Death, Culture & Leisure

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Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead

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Contents

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Andreas Theodorou is an independent scholar who began his studies on Nineteenth Century Gothic and the study of the mind, but later shifted focus to Gothic video games and the onus on interaction and immersion in contemporary narrative modes. He is the author and artist behind *Beyond the Darkness* (2018–2019), and a guest editor for the journal, *Alluvium*.

Solveiga Zibaite is a Social Anthropologist. Her PhD project, based out of the Centre for End of Life Studies at the University of Glasgow, is an ethnography of the Death Café movement in the United Kingdom. Her research interests include existential anthropology, online memorial cultures and sociological aesthetics.

Foreword

Since 2016, at the University of York, there has been a growing cluster of academics who are passionate, committed and focussed on matters of human mortality. Researching and talking about death, dying and the dead link us together and led to the formation of the Death & Culture Network (DaCNet), an interdisciplinary group of scholars and death industry professionals who wish to engage with death from a cultural perspective. As part of the DaCNet steering group, Matt Coward-Gibbs brings his wealth of experience to administrating the network ranging from his spates as an artistic director, youth theatre manager, research assistant and research centre manager. Add to this, Matt's teaching contribution at two universities and his stellar doctoral research, he is truly one of a kind and an emerging star into the research dominion of academia. Matt's vision and editorial work on this book only confirm this status and his value to the death studies community and beyond.

As part of DaCNet's various activities, its first annual symposium *Playing Dead* was held in May 2018. Memorably, the day had a bumpy start with technology problems leading to a last minute room change and a late start. Despite this inauspicious beginning and with participants being plied with coffee and biscuits, *Playing Dead* was a convivial event. Papers and discussion were insightful and thought provoking through an exploration of the intersections between death, culture and play. Play, in the context of this symposium, was used to broadly speak of leisure and recreational activities and, as such, not only encapsulated the playing of (non-)digital games, but also the consumption of cinema, literature and theatre. The symposium embraced the largely underappreciated phenomenon of play across disciplines by placing it within the context of death and culture.

This symposium was the catalyst for this book and draws together research passions that are united by play and focussed on death. As such it engages with the intricacies of playing digital games that inflict death in fantasy realms or are about memorialising and expressing grief. It examines scary folkloric-horror characters such as the Slender Man alongside death in the Pokémon universe. These death representations are held up in a complimentary, but contrasting, consideration of books that introduce children to death, the role of the dead and undead in television, the controversial relationship between music and suicide and even burial and exhumation in contemporary theatre. The significance of this work lies in the unity that Matt has managed to create through the interwoven thread of play – how we play, who we play and how we are playful in the context of death and the dead.

In this volume, Matt has succeeded in breaking new ground by drawing together interdisciplinary academics at different stages of their careers as well as integrating contributions from independent scholars. He has worked to encourage authors to convey their ideas across disciplines and to showcase their work and arguments to a high standard. The result is a collection of work that represents a range of voices that when brought together unite to provide a textured and vibrant contribution to death scholarship. Together these chapters bring strength and coherence to Matt's research interest and overarching research argument that play has intrinsic value in understanding the world around us in terms of community, labour, production and self-identity. Understanding and engaging with death through play is just one illustration of this and one that opens a wide realm to contemplate and investigate human mortality.

Ruth Penfold-Mounce,
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November 2019

Acknowledgments

They say it takes a village to raise a child; the same is true for an edited volume.

In the first instance, I would like to thank Ruth Penfold-Mounce for her ongoing support, encouragement, critical insights and unending thanatological enthusiasm. There are countless others who deserve recognition for their helpful advice and discussions along the way in the generation of this project. As such, I would also like to acknowledge David Beer, Rachael Burns, Alice Collett and Jack Denham as well as the wider publication team at Emerald for their care and assistance in the construction of this volume.

This volume would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the twelve individuals who contributed to this collection. They have my sincerest thanks not only for their contribution, but for trusting this rookie editor with their work.

Finally, I would like to thank Emma and Ruby: there is no one else I'd rather play this game of life with.

