

Death and Video Games

by Ian Duckles

Ideas in progress, very interested in feedback or comments about how things could be strengthened, areas that need work or that should be eliminated. **Begin with South Park Clip Slide 2.**

I. Introduction

Though exact calculations are difficult, video game sales in the US and worldwide are equal to or have surpassed movie box office receipts. In 2010, total US box office receipts were about \$10.5 Billion, while total sales of video game content (excluding hardware and accessories) were about \$15 Billion.

72% of US households play computer or video games. The average video game player is 37 and has been playing video games for 12 years. 58% of video game players are male and 42% are female. In addition, “Women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (37%) than boys age 17 or younger (13%).”¹

It is undeniable, then, that video games are woven into contemporary society. As a philosopher, it is worth asking what impact this might have on individuals and society as a whole. **[Slide 3]** A common claim is that playing video games, particularly violent video games like *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto* directly leads to violent and antisocial behavior. In 2003, the county of St. Louis attempted to ban the sale of violent video games to minors on just these grounds. The ban was overturned by the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals on First Amendment Grounds, but in considering the link between video games and violence the Court noted that, “The

County's conclusion that there is a strong likelihood that minors who play violent video games will suffer a deleterious effect on their psychological health is simply unsupported in the record."² Furthermore, an Amici brief filed on behalf of the plaintiffs by 33 media scholars noted that:

Most studies and experiments on video games containing violent content have not found adverse effects. Researchers who do report positive results have generally relied on small statistical differences and used dubious "proxies" for aggression, such as recognizing "aggressive words" on a computer screen. Indeed, research on media violence more generally has also failed to prove that it causes – or is even a "risk factor" for – actual violent behavior.³

The most, it seems, that can be said regarding a link between video games and violence is that individuals who have a predisposition to violent behavior do become more aggressive after playing violent video games, but the effect is small and does not last very long after the individual stops playing.

Despite the lack of evidence for a link between video games and violence, it does not appear unreasonable to ask what effect such a popular form of entertainment might have on players individually or society as a whole. **[Slide 4]** This is an increasingly pressing question as video games become more visually realistic and immersive and much longer and open-ended with many large open world games allowing for hundreds and hundreds of hours of gameplay. Clearly a direct causal link between the playing of video games and a particular behavior or attitude of a gamer would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish. Nevertheless, I do think that some progress can be made in thinking about how video games affect players.

Like all popular culture, video games promote ideologies. By 'ideology' I

mean a set of values and beliefs that structures how an individual perceives, interprets and responds to the world. By 'promote an ideology' I mean that a work of art has a set of values and beliefs that go into its creation and which are reflected in that work. **[Slide 5]** As a very simple example, between 1930 and 1968 Hollywood films were subject to the Hays Code, a set of guidelines concerning what could and could not be depicted in films created in the US for a public audience. One component of this code was that criminals and criminal activities could not be glamorized and that all criminals in a film must ultimately be brought to justice (arrested or killed). This amounts to a particular set of values and beliefs that was then reflected in all the films released under the code. If one watches films from this period one can come away with a distorted conception of American society during this time period. I, for one, was very surprised to learn that people living in the 1950's used swear words and that married couple slept in the same bed because, based on the movies and TV of the time, apparently they did not. I suspect that those who long for the good old days when America was a kinder, gentler nation really long for this cinematic vision of America; a vision that has, at best, a tenuous connection to reality.

This is a particularly extreme case since, here, the ideology was imposed on filmmakers, but the general point should be clear: works of art have a point of view, they take stands on issues and support specific sets of value judgments. In many cases these ideologies promoted by works of art and popular culture are not necessarily intended by the creators, but creators don't always have the best sense of the meaning and significance of their work. In this paper I want to focus on video

games and the ideologies they present by arguing that video games promote an ideological view of death that is at odds with how death “really” functions and the role it plays in the material world.

Before embarking on this project, I first need to articulate an approach to thinking critically about video games. Unlike other forms of entertainment or art where, for the most part, the reader or watcher is generally passive in the reception of content, in video games players have an active role in shaping and structuring their experience. This is, perhaps, a bit of an oversimplification insofar as a reader or watcher does play a role in interpreting a work of art, but the intuitive difference between, say watching a movie vs. playing a video game should be fairly obvious. I will begin by first exploring the critical framework for analyzing video games articulated by Ian Bogost, which he labels, “Unit Analysis.” Next, I will illustrate Bogost’s unit analysis approach by examining Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12*. I will then shift gears and look at death and the role death plays in shaping our subjectivity with a particular emphasis on Heidegger’s account of being-towards-death from *Being and Time* and Derrida’s expansion on this view articulated in his *The Gift of Death*. I will then explore the ideology of death in video games. After connecting these two discussions and exploring the similarities and differences between how death functions in video games and the real world, I conclude by articulating the significance of these similarities and differences and raise some questions about where this analysis could lead us going forward.

