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**“War...war never changes”: Exploring explicit and implicit encounters with death in a post-apocalyptic gameworld.**

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## **“War...war never changes”: Exploring explicit and implicit encounters with death in a post-apocalyptic gameworld.**

### Abstract

This paper explores how players of Fallout 4 discuss death in response to their interactions with the game and each other. Using Atkinson and Rodger's concept of the 'murderbox', a distinction is forwarded that details player engagement in relation to explicit and implicit encounters with representations of death. Two data sources are explored using discourse analysis: the first is a player-constructed narrative charting an individual's experiences of trying to stay alive having set their own limits on survival; the second is a series of exchanges relating to the discovery of skeletons fixed in the gameworld environment. Drawing on Jenkin's work on narrative architecture, it is argued that environmental storytelling facilitates extra-narrative dialogue between players framed by reflections on the context-specific nature of mortality including the death of the avatar, emotional responses to dying at different locations in the gameworld, an interrogation of the validity of the end-of-the-world scenario and broader social death as presented in the game. In closing, the paper will argue – with regards to notions of convergence and representation - for a more nuanced consideration of mortality in videogames through both explicit and implicit encounters with death and dying.

Keywords: death; videogames; murderbox; post-apocalypse; narrative architecture; discourse

*Last week I found a sole skeleton sat in a chair, a pistol nearby, bullets placed carefully on a table. Chems and beer were strewn about the place. I imagined the skeleton plucking up the courage to end it all, no doubt as an army of Ghouls tore at the door.*

*The other night I stumbled upon two skeletons huddled together at a broken bus stop. I imagined them as husband and wife, embracing each other for the last time as the burning bright light engulfed them (Yin-Poole, 2015)*

Yin-Poole's epigraphs neatly encapsulate the sort of narratives that gamers develop in relation to depictions of death in the gameworld of *Fallout 4* (Pagliarulo, 2015), a post-apocalyptic action role playing game set in a collapsed version of Boston in the year 2277. The world as we know it has been destroyed by nuclear weapons, and your avatar – a bungalow-dwelling father or mother who survives the blast by entering the Vault 111 fallout shelter – is tasked with finding the whereabouts of Shaun, the son you witness being kidnapped from your cryostasis pod in the game's prologue. You emerge in to a world where the trees are little but greying trunks devoid of leaves, a spectrum of characters from mutated former-humans to gigantic Praying Mantis-like Deathclaws are keen on killing you and, as Yin-Poole suggests, the gameworld is dotted with skeletal reminders of the world that existed pre-catastrophe; in short, death is ever present.

Using these observations about skeletons alongside a player-created travelogue, both featured in online games magazines, this paper will explore narrative discourses of death in *Fallout 4* and consider how these extra-narratives – stories that are developed by players externally to the gameworld - can be understood in relation to *explicit* and *implicit* encounters with death, reflecting what (Schulzke, 2014) calls the power of 'critical dystopias' in helping frame the present. In doing so, the intention is to underscore how depictions of dying and the dead enable us to engage in speculation (by proxy) on our own mortality, but also how representations of death are spatial, manufactured through environmental design and manifest in multiple narrative dynamics (the programmed story line, the role of the avatar, the agency of the player). Essentially this paper unpacks the interplay between the gameworld and the complex narratives that players construct and share, and considers what these interrelationships might mean in terms of discussions about death. The paper will draw on the work of Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) and Jenkins (2005) - looking in particular at ideas around killing and

murder in games and narrative architecture, environmental design and fan-generated content respectively - to situate two examples of extra-narratives: the first is a series of articles on the online games site RockPaperShotgun in which a player tells a story about his experiences of playing the game under self-imposed restrictions (Meer, 2015a) and the second is the comments thread on Yin-Poole's (2015) original article on skeletons, featured on the Eurogamer website.

One issue to briefly address is why videogames might be a useful way of understanding how we think about death and dying. Approaches to situating and discussing videogames as a form of cultural critique have developed considerably in recent years (Nieborg & Hermes, 2008). As Grey (2009, pp.1) contends, games can 'be read critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products of consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*'; this thinking might involve the formal qualities of the game itself in relation to interactions between programmers and players (Cremin, 2012), methodological issues around capturing and detailing what constitutes 'play' (Giddings, 2009) or the role of memory in creating players identities and associated gameworld narratives (Mukherjee, 2011). Pichlmair (2009), in detailing the ways in which the *Fallout 3* gameworld was assembled, highlights the validity of the franchise in connecting speculative narratives of a post-apocalyptic world with socio-historical discussions of the development of nuclear weapons and our attitudes towards them, which ties in with both Abraham's (2015) discussions of the 'slow apocalypse' and Heffernan's (2015) work on the death-drive in post-apocalyptic fiction, which she attributes to concerns around our relationship with ethics, technology and our own traumatized culture; it is with a similar regard that this article will outline how different types of death in *Fallout 4* facilitate fan-generated narratives that reify player's concerns about representations of death and dying.