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Introduction: Death ≠ Failure

Matt Coward-Gibbs

> Death is not the opposite of life but an innate part of it.
> By living our lives, we nurture death
>
> Haruki Murakami (2003, 360)

In 2010, Julijonas Urbonas, artist and former amusement park employee, hypothesised a roller coaster that was designed to end its riders' lives. His *Euthanasia Coaster*, which begins with a two-minute ascent (for the purposes of personal reflection) and offers its passengers a chance to disembark before the drop, falls five hundred metres before entering into series seven 'teardrop shaped' concentric loops, maintaining the necessary G-force in order to euthanise its riders by starving both brain and body of oxygen (Urbonas, 2012). Following the demise of those aboard, the coaster makes a sharp turn, allowing for the disposal of the corpses, before returning to intake another set of passengers. Even in hypothetical discourse and playful engagement, separation from the corpse, and therefore the realities of death, is paramount.

Young and Light (2016, 61), in their recent article, note that spaces for the deceased in 'modern Western societies have been typified by a sequestration of death and the dead body'. This sentiment is not new, and still prevails throughout thanatological debate. Ariès, in *Western Attitudes Towards Death* remarked that when humanity entered the latter half of the nineteenth century 'death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden' (Ariès, 1974, 85). This thesis of death's privatisation is interlinked with both the professionalisation and medicalisation of death through which a 'fundamental shift in the corporeal boundaries, symbolic and actual, associated with dead and the living' (Mellor & Shilling, 1993, 414) occurred. Physical spaces for the dead, such as cemeteries became a 'conscious attempt to relocate the corpse' (Rugg, 2000, 262) away from society emboldened by the growing fears of the corpse as a form of pollutant. These spaces of disposal became a 'boundary structure' (Rugg, 2000, 262) around the corpse. Changes, however, did not just occur with reference to the disposal but the location in which death took place. Medicalisation of the dying process

Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead, 1–7

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moved it from the home to a clinical setting, both shrouding and making occultic the realities of death.

When death is obfuscated, autonomy of both the dying parties and witnesses is removed; therefore, societal understandings of death found primarily through either metaphor or adjacency. This means that, in most instances, we consume and understand death by proxy – at a position at least once removed from its realities. Jessica Fishman (2017, 51) provides a suitable example, in which she describes the way in which photojournalists are encouraged to 'hurry up and wait' when documenting death. For, in order to offer suitable coverage of death, images of mourners and memorials are infinitely more value than pictures of the dead themselves. Yet, Walter (2019, 389) goes as far as to contend that there is a 'new integration of the dead into everyday life', which he frames as the pervasive dead. However, this pervasive nature of the dead, Walter continues, can still exist with the thesis of death denial (Walter, 2019, 401; Becker, 1973; Ariès, 1974).

In the video game space, the notion of the *magic circle* is a somewhat contentious term (Huizinga, 1949; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003; Linser et al., 2008; Consalvo, 2009; Crawford, 2015, to name but a few).[1] However, in utilising the magic circle as a theme or tool, it becomes useful in allowing us to consider, more fully, the way in which death permeates leisure. In their article published in the *American Journal of Play,* Ken McAllister and Judd Ruggill (2018, 86) write that:

> […] play and death are more than merely interchangeable in some ontological jiggery-pokery. They are, in fact, interrelated and interlocutory, dialogic in their ability to illuminate and inflect one [an]other.

It should therefore come as little surprise that there is a distinctive braiding between death, play and leisure.

Leisure itself can also be argued to lay in occultic realms. It is, after all, considered as the antithesis to work. In Western societies, in particular, individuals tend to be preoccupied on notions of 'production' and 'success' which are measured through various metrics, such as promotions at work or the amount of economic capital an individual has at their disposal (Bourdieu, 2004, 1977). Becker (1973, 11) contends, for example, that 'the fear of death must be present behind all normal social functioning'. He continues, suggesting that 'everything that man [*sic*.] does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny or overcome his grotesque fate' (Becker, 1973, 27). If death sits at the root of human experience, even if that is but the management of terror (Solomon et al., 2015), then leisure is inevitably interwoven with death. Terror management theory, in essence, sits alongside Michaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) notion of optimal experience, or flow in which he contends that within each activity we undertake, we are part of a flow channel, carefully tracing a trajectory that is complex enough to avoid boredom, but not

[1]Both Jonathan Stubbs and I pick up on this issue in more detail in our respective chapters in this volume.

so challenging that it creates anxiety. Flow, Csikszentmihalyi argues, can be found in any state of life, including work, but prevails in both leisure and pleasurable situations.