II. Unit Operations [Slide 6]

In trying to think about video games, one of the first obstacles was identifying a set of critical tools that would allow for an analysis of video games. There are a variety of critical approaches from a number of domains, but none of these is able to get at the essential character of video games qua video games. One obvious approach would be to treat video games as another form of narrative. One would then use the critical tools one uses to analyze narrative in general to analyze the specific stories told in a particular video game. One might, for example, apply Aristotle's theory of drama to the story presented in a game like *Grand Theft Auto*. The problem with this approach is that it doesn't get at the essential nature of the video game media, but rather treats video games as essentially identical to other narrative modes such as the novel, movie or play. It was this very challenge that got me thinking philosophically about video games in the first place.

Needless to say, I was quite pleased on encountering Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations* because in this work, I finally found a critical approach that allowed me to examine video games as video games and to bring out the essential nature of this particular artistic medium. Bogost himself intends this approach as a universal critical tool that can apply across a wide range of media and disciplines, and in my own discussion of his work, I will look at media other than video games. Despite this, as I hope will become clear, this critical approach is particularly well suited to studying video games and it will allow us to unpack some of the ideological positions they take. However, in order to understand this critical framework, it will be necessary to unpack a few of the core concepts. These are the concepts of "unit" "unit operation" "unit analysis" and "simulation fever."

To begin, the critical approach of unit analysis was developed by Ian Bogost as a response to deficiencies he encountered with critical tools that favor what he calls a systems approach. As he puts it, "Unit operations are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems." (UO 3). The key contrast here (though not one of binary opposition) is between a unit approach to analysis and a systems approach. A systems approach is a more traditional critical framework that seeks to understand a work as an exemplar of a particular pre-existing analytic framework. For example, when one provides a generic analysis of a work by analyzing it as an exemplar of a particular genre, one is taking a systems approach to criticism. Similarly, examining video games through the lens of Aristotle's theory of drama would also be to take a systems approach to analysis. By contrast, the unit analysis approach doesn't begin with a set of analytic tools already in place, but instead builds up a critical analysis from the basic starting point of the "unit."

Within the framework of unit analysis, a "unit" is just anything that exists. As Bogost notes, "units not only define people, network routers, genes, and electrical appliances, but also emotions, cultural symbols, business processes, and subjective experiences" (UO 5). Basically a unit is whatever the critic identifies it to be. At this point one might worry that the concept of "unit" is too vague to have any critical use, but the very vagueness of the concept is what makes it such a powerful approach to criticism. A real benefit of this approach is that it frees one to focus on those aspects of a work that one finds compelling. Insofar as the critic is able to identify anything she wants as a unit, this frees the critic to focus her analysis on those aspects of the

work that she finds significant. For my purposes it will allow me to focus on death and how death is presented across a wide range of video games from a variety of different genres.

An “operation” then, is akin to a mathematical function, a process that receives an input and performs some sort of transformation on it. As Bogost writes, a unit operation is simply “an understanding, largely arbitrary, certainly contingent, of a particular situation, compacted and taken as a whole” (UO 13). Again, this is an intentionally open-ended concept, allowing the critic wide latitude in identifying and analyzing it. As a very simple example of a unit operation we can look at how a video game controller works. Very simply, I press a button on my keyboard or controller and, according to set of algorithms realized in the game code, that press of a button is transformed into my game avatar performing some activity such as shooting a gun. Furthermore, that in-game action of firing a gun is itself a unit operation insofar as that in-game action produces in-game consequences (such as damaging or “killing” another character). Which aspect of this schema the critic focuses on is fairly arbitrary, but, again, this arbitrariness is what makes this tool of analysis so useful.

Lastly, unit analysis is “the general practice of criticism [that operates] through the discovery and exposition of unit operations at work in one or many source texts” (UO 15). That is, providing an analysis of a work of art using the unit or unit operation as one’s basic tool of analysis. Again, the key here is that one starts with a unit and builds one’s analysis bottom up from there as opposed to the top-down approach one finds with a systems analysis.