In terms of the gameplay dynamic, that is the way in which players engage with the gameworld, *Fallout 4* is marketed as an action role-playing game (Bethesda Games, 2015) where you adopt the role of the Sole Survivor, an avatar whose back story forms the central narrative arc of the game. The 'action' of the game predominantly involves completing missions by following instructions set by various non-player characters (henceforth NPCs) and navigating your way around the game map of Boston to specific locations; in this sense, *Fallout 4* corresponds to what Jenkins terms a 'spatial story' (2005, pp.674) which 'have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives'. This particular spatial story is set in an open-world, which is a space

where from the very beginning the player is free to roam in any direction. This presents particular problems in terms of design as programmers want to ensure that players engage with the narrative arc of the story. The mission structure of the game addresses this in two ways, firstly by presenting death as a crucial binary gameplay dynamic – to progress is to kill, to fail is to be killed - and secondly by displaying a broader ‘social death’ through the design of the environment, whereby Boston is a destroyed city where most of inhabitants are dead. The former corresponds most closely to what Aktinson and Rodgers (2016) call the ‘murderbox’, and the latter conforms - in part at least - to Jenkin’s assertion that ‘within an open-ended and exploratory narrative structure like a game, essential narrative information must be redundantly presented across a range of spaces and artifacts, since one can not assume the player will necessarily locate or recognize the significance of any given element’ (Jenkins, 2005, pp.681). However, fan-generated dialogues demonstrated a more nuanced engagement with the gameworld which suggests that death is more complicated than the initial binary outlined above. The ways in which representations of death in the game are built upon by these player-based responses are what this paper is interested in fleshing out in more detail. Ultimately, it will be argued that representations of death in the gameworld are about more than the spectacular act of killing or being killed: unpacking and examining the notions of *explicit* and *implicit* death will demonstrate the importance of these distinctions, particularly how ludic engagement can facilitate social interaction on the subject of mortality beyond the confines of the gameworld.

#### ***Fallout 4 as ‘murderbox’: explicit and implicit encounters with death***

King and Krzywinska (2006, pp.162) suggest that the ubiquity of violence in videogames is potentially the result of the intensity that violence engenders in the player, especially in relation to preserving the life of the avatar: in essence, it could be argued, you are playing to avoid dying, and dying in a violent way for the most part. The content of the missions that make up the central narrative arc of *Fallout 4* corresponds to this, requiring the avatar to visit a location, collect an artifact and kill any hostile NPCs in the area (failing to do so routinely results in the death of the avatar); as such, death is a central part of gameplay. With this in mind, *Fallout 4* can be read as a ‘murderbox’, where ‘norms, affectations and interpretive dispositions [are] shaped by what have become conventions of violence, torture and murder within this “media milieu” of

playful, *ludic* engagement’ (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016, pp.1302). Videogames, they argue, are cultural zones of exception that allow players to exist in, and interact with, spaces where normal social rules can be either abandoned or modified through hyper-masculine and often militaristic value systems. In terms of gameplay within *Fallout 4*, there are similarities between Atkinson and Rodgers’ typification and the sorts of interactivity that take place in the gameworld: to progress in the game, whether following the main quest or attempting to improve your character by increasing your ‘experience points’, killing is a prerequisite.

However, where this paper seeks to move away from this model is in the distinction and development of what we shall term *explicit* and *implicit* encounters with death. In the ‘ludic thanatodrome, killing - an extreme form of conduct in reality - becomes normalized through engaging in different types of play’ (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016, pp.1303); setting aside the potentially detrimental effects of this type of engagement, this describes one form of engagement, or an *explicit* encounter with death. The player – through the prism of their avatar - is required to kill somebody or something, or else be killed themselves. Death is *ludic*, an intrinsic element of the gameplay mechanic. Aside from the aforementioned narrative arc, this can also be seen in the targeting system for using weaponry – known as V.A.T.S. – which allows the player to isolate particular parts of the body which can then be shot at and off, the result of the latter being a viscerally-detailed slow-motion animation; an exploded head, a severed arm spinning wildly through the air. This type of explicit engagement with death is juxtaposed by *implicit* encounters with death, and the distinction is worth exploring in detail as it impacts the social engagement of players in the two case studies discussed later in this paper.

