

## Getting 1UP on Death: Failure and Consequences in Narrative Video Games

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Presented at PCA/ACA San Francisco

March 21, 2008

### INTRO

#### A. *SLIDE – TITLE SCREEN*

My name's Jason Tocci, and I'm a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. I study intersections between digital media and visual culture, and I'm especially interested in how people play video games.

- B. This presentation – “Getting 1up on Death” – discusses death in games, but not in the way that most researchers and critics are concerned with that topic.

I think it'll be easier to explain what I mean if I start with a specific example.

- C. So, picture this: You've just struck the killing blow against an evil cult leader who seemed to be possessed by a demon. You go to pick up a dangerous item from the remains, when a woman you thought was your ally holds a gun to your head and claims it for her own employers. She flies away on a chopper, and tosses you the keys to a jet ski so you at least have a chance to get yourself to safety before explosives go off that will destroy the entire island.

#### D. *SLIDE – Resident Evil 4 pic*

You run for the jet ski, urging the President's daughter (whom you've rescued) to follow quickly, knowing you only have three minutes to get away before the island is blown sky high. You take off on the vehicle, with the President's daughter on back, and pieces of rock starting to fall around you as the first charges begin to go off, but you still just barely have time! And then suddenly, you veer left and slam into a wall.

You're dead. Would you like to continue? Choose yes or no.

- E. If you do opt to continue, then – Oh my gosh! You've only got three minutes to get off this island before it all blows!

Except ... not really. Actually, this might take awhile. Better do it some more and hope you get it right eventually.

- F. This was my experience, anyway, playing *Resident Evil 4* for the first time. So much of it really feels like a horror action movie, and it got great reviews for this – but, as you might have guessed, some parts of it work more like a game than like a story.

Probably the part that irritated reviewers the most were the narrative cut scenes where

you had to push a button really quickly to react to something – and if you fail, you die instantly and have to replay the scene again.

#### G. ***SLIDE – OUTLINE***

Videogames must be the only narrative medium in which the death of the protagonist isn't just devoid of drama, but entirely routine.

- H. I'm not so concerned with death per se, though, as I am with how the rules of games sometimes get in the way of their stories. I believe this is changing, though, and I think it's a change many gamers would appreciate.

The way death is handled in games happens to be a source of frequent complaint among many gamers, and so provides a handy set of examples to draw from.

- I. In this presentation, I'm going to describe:

- a. ... how researchers and theorists have discussed whether games can even work as stories
- b. ... how players do like games that tell stories, and that the old convention of protagonist death kind of gets in the way of this
- c. ... how modern videogames have tried to get around this problem
- d. ... and how videogames *can* handle protagonist death in a meaningful way, demonstrating that the rules and fiction of a game can work together even with difficult subject matter

- J. My claims about what some gamers actually want and what conventions work well are based on conversations with players and developers, as well as online writing by players and critics.

### THEORY

#### A. ***SLIDE – THEORIZING GAMES***

As I said before, when I say this presentation is about death in games, I'm really just taking that as a particularly prominent and useful example of a bigger debate:

*Should we study, describe, and design videogames as “narratives” or as “games”?*

- B. This has been something of a contentious issue in game studies.

- a. Some have argued that games tell stories, and must be considered as we consider narrative *fiction*.
  - b. Others have argued that games are all about learning and mastering *rules*, and that these trump fiction.
- C. In his book *Half Real*, Jesper Juul helps to bridge this theoretical gap by suggesting that

*“Rules and fiction interact, compete, and complement one another.”*

When rules and fiction compete with (and don't really complement) one another, the *fiction* of a game seems *incoherent* (to use Jesper's term).

- D. Scholars suggesting that rules beat fiction have generally had precedent on their side. Traditionally, players tend to do a lot of things that make little or no sense in the game's fictional world.

E. ***SLIDE – Star Wars force electrocute***

Playing a *Star Wars* game, for example, you might do really evil things – not necessarily because you like the evil character, but often because electrocuting people with the Force makes the game easier to beat than healing yourself with the Force.

If that's the case, your reason for acting the way you do in the game has more to do with the rules than the fiction.

- F. Even more damning for those who would like to claim that games are narratives, sometimes the rules of a game force us to leave narrative explanations for what happens entirely.

When Mega Man jumps into a pit of spikes, he gets disintegrated. Why does he get to try twice more? We can imagine answers, but none are provided in the story itself. The real answer, we know, has to do with the rules: The game would be too hard otherwise.