To illustrate this contrast and these ideas, I will briefly look at the Disney/Pixar film *UP* (2009) and contrast two different approaches to critically examining the film. The first approach, the systems approach, might involve a generic analysis of the film. That is, one first identifies the genre of *Up*, identifies the defining traits of that genre, and then explains how specific scenes and moments in the film are instances or subversions of those generic traits. **[Slide 7]** In the case of *Up*, we might see the film as an example of the coming-of-age adventure story or “Hero’s Journey” in which a youthful protagonist with some character defects is placed into a dangerous situation. Over the course of the story he collects a group of companions who work together to defeat the bad guy and in the process, the youthful protagonist uncovers some important life lessons. Using this approach, *Up* can be seen as an instance in a long tradition of genre filmmaking that includes films like *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Treasure Island*, *The Wizard of Oz* etc. In addition, I can connect the treatment of this genre in *Up* with the treatment of that genre in other media such as books, TV, or video games. The key behind this systems approach is that we have a pre-existing structure (in this case the genre and its traits) and the critical work is done by examining how the film does or does not fit into this pre-existing structure.

By contrast, a unit analysis approach begins by looking at specific instances or moments in the film and using those to develop a larger reading of the film, one that, in many cases may be incomplete or open-ended, unlike the more closed approach I looked at above. Following this approach, one might focus on seeing *Up* as expanding on and exploring the theme of caring. **[Slide 8]** The film begins by

showing us a “traditional” caring relationship in the opening montage of the relationship between Carl and Ellie. Through the course of the film we then see different version of caring as the various characters form relationships and then act on those various bonds (e.g. Carl and Russell the boy; Russell and Kevin the bird; Dug the dog and Carl; etc.). In this example above, the unit would be caring, the unit operation would be identifying specific moments in the film as instances of caring and understanding the nature of those caring relationships as well as how those relationships transform and intersect over the course of the film, and the unit analysis is just critically analyzing the film as a film about caring.

This approach is, again, much more open-ended and partial than the systems approach discussed above. In particular, the systems approach looks at the movie as a whole, and must take seriously all the elements of the film from beginning to end in order to provide a generic analysis of the film. If one is analyzing the film as an example of the “Hero’s Journey” and the protagonist dies half-way through the film, this creates serious problems for one’s analysis. The unit approach, by contrast, focuses on specific moments in the film, picking and choosing moments that fit the theme of caring and ignoring or setting aside those aspects of the film that are not relevant to the theme. In addition, the analysis does not begin with a pre-existing understanding of what “caring” is, but instead builds up a definition by exploring specific relationships as they are presented in the film. I do not want to argue that either approach is superior to the other as I do think both approaches are valuable and useful, however, for the purpose of video game analysis, I do think the unit analysis approach is more fruitful. This is because, in general, video games are more

open ended, and thus are more resistant to the systems approach. From this perspective the unit analysis approach is particularly useful as it allows me to select one particular moment from a wide range of radically different video games and yet still find commonalities in the way these disparate games deal with the exact same issue of death. This is something that a systems approach would not really allow me to accomplish.

One last significant critical concept I need to examine is “simulation fever.” **[Slide 9]** Bogost defines simulation fever as, “...the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game’s unit operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player’s subjective understanding of that representation” (UO 136). Whenever we play a game, watch a film, read a poem, etc. there is a gap between what the text presents us with and our interpretation of that presentation. Further, it is in the exploration of this gap that the critical work of video game analysis under a unit operation model occurs. As Bogost puts it, “...exploring the manifestation of game rules in player experience is perhaps the most important type of work game criticism can do” (UO 131). That is, in providing a critical analysis of video games under this model, we look at how the player interprets the units and unit operations he or she is presented with. In this way, we are able to critically unpack the ideologies at work in video games as the game rules and algorithms, insofar as they define what a player is capable of doing and what the implications of those actions are, give us insight into the values promoted by a particular game. In addition, this approach allows us insight into how a game experience is shaped by and shapes a player’s own subjectivity.