Explicit encounters with death, as discussed, are a prerequisite of progress through the game, but running alongside this are encounters with death as part of the wider gameworld environment. Here we are not thinking about death instigated by the player-avatar - or exacted on the player-avatar by NPCs - but rather death is manifest as an extant feature of the spatial architecture of the game, part of the process of ‘world-building’ (see Freyermuth, 2015; Jenkins, 2005; Walther, 2003) which makes the setting of post-apocalyptic Boston a semi-believable location for engagement. The gameworld features elements of the real world, including notable landmarks in modern-day Boston, depicted in a way that depicts the death of the current social order as a result of nuclear war; the environments is fictional, but based on everyday experiences of the city.

There are a number of features that show us how death is embodied through environmental design. Firstly, there are the *object features* of the environment, which include infrastructural elements like broken bridges and buildings - structurally unsound, crumbling spaces – as well as their contents, perhaps best described by Philip K. Dick (1968) as ‘kipple’, the amalgamated entropic detritus left behind by society. In addition, we have the aforementioned fauna (feral dogs, giant crabs called Mirelurks, oversized mosquitos called Bloodbugs) and flora and a wide variety of unfixable machines and outdated military equipment from a war that the United States appears to have lost: these objects are based on current technology, but depicted as decayed in the gameworld. Secondly, there are the *human features* of implicit death. These include inscriptions on *object features*, so graffiti on the walls of tower blocks, notes left on desks or sound files recorded on ‘holotapes’ – the latter can be understood as analogous to Edison’s wax cylinder phonograph recordings of the voices of the dead (Edison, 1888) – but also direct encounters the player has with NPCs who are dead, such as the skeletons Yin-Poole (2015) outlined earlier; both object and human features can be understood as virtual environmental features that facilitate players reflections on death and dying.

Explicit encounters and implicit encounters with death will be explored through two case studies: both case studies involve responses by players to initial narratives offered by a games journalist. The first case study (Meer, 2015) involves a journalist/player constructing a travelogue discourse narrative for their avatar, casting him not as the Sole Survivor but as ‘Michael Radiatin’ - a parody of Michael Palin’s BBC series *Full Circle* (Palin, 2010) - whereby the avatar circumnavigates the edge of the gameworld (rather than the Pacific Rim, as in the series). The second case study (Yin-Poole, 2015) involves player’s responses to an article about the situating of skeletons across the gameworld. Using these differing discourses, the intention is to detail how discussions between players, based on antecedent representations of death, are framed not simply by Atkinson and Rodgers’ (2016) initial concept of the ‘murderbox’, but rather a more expansive and complex engagement with explicit and implicit encounters with death and dying.

Methodologically speaking, the data collected in both cases involves an article by a videogames journalist followed by a comments thread. The use of comments threads can be understood as a form of non-participant, non-reactive data collection (Lee, 2000), wherein the discussion is non-continual – the most recent posts are November 2015 – and the researcher has not interfered with the responses in any way. There is some



debate around whether or not this approach may be considered a form of ‘lurking’ (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009); however, the collection of this data was unobtrusive, the data is freely shared in the public domain, and the users of the site can only be identified via their username, which is also in the public domain (Janetzko, 2008). The comments will be reproduced as per the thread on the website and analysed through a form of critical discourse analysis previous outlined: this analysis of micronarratives has precedent in other research including Sloan (2014) on virtual objects of nostalgia in the *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* and *Gone Home*, and Gidding’s (2009) microethnography of two players learning to play *Lego Star Wars*; as such, this micro-engagement is not without precedent.

Analysis of the data collected will involve what Ruiz Ruiz (2009) describes as analysis of *spontaneous* discourse, discourses produced during everyday interactions between participants, rather than an *inductive* discourse framed by the researcher. The theoretical perspective that informs this analysis is that discourse is a social construction produced by participants – in this case, players of *Fallout 4* – and the meanings of these discourses are built around specific ways of understanding and interpreting aspects of the social world in a culturally-contingent sense (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The analysis adopts a critical discourse perspective, in that the data represent one of many socially-derived discourse practices that intersect with others, and are co-constructed intertextually (Fairclough 2003); for example, the discourses outlined and explored below are the product of engagement with the discourses of gameplay in a ludic sense, the designed narrative discourse of the games’ programmers and broader cultural discourses (films, books and television for instance) that speculate about the nature of apocalypse.

It is also worth noting that some game studies literature has questioned the value of these sorts of narrative approaches to understanding games, at times offering a simplified binary where games were either viewed as ‘actions’ (see, for instance, Galloway, 2006) or as ‘narratives’ (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Jenkins, 2005) but as Simons (2007) suggests, this distinction is an unnecessarily reductive interpretation of an increasingly complicated and interdependent medium so, while noting that such arguments have taken place, a broader discussion of the politics of game design is perhaps best left for a different paper.