- G. Jesper suggests that many games only seem coherent when you consider BOTH the rules and the fiction of a game. He writes,

*“Focusing exclusively on coherent worlds and well formed storytelling is a misunderstanding of what games are about.”*

- H. For this reason, Jesper says that some sorts of stories couldn't even be made in games. We'll never see an *Anna Karenina* game because

*“The goal has to be one that the player would conceivably want to attain”*

... and why would players play a game where the “goal” is to commit suicide at the end?

- I. The tricky thing here, though, is that this understanding of “what games are about” is based on what games have *traditionally* been like – not what they could be like, and not where some of them seem to be going.

## PLAYERS WANT NARRATIVE

### A. *SLIDE – PRIORITIZING NARRATIVE*

Dying and replaying a scene may not seem like a big deal for a game like Mega Man, but for a game that is actively trying to seem more like an interactive story – with cut scenes, character development, and plots even marginally more complex than shooting anything that moves – the “die-and-retry” approach can get pretty grating.

- B. If games were only about rules, you’d expect players to use Force lighting over Force heal every time. For some narrative-heavy games, however, some players demand more attention to the story.

### C. *SLIDE – Splinter Cell DA pic*

One player, for example, wrote a document full of hints for a game called *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*. In this game, you play a government agent who is undercover in a terrorist organization.

In some scenarios, you gain an advantage by following the terrorists’ orders – they trust you more, and you get access to more weapons. As the player who wrote this file suggests, though, it “feels more heroic and cinematic” to shoot the bad guy instead of the good guy – to blow your cover and make things harder on yourself.

- D. The problem comes when games get *too* hard – so hard that you keep dying, and have to keep doing the same scene over and over again.

I hear this all the time from players, but some of the more eloquent comments on this point come from game designers and critics, such as when the lead developer of *God of War* wrote in frustration on his weblog:

“I DON'T \*\*\*\*ING WANT TO BE CHALLENGED BY MY \*\*\*\*ING ENTERTAINMENT. HERE'S 60 \*\*\*\*ING BUCKS. ... ENTERTAIN ME GOD DAMMIT!!!”

In other words, some people actually *are* in it for the story, not just to “master” a game.

### E. *SLIDE – Zelda carriage scene*

The ultimate example of players resenting rules for getting in the way of story is the “escort mission,” a game or level where you’re responsible not just for your own survival, but for the survival of characters controlled by the computer.

Some game designers have written about this as an excellent way of encouraging identification with the characters in the game. In practice, though, players often end up just getting mad at the extra character, who ends up feeling less like a friend and more like a liability.

- F. This scene from *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* was described as some gamers as the most frustrating in the game. You have to escort a carriage through a bunch of monsters who are generally pretty good at setting it on fire.

## MECHANICS OF DEATH

### A. *SLIDE – MECHANICS OF DEATH & FAILURE*

But that’s just the way games are, right? Well, no, not necessarily. That’s just the way games *have been*. And things are changing gradually as videogame designers realize that they don’t need to be tethered to past conventions.

- B. The way “death” works in videogames is kind of a vestigial holdover from the medium’s history in arcades, where something had to be built into the design to limit how much play you could get out of one quarter.

Now that people can play games at home as much as they want, it doesn’t make as much sense to just offer three lives – and maybe the idea of “die-and-retry” has outlived its usefulness in some kinds of games, as well.

### C. *SLIDE – Super Mario Galaxy*

Some games have dealt with this shift with only marginal changes. You can still die and have to retry a level in *Super Mario Galaxy*, on the Wii, but you literally have extra lives just sitting around the house. Actually running out of lives is nearly impossible.

Many other, more narrative-heavy games – like *Resident Evil 4*, mentioned earlier – may keep track of how many times you die, but don’t really hold it against you. And some games actually reward you if you can get through a whole level without dying.

### D. *SLIDE – Gears of War*

Some games have tried to make it harder to die. *Gears of War*, for example, allows you to revive your buddy if you’re playing cooperatively.

Also, rather than keeping track of “hit points” and requiring the character to collect “med

kits” to stay alive, your character automatically regenerates – you can only get killed if you take a lot of damage in a short period.

These seem to be getting increasingly common conventions, appearing in other games, like *Kane & Lynch*.

E. ***SLIDE – Prince of Persia***

Some games, however, give more of a nod to the idea that you’re playing a story, and try to explain death in a way that preserves coherence with the fiction.

In *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, you can turn back time a few moments to avoid your own death. And, if you should run out of “time sand,” the narrator says, “Wait, that didn’t happen.”

(You’re playing through his story of the event, and for some reason he just tells it wrong a lot when he gets to the parts with a lot of spikes.)

- F. Another example of this approach is *BioShock*, where you get brought back to life instantly when killed in the nearest “Vita Chamber.” Why this works on you and not everyone else you kill ends up being a major plot point.