However, leisure is deeply rooted with work. As Stebbins (2009, 3) remarks, across the academy, it is common for leisure to be viewed as 'little more than the purchase of a good or service'. In many instances throughout contemporary life, not just in recreation, we pay to consume. Life is expensive and so is death. There are many points at which the interface between death and capitalism is prevalent, especially in both formal processes of disposal as well as in popular media. The death of Maude Flanders in the popular US cartoon *The Simpsons*, for example, was primarily due to a pay dispute between voice talent Maggie Roswell and the Fox Broadcasting Company, when the latter refused to reimburse Roswell for her travel expenses (Blistein, 2013; Brownfield, 2000). Yet, in this instance, we also see a quasi-reanimation, with Roswell returning in order to voice Maude's ghost in later series following a settlement of the pay dispute.

This volume is primarily the product of the first *Death & Culture Network* annual symposium. The event that was held at the University of York in May 2018, brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines, backgrounds and career stages to consider the nexuses between death, culture and leisure. *Death, Culture and Leisure: Playing Dead* works within the realms of the once-removed from death. However, it does not accept that death should be approached through metaphor and adjacency as standard. It focusses on the way in which a variety of recreational, playful or pleasurable pursuits aim to grapple with the complex issues of death, dying and disposal. This volume aims to accept grey areas and work with contradictions in order to present a series of innovative approaches to contemporary thanatological debate. Divided into four sections this volume approaches: understandings of death in recreational landscapes; encounters with the gothic in playful environments; spaces for play with monsters and the realities of combining leisure and death.

Accompanying each chapter in this volume is a series of related materials for further consideration. These 'interactions and sensoria' offer the opportunity for further engagement whether that be through additional academic consideration, or further media texts to consider. Although this volume operates across four parts, it is somewhat difficult to separate them, meaning that the lines between different enquiries are often blurred. This is not meant to be a binary and, as such, readers are encouraged to dip in and out, skim or, if you please, read it entirely in reverse.

Playing with Understandings

The first section of this volume considers the way in which leisure and recreational activities allow us to play with understandings. To challenge ideas, critique and construct new rubrics. In the first chapter of this text – 'Nonhuman Games' – Paolo Ruffino questions and complicates the playing of games both based on and during the dawn of a new epoch, documenting and analysing the value of gaming media in the context of mass-extinction. As well as considering games which have

engaged with post-Anthropocentric encounters, including *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), he moves to unpick those games which exist without the need for human intercession. In using this contemplation of 'idle' games, he maps a framework for non-human gaming, questioning the paradoxical notion of games that are both made, and yet for, no one. Stepping from Ruffino's consideration, Ashley Darrow's 'Peaceful in Death', shifts the tone somewhat in order to illustrate what is lost in conceptualising death in playful environments when our frame is locked firmly on meditative encounters which directly consider death. In his exploration of both explicit and implicit engagements with death within the infamous Japanese roleplaying game franchise, Pokémon. Darrow questions the way in which we consider Pokémon as a discourse around death, arguing that we should apply the same framing to it as we do to other cultural or media texts.

In 'Staying Dead', Benjamin Poore considers the way in which both burial and exhumation (by both the buried themselves and others) can be aligned with notions of nationhood and belonging. In his rich consideration of place and the way in which the playing-dead body is engaged with in live theatre, Poore invokes notions of folk horror in order to explore what a combination of theatre and nationhood can present in uncertain political times. The final chapter in this part – 'Death, Playfulness and Picture Books' presented by Maggie Jackson subsequently moves from performance to pictures in her discussion of the presentation of death in books for children. Jackson devotes time in this chapter to considering the directness of death's portrayal across a sample of children's picture books, drawing on the work of her PhD thesis. It is in their directness, Jackson argues, the children's picture book that deals with death does not have to sacrifice either artistic or literate merit, and can, at the same time, offer a profound route for both discourse and understanding.