There are two important features of simulation fever and this approach to game analysis. First, unit operations are biased. That is, we will be looking at specific unit operations performed by a video game and these unit operations follow a specialized set of rules or algorithms that have been put into the game by the designers. These rules are not, in general, modifiable and they are embedded in the very fabric of the game and the game world. In a sense, they are the metaphysical or ontological features of the game world, akin to the laws of physics in the material world. Unlike the laws of physics, these game rules are the product of conscious choices made by the game designers and reflect consciously or unconsciously the ideological commitments of those designers. As Bogost puts it, “What simulation games create are *biased, nonobjective* modes of expression that cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity and ideology” (UO 99). A second feature of this approach is that it necessarily takes us outside the world of the game. Insofar as we make reference to how an individual interprets these unit operations, we necessarily invoke the attitudes, desires, appetites and cultural milieu of the player. We go beyond the game in order to understand how the player interprets the game. This interpretation is not completely free because it is bound within the confines of the game rules that have been established, but it is necessarily open-ended, which is, of course, one of the main features of a unit analysis approach to criticism.

III. September 12 [Slide 10]

As a brief illustration of these concepts, I want to look at a game with a very clear ideological perspective, the game *September 12* created by Gonzalo Frasca. I choose this game because it has a very clear ideology and was, in fact, created with a

clear ideological perspective it wants to communicate to the player. In this respect, the game is, perhaps, closer to an editorial cartoon than what we traditionally understand a video game to be. <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>

Let's unpack the unit operations in the game. First, we have the algorithm that controls the movement of the three different types of Non Player Characters or NPC's in the game. Then there is the unit operation that allows the player avatar (the crosshairs) to target a specific region of the game world. When the player clicks there is a short delay until the explosion occurs and a cool down or reload timer until the player can shoot again. Then there is the unit operation that kills everyone and destroys buildings within the blast radius of the explosion, and lastly the unit operation that turns civilians into terrorists when they encounter a dead civilian.

Now, I hope the ideological perspective of the game is clear. It obviously promotes a particular conception of what leads to the creation of terrorists, namely that the bombing and destruction of Middle Eastern cities leads to the creation of new terrorists (a claim that there is some empirical evidence to support). In particular, it is the action of westerners (players) motivated by a desire to eliminate evil that, ironically, is the source of evil in the first place. When I interpret this game, I see it as an indictment and criticism of post 9-11 US foreign policy. Based on interviews with the game creator, I believe we share that interpretation of the "meaning" of the game, but one could easily imagine that a different player with a different set of values might come to a different conclusion about the meaning and significance of the game. For instance, there is nothing in the player avatar (the crosshairs) that indicates a nationality, nor is there any indication of the nationality of the NPC's

beyond a vaguely middle-eastern character design. However, as a US citizen who vividly remembers the events of September 11, 2001 and the US response I almost immediately interpret the crosshairs as a US drone bomber and the targets as Iraqi's. Simulation fever occurs in this gap between what the game allows us to do and how we interpret the significance of that. Now, I don't want to get involved in the question of the accuracy of the ideology promoted by September 12, but merely to provide an obvious example of how a video game can promote a particular ideological position. With this in mind, I will now turn to the issue of death.

IV. Death [Slide 11]

Death has been a central preoccupation of Philosophers since at least Plato's *Phaedo*. One of the more interesting analyses of death and its relation to human beings, and one suited to my purposes in this essay, comes from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). For Heidegger, the values and goals that are encouraged and supported by modern, Western culture are merely structures developed by society to allow individuals to avoid an authentic confrontation with the reality of the human condition; viz., a confrontation with the fact that one is mortal and will die. For example, let's take the sort of life that is encouraged in contemporary American society. We live in a capitalist culture in which all aspects (TV, media, the president⁴, our friends) constantly tell us that we are defined by what we own. This is seen quite clearly in the phenomena of "keeping up with the Jones'" in which individuals feel compelled to acquire whatever new goods or products are acquired by their neighbors. For Heidegger, this constant drive to acquire more wealth and accumulate more stuff is best understood as an attempt by individuals to flee their

own deaths, and to avoid confronting the reality of death. By focusing on the acquisition of wealth and consumer goods, individuals are able to distract themselves from the reality of their own deaths. Heidegger also notes, that this strategy is ultimately unfulfilling for most individuals. One can devote one's life to the pursuit of new and better consumer goods, but this is ultimately unsatisfying. Why? Because the individual is using this pursuit as a way to hide from the truth of his own existence and the reality of death. Heidegger argues that until individuals authentically confront this reality they will never be able to lead fulfilled meaningful lives, and never be able to achieve happiness.