G. ***SLIDE – Grim Fandango***

Most interesting to me, though, are games which offer different ways for challenging the player and defining “failure” *besides* death.

These don’t all necessarily fix the “die-and-retry” frustration, but they offer another way of thinking about how games can remain challenging without every situation being a life-and-death situation – at least for the protagonist, anyway.

- H. Some games, based on the model of “adventure games,” avoid protagonist death entirely. In games like *Grim Fandango*, you can’t die (in this case, you’re already dead). Such games present challenges in the form of puzzles and character interactions rather than life-threatening situations.
- I. Other games (while still perhaps allowing for death in other scenarios) suggest a model based on decision-making and consequences, rather than death and incoherence.

*Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, for example, has no “life bar,” but meters keeping track of how much the NSA and the terrorists each trust you. This can force you into situations with real narrative consequences to avoid losing (such as when I had to allow a ship of innocent coast guard officials to die in order to avoid the game ending entirely).

Games like *Mass Effect* allow the player to choose options from a menu to interact with characters. Depending on what you choose, other rewards and options may be available

or denied to you later in the game.

## DEATH WITH PURPOSE

### A. *SLIDE – DEATH WITH NARRATIVE PURPOSE*

The ironic thing about all this is not that games can't handle death – quite to the contrary, this medium can encourage intense identification with an avatar, and I suspect it would be even more intense if a sense of fictional coherence weren't broken so frequently.

- B. So far, I've focused on how rules and fiction are in conflict with the common convention of allowing protagonists to die repeatedly.

But now I want to consider how some games have actually approached death in other ways, illustrating how game rules and game fiction can complement one another, as Jesper Juul suggested might be done.

### C. *SLIDE – King Kong*

One way to do this is through a “forced failure” scenario. Some have suggested that a game where you can't prevent your own death is a “bad” game, but as others have pointed out, maybe that's the best way to connote tragedy in a medium so focused on “winning.”

- D. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that's precisely how the the videogame adaptation of the recent *King Kong* remake ended (unless you unlock the “good” ending).

- E. An even more well-known and critically-praised example is *Shadow of the Colossus*, which – (close your ears if you don't want to know how it ends) – ultimately reveals the futility of the protagonist's archetypical “save the princess” quest when you must play through being possessed by the demon you bargained with to bring back your girlfriend, and then struggle against a defeat you can't avoid.

### F. *SLIDE – Shadow of the Colossus*

*Shadow of the Colossus* also provides a handy example of another way that games can mix rules and fiction to create emotional resonance through failure and loss.

Your protagonist has a horse – but unlike in “escort missions,” where an ally controlled by the computer is a liability, this horse is always there for you, never gets in the way, and never dies, making you restart. So – (close your ears again) – when your horse does eventually plummet from a crumbling bridge, and bucks you off to save your life, the sense of loss can be profound.

One gamer I spoke to said that he didn't care much when the “sleeping beauty” you've

been trying to free the whole game awakens in the final cut scene, but he nearly cried when the horse limped back out onto the stage.

- G. Probably the most famous example of this principle at work, though, comes from *Final Fantasy VII*, a videogame role-playing game. The death of Aeris, one of the members of the party of adventurers you control and an implied love interest for the protagonist, is still talked about by some gamers as the moment when the medium proved to them that it could evoke emotion.
- H. Much as in serialized comics or television, where the protagonist can't stay dead for long, an effective way to communicate loss or failure in videogames is to kill off the supporting cast – so long as they've been helpful, and not a hindrance.

This taps into both the “rules” and “fiction” of a game – keeping things coherent as fiction, and making sure you don't have negative feelings about a character based on their role in the rules.

- I. These aren't necessarily the *only* ways to blend the rules and fiction in videogames, but I'm offering here to counter what remains a common notion among some game scholars and designers – that games work the way they do because that's what they have to be like.

## CONCLUSION

- A. The way videogames have used character death has been more concerned with rules than with fiction, but this *isn't* an inherent bias of the medium.
- B. It's *hard* to make games with a focus on narrative – how many studios can afford the kind of voice acting that went into the hundreds or thousands of different plot branches in *Mass Effect*? And I don't think that this is what every game should be like. I do think though, that there's a market for narrative games that feel like stories, that make us think.
- C. We may not be able to make the *Anna Karenina* videogame right now, but I *don't* think that means that a game with such challenging themes – and such seemingly undesirable “goals” – could never be made.
- D. In summary, death is just the beginning of this story. I hope this offers some ways of thinking about how to make games more compelling as fiction.