preserve some sense of fictional coherence.

To consider another example, when the protagonist dies in *BioShock*, he immediately awakens in a “Vita Chamber,” built to bring people back to life. Why it is that the protagonist is the only person in the game who awakens in such devices becomes a major plot point late in the story. Nevertheless, one developer explained that this technique “keeps you in the game” (Gametrailers.com, 2007), suggesting that the

goal was at least as much to make challenge seem manageable as to make the story coherent. Such fictionally coherent explanations for death remain rare.

Purposeful Deaths

More common than fictionally coherent rebirths are death scenes that attempt to contribute something to the general narrative tone. There may be no explanation for how the protagonist returns from death, but the death itself invites a moment of spectatorship.

The more traditional videogame approach to the loss of a life portrays death as brief and uneventful, a quick hurdle before the protagonist returns to the fray: a spaceship explodes in a collision with a space invader, Q*Bert utters some implied profanity, and Mario turns to the player in comical surprise at having been killed. This approach remains the norm in many non-violent and cartoon-style games (with some additional flailing and moaning on Mario's part).

Games with greater narrative ambitions, on the other hand, often dramatize or even fetishize the moment of death, treating it as a scene in itself. To return to some earlier examples, suffering life-threatening injuries in *Kane and Lynch* drains all color from the screen. The sounds of nearby gunfire are drowned out by the dying character's auditory hallucinations and flashbacks. This even offers some back story for protagonists, recalling conversations with characters who never appear in the game otherwise.

The death scenes in *Resident Evil 4*, meanwhile, can be so graphic and jarring that they carry a sort of horror-movie shock value all their own. Different means of dispatch cue different animated sequences of death, such as when the protagonist screams and the controller vibrates as an enemy takes a chainsaw to his neck. Again, the player gets no diegetic explanation for rebirth in such cases, but such death scenes represent one way of attempting to portray death as a narrative element.

Non-fatal Scenarios

Arguably, the ultimate effort to preserve narrative coherence is to omit protagonist death from a game entirely. This technique has been most utilized among "adventure" games, a genre that focuses more on collecting items, engaging in pre-written dialog sequences, and solving puzzles. This is a long-standing trope of text adventures, such as Infocom's *Zork* series. In the graphical adventure game *Grim Fandango*, for example, the player controls a film noir hero in the land of the dead. The protagonist is never in any real danger, despite some seemingly tense action scenes. Play is never interrupted by death, but continues until the player figures out how to advance. Despite the lack of death scenes, however, narrative progression can still be halted if the player gets stumped by a puzzle.

These examples illustrate a number of ways that game designers have attempted to deal with players' increasing expectation for engaging game narratives. Protagonist

death, a peculiar convention of videogames, represents a standing challenge to the creation of coherent fiction while still offering interesting and challenging rules. As the next section will explore, however, death offers not just a challenge in the creation of meaningful fiction, but an opportunity.

Blending Rules and Fiction

As the previous sections make evident, the rules and fiction of games can conflict to create an incoherent (or downright frustrating) experience for players. Careful consideration and attempts to balance rules and fiction can help to correct this. Nevertheless, death and failure offer particularly problematic scenarios: In the absence of death as a penalty, how can one preserve fictional coherence but also make the player feel that something is really at stake, that failure is really worthy of avoidance, suspense, even dread? This section considers how rules and fiction might not just conflict with one another, but can complement one another for fictionally coherent and even emotionally evocative failure and tragedy scenarios.

Social and Moral Consequences

From a narrative perspective, death represents an awfully final failure scenario. This scenario is so common, however, largely because games have traditionally been very narrow and repetitive in the content they offer – i.e., slaying enemies. Games with more varied or nuanced narratives sometimes offer other sorts of tasks. These games do typically still leave open the possibility of dying, but the alternative failure scenarios for their other sorts of tasks may offer us another way of thinking about narrative progression in games.

As described earlier, failure in games has typically been treated as an impediment to progress. Whether the protagonist dies or the player simply gets stuck in a puzzle, the narrative must grind to a halt until the player does the “right” thing. As an alternative, some narrative videogames offer an increasingly common convention: plots that branch (or at least appear to branch) in different directions based on choices the player makes at key junctures.

This convention has long been a staple of interactive fiction, text adventures, and “Choose Your Own Adventure” books. Some PC games with role-playing elements developed in the 1990s, such as *Deus Ex*, featured such choices prominently. In recent years, plot branches appeared in number of big-budget, mainstream, console games, even including the most recent *Grand Theft Auto* title, in which the player could choose to take or to spare certain enemies’ lives.