By contrast, Heidegger argues that death is the defining feature of human existence. But, what is death for Heidegger, and what does an authentic confrontation with one's own death amount to? First and foremost, death, for Heidegger is the recognition of the end of all possibilities for the individual, all opportunities for action and all projects that seemed important or compelling to the individual. In confronting one's own death as the possibility of the end of all possibilities for the individual, one also realizes that the goals and projects that an individual takes to define his life ultimately have no intrinsic value. Since these projects and goals will end with the end of the individual, one's confrontation with death reveals these projects as ultimately worthless and meaningless. What is the point of devoting my life to the acquisition of money or objects of art if I am just going to die some day? Once I am dead my money and possessions will be of no value to me, and this reveals that my pursuit and focus on these goods was itself ultimately worthless.

This would seem to lead the individual to a kind of despair or nihilism. If nothing is valuable, and all my aspirations and projects are ultimately valueless, then what would be the point of continuing to exist? Heidegger responds by arguing that instead this confrontation with the possibility of my own death, this awareness that my projects are ultimately worthless, and in any case do not define me as an individual, instead frees me to develop a new, more authentic relation to my life and to the world. In recognizing the necessity of my own death, I can now cultivate a life that acknowledges this fact, and frees me from much of the anxiety that plagued my life. In confronting my own death, I come to the realization that the projects and values imposed upon me by my culture and my society do not define me, and thus need not control my life. In this way, a realization of the possibility of my own death frees me from the constraints imposed upon me by society and allows me to then develop and pursue my own projects and goals that are meaningful to me, this specific individual with these specific needs and desires. Furthermore, even when I adopt these projects, pursuing them with an awareness of the possibility of my own death allows me to deal more effectively with the viscidities and disruptions that can often befall me. Because these projects don't define me (only my death does), I no longer need to be upset when my projects are frustrated or not going the way I would like. Since the success of the project ultimately doesn't matter, failures in the project won't matter to me as much. Thus, I no longer need feel depressed or upset if I fail to live up to the standard of wealth and success defined by society. I am free to develop my own conception of success, and furthermore, even if I fail to live up to that standard, I needn't overly concern myself.

Another important thinker on the topic of death who extends this Heideggerian analysis is the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, death is important because it is through the necessity of our death that we become responsible agents who can be held accountable for our actions. Derrida begins his meditation on death by invoking the Platonic account of death seen in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*. According to Derrida, on this model, "By means of the passage to death the soul attains its own freedom."⁵ This claim would appear to be essentially correct as a gloss of the attitude towards death expressed by Socrates in the *Phaedo*. Derrida then goes on to suggest that this account of death is appropriated and transformed by Christianity (and the Abrahamic religions generally). Unlike the Platonic model in which death is something the individual gives to himself (an idea seen most clearly in Socrates' suicide and his exhortation to his followers to become philosophers and thus to achieve a deathlike condition), in the Christian appropriation, death now becomes something bestowed upon the individual by a radically distinct other, God.

Under this new model, death now becomes the source of individual responsibility. Why is this? A complete answer is not exactly clear, but the cornerstone of Derrida's analysis lies in the fact that our deaths are what make us irreplaceable, singular individuals. "My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given,' one can say, by death." It is because I can die, and furthermore because only I can experience my own death, that I take on the status of a unique individual. In effect, my death and the eventual necessity of my death is what defines and distinguishes me from all others. Many of the jobs and roles I play in my daily

life can be taken over by others and I can have substitutes for them, but no one can die for me. Derrida of course recognizes the possibility of sacrifice, but even if someone sacrifices their life for me, they don't take my death, they merely delay my death. At the end of the day, I am the only individual who can undergo my own death.

This singularity, this individuality conferred upon me by my own death (and the individuality conferred upon other individuals by their own deaths) is what in turn makes me a responsible agent. "Everyone must assume his own death, that is to say the one thing in the world that no one else can *either give or take*: therein resides freedom and responsibility."⁶ Again, Derrida is not as clear here as we might like, but I take it that the essential claim is that my awareness of the necessity of my own death, and my awareness of the possibility of death at any time, makes me sensitive to and responsible for my actions. Because my actions and choices can result in my death (or the death of others), my actions and choices become meaningful and significant. In addition, as death is the end of all possibility for action, this gives my life and actions a degree of urgency. Through a meditation on death I become aware of what is at stake when I act as well as the limits of the possibilities for me to act. This awareness translates itself into a kind of responsibility and freedom, I am concerned about my own death and thus take care or concern about my own life and what happens to it (as well as a concern for the lives of others). In this way, according to Derrida, it is through an awareness of death that I become a free and responsible agent.