Gaming Encounters in Gothic Environments

The second part of this volume presents a trio of encounters with death that are framed and centred through their Gothic nature. Jonathan D. Stubbs' 'Living and Dying in the City of the Damned' begins this section by considering mechanics of perma-death and Gothic intertextualities within Rogue Factor's (2015) tactical roleplaying game *Mordheim: City of the Damned*. By offering an intensive close reading based on the framework of Bizzocchi and Tenenbaum (2012; Bizzocchi, 2007), Stubbs considers the way in which a game's landscape can provide a fruitful location for the consideration of digital life lost. He considers the way in which perma-death in the context of *Mordheim* acts as a space for rumination on both insignificance and impermanence. The theme of space is also present within 'Prepare to Die', Andreas Theodorou's discussion of the *Dark Souls* trilogy (FromSoftware, 2011, 2014, 2016, and 2018 (remastered)). In this chapter, Theodorou contends that the *Dark Souls* trilogy has complicated the rubric of survival horror, calling for game texts to be read along range of experiential factors. Through the way in which the series demands that players themselves hunt for narrative congruency, Theodorou suggests that death, within the game, can be seen as a point of liberation and a realm to mark a players development.

As a way of rounding out a trio of gothic framed engagement 'He Died a Lot' from Ewan Kirkland offers an discussion of death in Giant Sparrow's (2017) acclaimed walking simulator *What Remains of Edith Finch*. In this consideration of uninhabited space, which notably chimes with the work of Ruffino and Stubbs, Kirkland figures death as a preoccupation for both the Gothic as well as video games, considering the morbidity of virtual space. By questioning the symbology of death within *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and the way in which the player is rendered as witness to each family member's demise, Kirkland draws out the way in which death is played with within this suitably Gothic virtual world.

Frolics with Monsters

The third section of this volume turns from the Gothic to consider the monstrous. In the first chapter of this part, Bethan Michael-Fox's chapter 'Dead Chatty' focusses on the implications of giving the undead voice. By constructing a typology, Michael-Fox unpicks the interfaces of undead dialogue in a range of contemporary media texts; ruminating on the pleasures and perils of undead articulation for both the living and the (un)dead. She considers the place of giving the undead voice in contemporary society, situating it in the wider cultural zeitgeist of the denial or possible non-denial of death, and the greater need to give voice to discourse about death, dying and disposal.

Vivian Asimos, in her chapter 'The Slender Man', asks if monstrous creation can be playful. Building on her work in contemporary myth and mythmaking, Asimos traces the way in which a monstrous legend began, quite innocently and playfully, within an online forum. In framing the generation of the Slender Man mythos alongside anthropological considerations of play, she figures the way in which society, the monstrous and the dead interact.

For the final chapter of this section, Chloé Germaine Buckley returns to considerations of the undead, in particular the zombie, in her chapter 'Gameful Interactions'. Through considering the ludic zombie, in relation primarily to augmented reality media sources and literature, Germain Buckley considers the way in which gaming's meritocratic norms co-exist with death. By considering the reader as a player, a complicated notion between goal-orientated play and death is discussed.

Performing Playful Realities

In this final section, the boundary is blurred somewhat between realms. Opening this section, Solveiga Zibaite's 'The Jovial Aesthetics of the Death-Positivity Movement' considers the role of humour within activism. By working with Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, Zibaite encounters the way in which members of the Death Positivity Movement, particularly *The Order of Good Death*, known fondly as *deathlings* engage with humour as part of their social activism. In dissecting the movement's online practices, particularly focussing on its selling of apparel and the presence of its founder, Caitlin Dougherty, Zibaite considers the inherent 'style' of death positivity.

Following from this encounter, in 'Some Games You Just Can't Win' I present a case of a game based on the real-life experiences of a family coping with the death of a child. In a consideration of *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), I focus on digital gaming spaces purpose-built for memorialisation, and the way in which crowdfunding has allowed *That Dragon, Cancer* to become a co-opted memorial.

The final chapter of this volume – 'Suicide, Angst, and Popular Music' – is presented by Christopher Partridge. Beginning with the understanding that mortality and music have always been interconnected, Partridge considers the way in which music offers not only a space for the musician to contemplate mortality, but also an opportunity for their listenership to do the same. In focussing on suicide, and the work of Durkheim, Partridge contemplates the relationship between suicide, mortality, self-harm and popular music.

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