Branching plots offer a way to communicate “failure” to a player without halting the narrative altogether. Typically, such alternative scenarios lead into only very slightly different plot branches; the rest of the game may be nearly identical in terms of gameplay regardless of how the player performs on a given task, while a brief cut scene signals that the protagonist should feel proud or guilty about his or her actions. In other words, it is not the character’s progress that signals success or death that

signals failure, but favorable or unfavorable interactions with other characters. The player's failure is thus integrated into the narrative itself.

In *BioShock*, for example, the player encounters a number of young girls who seem evilly possessed. If the player succeeds in capturing one of the girls, the game presents the option to press one button to "harvest" her for material to purchase more powers, and another button to "rescue" her for a smaller immediate reward. Later in the game, the protagonist encounters a number of rescued girls who treat him as a savior or a villain depending on how he had treated others in the meantime.

In the end, it does not matter very much how the player chooses for the protagonist to act in *BioShock*; the little girls will help out in the end either way. Some games, on the other hand, take a much more formalized approach to the social and moral consequences of player choices. In *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, the protagonist is charged with a number of assignments from both the NSA and the terrorist organization he has infiltrated. The character's standing with each organization is represented by separate "trust" meters. Failing to complete an assignment, or completing an assignment for the other organization, can affect how each group trusts the protagonist.

Double Agent's system can lead to a complicated balancing act. In one scene, the protagonist receives conflicting orders from the NSA and the terrorist leader, each instructing him to shoot a different man in a struggle between another agent and a terrorist. Players may find it more "heroic and cinematic" to shoot the terrorist, in the words of the amateur writer of one online strategy guide (Barbee, 2007). But if that choice would deplete the terrorists' trust too much, the player would be forced to choose otherwise. Because of choices such as this, while most games allow players to choose a difficulty rating that affects how fierce opponents will be in combat, *Double Agent* describes its difficulty rating in terms of the consequences of player actions.

In this game, the moral system is clearly meant to signal which actions are successful and which represent failure (though failures which allow the narrative to proceed). The protagonist is never given the option to simply join the terrorists in earnest. In some games, however, alternative scenarios do not necessarily represent failure, but simply different – and arguably equally valid – paths through the narrative. Consider *Mass Effect*, which sees the player controlling a character not just in combat situations, but in conversational situations, giving options between different pre-recorded responses. If players consistently give rude and ruthless responses, it can eventually yield bonuses in the amount of damage their character can deal. Virtuous responses, on the other hand, eventually yield bonuses in the amount of damage the character can sustain. In either case, player actions affect how other characters interact with the protagonist: Some respond more favorably to virtuousness, while others admire the protagonist's ruthlessness.

According to testimonies on the developer's *Mass Effect* forums, players frequently make conversational decisions based on what would be most interesting for the progression of the story. In one scene, for example, the player may choose a response so hostile that the protagonist would kill the other member of the conversation, a member of his fighting squad named Wrex. One player on the forums

noted that he had been playing through the game consistently giving the most hostile responses possible, but admitted that he did not kill Wrex because of his great respect for that character, based on previous conversations (mr_winkle, 2008). As this player’s comment indicates, immoral or amoral actions in a game with branching plots may be the result of deliberate narrative directing or exploration, not of “failing” to make the right choice.

Indirect Punishment

Another sort of failure scenario based on branching plot elements involves penalizing the protagonist indirectly or non-fatally. This may take the form of permanently hurting the members of the supporting cast, rather than temporarily setting back the player with a brief death. In *Metal Gear Solid*, for example, one scene has the protagonist rigged to a torture device; the player must press a button very quickly or else give in to the torture. If the player fails, the protagonist’s love interest is killed.

This technique sounds familiar to a task colloquially referred to as an “escort mission,” in which the protagonist is charged to protect a computer-controlled character. Escort missions are different from the technique described here, however, because permanently hurting or killing off the supporting cast actually preserves fictional coherence. Some game designers maintain that escort missions help create a stronger sense of identification with the other characters in the game (see, for example, Freeman, 2004). In practice, however, this simply presents another way to die-and-retry; when the protected character gets killed, it usually forces the player to restart as if the protagonist him or herself had died. This is why many players end up hating, and not identifying with, the characters they are supposed to protect. As one reviewer says, “Protection and rescue missions ... are historically frustrating, even loathsome” (Alexander, 2008, see also Pitts, 2007).

On the other hand, killing off a character the player has grown to like – a character who never gets in the way, who may have even helped the player – can be a devastating blow. Returning to the above example of Wrex from *Mass Effect*, the loss of this character has ramifications not just to the narrative, but to the gameplay. Some players may be forced to kill Wrex because they did not spend enough time building persuasion skills or conversing with him earlier in the game. The punishment for their failure to develop a more humane character is the loss of a supporting cast member who could provide backup in combat portions of the game. The player thus loses a character who was not an annoyance, but an asset.