It is also for this reason that Derrida asserts, “only a mortal can be responsible.”⁷ This is because only a mortal has anything at stake in his or her choices. Because an immortal has no possibility of death, its actions have no significance to its existence. There is nothing it can do to its life in the way that a mortal, through his choices can bring about his own death. Further, an immortal literally has time to do everything; something denied to a mortal with a finite life span. This last point will become important as we begin to look at the role of death in video games.

V. Death in Video Games [Slide 12]

In providing his analysis of unit operation and simulation fever, Bogost uses the example of the game Tetris. He analyzes the game as follows:

Only a few basic functional unit operations drive *Tetris*: the player can turn a piece, move it, or drop it. The game mechanics add perhaps two more unit operations: a completed line of pieces disappears, and each time the player places a block another one appears immediately after. (UO 101)

This account of the unit operations available in *Tetris* seems to omit one of the most important unit operations in the whole game, namely what happens when the stack of blocks reaches the top of the screen. As anyone who has played Tetris knows, when the blocks reach the top of the screen a new operation occurs bringing the game to an end. This generally involves some sad music and the words “Game Over” plastered across the screen, but shortly thereafter the player is returned to the main starting screen from which she can begin the game all over again. I will call this the “death operation,” and as we shall see, it is one of the most important components of

many video games, but with some interesting features that distinguish it from the way in which death operates in our own lives.

Because so many different video games have so many different success conditions, it is difficult to provide a general description of video game death. In a game like Tetris, the player dies when the pile of blocks reaches the top of the screen. In a game like Pac-Man the player dies when he touches one of the Ghosts. In a game like World of Warcraft the player dies when his health bar is reduced to zero. What is key for my purposes is that in all these games death has the common element of first setting up the conditions under which a meaningful game experience can unfold and second, not being the end of the game, nor the end of the player's character (again, there are certain exceptions to this general point that I will ignore). Instead, death is merely an inconvenience, or a stumbling block on the way to achieving whatever in-game goal the player is working towards (higher levels in Tetris or Pac-Man, fulfilling a quest in WoW).

Again, the key feature that these games have in common is that death is an inconvenience or a frustration of some sort, but not the end of the game or the player or the player character. To make this point more clearly, I want to focus on the way death functions in World of Warcraft. As mentioned before, a player dies when his character takes enough damage to reduce his health meter to zero. At this point the character becomes a corpse unable to do anything other than observe the area around which she has died. There are then a number of options for resurrecting the character back to life. Some characters are capable of self-resurrection and other characters are capable of reviving fallen players. If these

options are not available, the player can release her spirit to a “graveyard” where she has the option of returning back to her body whereupon she can resurrect immediately with no penalty, or resurrect at the graveyard where she suffers a 10-minute penalty that limits her ability to play the game. In all cases, of course, the worst impact of death is that the player is set back in her goals by a few minutes.

This, then, is the general two-fold pattern for video game death. First, virtual death establishes the success conditions and challenges that make the video game experience compelling. However, this aspect is undermined by the second aspect which is that the worst case scenario is that the player has to start over from the beginning, or, in the case of many modern games, restart a level, or continue from a save point. In no case does the death result in the end of the player or the end of the game, or the end of future possibilities for action.

VI. Death and Video Games

Real world death and the death operation share a core feature in common, but also have some significant differences. It is to these issues that I now turn in this section. One important commonality is that real world death and the death operation both play an important role in giving meaning to the actions and activity of the subject in question. As both Heidegger and Derrida argued, death confers a uniqueness and singularity on the individual, thus making her actions meaningful and her subjectivity irreplaceable. Similarly, in video games like *Tetris* or *WoW*, the possibility of death gives urgency to whatever game situation one finds oneself in. The sense of thrill and excitement that arises as the block in *Tetris* fall faster and faster and get closer and closer to the top only arises because of the possibility of

the game ending when the player dies. In a game like *WoW*, the thrill of a successful raid is directly connected to the possibility of failure resulting from player death. If there is no possibility of the player dying (say because her character is so strong that the in-game obstacles present no challenge) the game loses interest. The challenge and interest of the game is directly related to the likelihood of player death within that game. This connection is not absolute, as a game that is too difficult will lose interest almost as quickly as a game that is too simple, but this aside, there is a strong analogy between real death and the death operation in terms of how the possibility of death confers meaning and significance to the experience at hand.

This analogy, of course, breaks down when we note the obvious fact that a real human is only capable of dying once, but a video game character can die an infinite number of times with only minor penalties. What might the significance of this important difference be? I will argue that the most significant impact of this difference is that because video game death is only temporary and an inconvenience, the video game experience is ultimately devoid of true meaning and significance. In the context of a game, actions that occur will seem significant and important, but once the individual stops playing, these experiences fade into the background and what seemed like an exciting life or death experience quickly fades from memory because the video game experience is only a virtual reality, not truly real. As a side note, I would be very interested in seeing the results of studies that compare memory retention of real world experiences with memory retention of

virtual experiences. I would be intrigued to see if there are differences and what those differences might be.

This lack of lasting significance is directly tied to the impermanence of virtual death. A life or death experience in the material world sticks with the individual because there was something genuinely at stake in that experience. A similar experience in a virtual context does not have lasting significance because there is ultimately nothing at stake (barring the loss of some time). When I reflect on my own life experience, I can remember situations where I experienced a significant emotional response and I can generally recall what triggered those experiences. By contrast, when I reflect on my time as a player of WoW, I can also recall moments of significant emotional excitement, but I can't recall what virtual experience triggered it. This is merely anecdotal, but I think it is accurate as a general description of the differences between a virtual and a material experience.

Extending this idea, a further consequence of the difference between virtual and real death is that spending too much time in a virtual world might lead an individual to conceptualize her own real mortality as akin to the virtual reality. That is, individuals might begin to be influenced by the ideology behind video game death, and begin to think of their own mortality in the terms of video game mortality. This could lead to a variety of negative consequences as the individual begins to flee from an authentic being-towards-death. This is a more speculative consequence in that isolating a direct causal relationship between playing games and exhibiting certain attitudes towards one's mortality is difficult to determine, but it does seem that there is an element of plausibility in this claim. For example, some

feminist critiques of film argue that Hollywood narrative films reinforce a patriarchal ideology.⁸ **[Slide 13]** These authors don't argue that Hollywood films create the patriarchy, but they do plausibly argue that such films reinforce and support a patriarchal ideology. Similarly, I do not want argue that video games cause people to adopt a particular ideology surrounding death, but they do reinforce a certain cavalier attitude towards mortality, and this attitude towards mortality could have real world consequences.

What might some of these real-world consequences be? This next part is the most speculative part of the paper, and some of these ideas may not pan out, but some potential consequences might be as follows: first, this may relate to the emerging phenomenon of an extended adolescence for males in the 21st Century. **[Slide 14]** As many psychologists and sociologists have noted, US males are tending to delay the assumption of adult responsibilities until well into their 30's. The basic idea here is that men are increasingly delaying the pursuit of traditional signs of adulthood such as getting married, starting a profession etc., and instead delaying the pursuit of these responsibilities and spending their days hanging out with friends and playing video games and collecting toys. The films of Judd Apatow such as *The 40-Year Old Virgin* or *Knocked Up* are good pop culture depictions of this phenomena. It is important to stress that men are not wholly rejecting these responsibilities, but merely delaying the assumption of them until later than has been the historical norm. Now the causes of this are certainly complex and multi-faceted, including economic factors and the state of the modern American work force, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to suggest that one other causal factor might

be this new attitude towards death that one finds in video games and the consequent loss of responsibility that comes with it. As individuals conceive of their deaths as temporary or merely an inconvenience, the sense of responsibility that Derrida argues flows from an authentic conception of death can be lost, leading to a lack of responsibility among these individuals. It is also worth noting that this phenomenon of extended adolescence began to emerge in the 80's and coincides quite nicely with the rise in popularity of video games. Let me be clear here that I am not claiming a direct causal relation between the two. These facts may simply be correlated, the causal arrow may run in the opposite direction, or it could just be a coincidence, but it is an intriguing correlation that seems worthy of further study.

A second consequence of this changed attitude towards mortality is that it could help us explain and understand the ways in which personal interactions over the Internet or within large MMO's are often extremely rude and insensitive. **[Slide 16]** As anyone who has spent much time reading blog comments or listening to the public chat channels in a highly populated region of an MMO will know that the level of discourse can be quite cruel and vicious. Homophobic slurs are commonplace and people are generally intolerant of any position (political, aesthetic, etc.) that conflicts with their own. Some even go so far as to be deliberately provocative. People seem quite comfortable saying things in a virtual space that they would never say even in a private face to face conversation. One must always be on the lookout for trolls. Though the anonymity provided by the Internet is obviously a component of this, I don't believe it is a sufficient cause, and it instead suggests a genuinely different attitude towards communication and interpersonal interactions.