Most frequently, however, harming the supporting cast has been used not as the consequence of player actions, as in *Metal Gear Solid* and *Mass Effect*, but as a plot element that cannot be avoided. Even so, such “forced failure” scenarios offer another way to integrate death and failure meaningfully into narrative games.

Forced Failure

A game need not have a number of branches in story to offer complementary rules and fiction. Even more linear storytelling has a place in games. And while some

maintain that a game in which the player must fail is a bad game by definition, this appears to be an increasingly common convention used to create a sense of tragedy (see Lee, 2003).

Sometimes this tragedy has been presented as the unavoidable loss of a supporting character through a cinematic cut scene: the horse in *Shadow of the Colossus*, which bucks the protagonist to safety before plummeting from a crumbling bridge; the commanding officer in *Gears of War*, who is stabbed through the chest while the protagonist looks on in horror; and, perhaps most famously, Aeris, the doomed love interest of *Final Fantasy VII*. This character's unavoidable death has been frequently described as one of the most upsetting and emotional moments in the history of videogames, with some players recalling bursting into tears or needing to avoid the game for weeks (Bowen, 2005).

Some games, meanwhile, create a sense of tragedy by forcing the protagonist him or herself to fail, even to die. As in the movie, the recent adaptation of *King Kong* culminates in a doomed last stand against airplanes. *BioShock* reveals the protagonist to be controllable through a post-hypnotic suggestion, forcing the player to murder a defenseless character. And *Shadow of the Colossus* culminates in the realization that the protagonist has been working in the service of a demon; the player spends the protagonist's final moments controlling a futile struggle against a vortex meant to imprison the demon that has possessed him.

Moreover, despite the earlier described charge that the goal of a game could not be suicide, some games – such as *God of War* and *Eternal Sonata* – begin with the revelation that the protagonist will eventually die as part of the story. In a medium where agency may be misleading at best, such sequences can hold great suggestive power.

The games offered as examples in this section are not meant to be held aloft as models for the death of “death” in videogames. After all, most of these games still involve the standard convention of death and repetition, and some of the concepts discussed here may have worked better in theory than in practice as they were implemented. (In *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, for one, it is quite easy to suddenly and accidentally blow one's cover with the enemy, effectively resulting in many more opportunities to “die” without even the usual advance warnings one would get when taking physical damage.) Nevertheless, these examples are meant to illustrate alternative ways of thinking about “failure” in games – not just as an impediment to progress through a game, but as a condition inferred within a continuous narrative.

Conclusion

The way that videogames have dealt with failure, primarily through protagonist death and trial-and-error, has generally been more concerned with games as rule sets than with games as narratives. As a result, games which appear to tell stories often become incoherent, bringing narrative progression to a halt, eliciting frustration with gameplay rather than engagement with fiction. Despite what some may charge, however, this is not an inherent bias of the medium. The die-and-retry approach is a shortcut in game design, a holdover from an era when games were more limited in

their ability to tell stories. This convention now imposes an artificial limitation, even as alternative methods of dealing with failure have been exercised in some games.

This argument should not be taken to suggest that all games ought to be narrative-oriented games, that trial-and-error has no place in modern videogames, or that all games should be so concerned with preserving an illusion of boundless choices. Not all publishers could or should create hundreds of conversation branches with hours of voice acting in an attempt to emulate the open-endedness of *Mass Effect*. This article simply seeks to argue that universal models of game enjoyment that would lump such a game in with *Tetris* fail to acknowledge that such games ultimately offer different appeals. There is a market for games with complex stories, and asserting that games can't tell traditional stories – with their own strengths in offering player agency (or the illusion thereof) – fails to recognize this. Developers may not be able to make the *Anna Karenina* videogame right now, but this does not mean that a game with such challenging themes – and such seemingly undesirable “goals” – could never be made.

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Notes

- ¹ In addition to recognizing two sides of games – “rules” and “fiction” – Juul (2005) also categorizes games as “progressive” (presenting challenges as a serialized progression) or “emergent” (presenting open-ended challenges through variation). While “progressive” games may sound like a category set up for games with narratives, this is not necessarily the case; this categorization is about how games present *challenges*, which is still an issue primarily concerned with a rules-focused understanding of game content.
- ² The conventions of death in massively multiplayer games are not considered here in part to limit the scope of this article, but also because my own anecdotal experience of MMO play has emphasized social and rule-oriented elements far beyond narrative elements of play. Role-playing in such games does occur among some players – some of whom even quit using a character when he or she dies – but this is the exception rather than the rule. Rather, as described at the end of the section titled “Theorizing Games,” this article focuses on single-player or offline narrative games, which are arguably more story-focused by design.