I would argue that this is due, at least in part, to the ways in which this alternative conception of virtual mortality impacts our sense of meaning and significance. If my argument is correct, then these virtual spaces are increasingly seen as environments in which what happens ultimately doesn't matter. This lack of meaning or responsibility may help account for the courser, ruder forms that Internet discourse takes.

Similarly, this seems directly related to the phenomenon of "griefing" **[Slide 17]** in which individuals or groups of individuals deliberate harass and ridicule others, seemingly for the sole purpose of taking pleasure in the suffering of others. This phenomenon is fairly common in the context of MMO's, and is central to the plot of the *South Park* episode from which the opening clip came, but also apparently plagues sites like Wikipedia and Facebook. This does seem to be a phenomenon similar to the communication issue describe above, and also arises out of the lack of responsibility connected to the ideology of death found in virtual environments.

One final consequence might be related to contemporary attitudes in the US to war and the apparent indifference of US citizens towards the suffering our military presence causes throughout the world. It is quite telling that much of the narrative surrounding war in the US is very much in line with a video game. **[Slide 18]** News reports about war are presented with fancy CGI graphics and stirring music, and it can't be coincidence that realistic war simulations are among the most popular video games in the US. This is a particularly disturbing consequence because, as war is increasingly presented to the public as a video game, and in many

cases such as drone warfare essentially waged like a video game [Slide 19], the participants will begin to see the activity as lacking significance, fostering a cavalier attitude towards war and the real-life victims of it.

I would like to finish out this section by raising some additional speculative questions arising out the issues raised in this essay. In many cases, these are questions I myself do not have compelling answers to, and ones that I have only begun to think about, but I find them nevertheless to be compelling questions that arise out this discussion.

First, it seems plausible that this analysis reveals something about the role video games play in our culture and society. Might it be that the popularity of video games is related to this lack of consequences for in-game actions? That is, perhaps the very appeal of video games and the enormous growth in popularity is a direct result of the fact that games can serve for us as a flight from an authentic being-towards-death. They can serve as a tool to help us lead inauthentic lives and imagine that our lives and the actions that make up our lives ultimately have no long-term lasting consequences. This question is particularly compelling as video games begin to dominate the media landscape. Just as movies supplanted novels in the 20th Century, perhaps we can understand the replacement of movies with video games as related to the effectiveness of video games on allowing us to flee from being-towards-death.

A second related point concerns another theory about the popularity of video games, again related to their promotion of ideologies. As I noted earlier, the ideologies or unit operations that structure games are essentially the ontology or

“laws of physics” of the game universe. One succeeds in the game by learning and understanding these rules and then exploiting that understanding to advance in the game. Unlike the real world, in which the rules can be difficult (if not ultimately impossible) to grasp or understand, the rules of a video game, even an extremely complex one, are far simpler and easier for an individual to understand. This simplicity, as compared to the complexity of the material world, may be another source of the popularity and appeal of video games.

VII. Conclusion

So, if my analysis is correct, what is to be done? I don't think the solution lies in an abandonment or rejection of video games. This is neither practical—video games are here to stay—nor is it necessary. Instead, I think that video games can provide a solution to the very problems that they generate. Video games themselves can provide us an avenue for critically examination and interrogation. When approached properly with the right sort of critical attitude, looking at the issues raised in this paper can be a spur to reflecting on our own mortality and the role it plays in our subjectivity, but this requires a level of reflection and analysis that one tends not to find among video game players. Furthermore, understanding how video games deal with death and mortality can lead video game designers to rethink and explore different possibilities and different ideologies related to mortality, thus encouraging more philosophical analysis of these extremely important topics. Like any mature art form, video games can serve as a vehicle to raise questions and explore issues about video games and how they affect us. One can begin to see

elements of this in some independently produced games, but I would hope to see these ideas explored on a much broader scale in the future.

That about wraps it up, I am sorry I don't have a stronger finale, but thanks to everyone who came out, and I am very interested in hearing people's comments and questions.

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¹ *2011 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Entertainment Software Association, 2011. PDF.

² *Interactive Digital Software Ass'n v. St. Louis County*, 329 F.3d 954 (8th Cir. 2003).

³ Amici Curiae brief on behalf of 33 Media Scholars.

⁴ To recall, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush encouraged all Americans to counter the terrorist ideology by continuing to shop and act as good consumers. In this way, by not abandoning our American way of life, we would not allow the terrorist to win. "I ask [for] your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity; they did not touch its source." This quotation comes from the President's address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001. A full text can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ For example, Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism* 6th edition. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004: 837-848.