### **Case study one: Explicit death through *Around the World with Michael Radiatin*' (Meer, 2015a)**

The first case study comprises eleven entries on the PC gaming website *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, written towards the end of 2015 following the release of *Fallout 4*. The overarching title of these entries is 'A perma-death Fallout 4 diary' (Meer, 2015a), which initially situates us in relation to an explicit encounter with death, one which transcends the game's narrative arc in favour of an extra-narrative discourse offered by a games journalist/player. Meer, moving beyond the gameplay architecture, sets his own narrative frame, and imposes particular criteria on his experience. In the first place this involves a predefined route around the fringes of the gameworld with no possessions or weaponry to protect the avatar and, secondly, 'a further condition: if Michael dies, he dies. That's it. Game, and diary series, over. So avoiding combat is surely a necessity, as a naked man will struggle to punch even the most lowly bandit to death' (Meer, 2015a).

This opening gambit offers a number of insights in to explicit encounters with death. In framing the game experience in relation to self-defined restrictions, Meer is telling what Jenkins (2005, pp.676) calls a 'spatial story' where the game provides 'resources for emergent narratives' that expand the pre-defined narratives of the game's designers. Building on this, the imposition of 'perma-death' establishes the relationship between explicit death in the gameworld and reality: normally, if the avatar dies in the game, they are 'resurrected' at the last point at which the game was saved but by preventing the avatar Michael from continuing, Meer is reflecting how death functions in reality: death is the end, a finality that replicates everyday experience through the designed spaces of the game.

The comment thread responses below Meer's first entry in the travelogue demonstrate gamer's shared understanding of the prevalence of explicit death in the gameworld. One commenter, 'Wisq' – all usernames are spelt as in the original – asks for:

Predictions on how long this will last? I would not be surprised (but would be saddened) if this only lasted a single episode before he gets eaten (Meer, 2015a).

The commenter 'kderby42' predicts 'death by wild dogs in the first 20 minutes' (Meer, 2015a). These early exchanges highlight that explicit death in the gameworld is

an expectation, echoing Atkinson and Rodgers' analysis on the role of gameworlds in facilitating engagement with spaces featuring 'increasingly complex societies that are often stripped of ethical constraints or humane values' (2016, pp.1301). Death is something that is a regular experience in *Fallout 4* and even in redefining the narrative (as Meer does) does not assuage the programmed dynamics of a game where different NPC enemies are designed to attack the avatar on sight. However, when 'Wisq' suggests that they would be saddened by the death of the avatar in this context, they imply a want for expanded narrative engagement beyond the programmed story: they would not be surprising if death happens – as per the gameplay dynamics – but being able to disrupt the programming and tell your own spatial stories is considered a worth-while endeavour by players: this shows how representations of death can move past the initial experience of the murderbox.

Later entries in the diary show the important intersections between explicit and implicit encounters with death. Michael the avatar enters a space in the gameworld where 'dismembered bodies [are] scattered messily across the ground...there's even a leg in a bin. A LEG IN A BIN' (Meer, 2015b). This is swiftly followed by the avatar being attacked by mutated molerats. In this case, the implicit encounter with death – the environmental design feature of 'scattered bodies' – foreshadows the explicit encounter where the avatar is attacked. Meer's capitalized response indicates a level of surprise or shock and, taken in conjunction with the gameplay experience, should be considered a type of 'micronarrative' (Jenkins, 2005, pp.679). Jenkins suggests that micronarratives can be thought of in the same way as Eisenstein's notion of 'attractions', or 'any element within a work which produces a profound emotional impact...[which] could be communicated across and through these discrete elements' (ibid). Meer's extra-narrative, while based on the arrangement of object and human features decided by the game's designers, demonstrates the emotional response of the player and this is communally shared via the article's episodic publication. Meer's response is not directed at the explicit encounter, but rather the implicit, which shows how crucial unpacking these different representations of death may be to fully understanding their contingency in broader social discussions of mortality

At the end of this entry, Meer puts his next move to a vote - decided by 7792 votes - thereby further cementing the collectivized experience of telling stories that move beyond those that are 'designed in'. The vote is a shared way of choosing whether or not, having reached a body of radioactive water, the avatar Michael should walk out in to it.

To do so would most likely result in death, but would maintain the initial premise of following the edge of the map; to not do so would break the same self-imposed rule by skirting the coastline instead. The latter wins, with 4082 votes to 3710 votes against. The response to the decision to continue along the coast – where the avatar is repeatedly attacked and nearly dies – develops further the extra-narrative experiences of explicit death, but framed by implicit, object features of the gameworld, namely the radioactive water: this tension between the two potential types of death are neatly encapsulated in other player's responses. The commenter 'thekelvingreen' states that 'I voted for water. I just want you to know that. Michael's death is not on my hands. It was *them*' (Meer, 2015c). Here we see that 'thekelvingreen' is invested in the life of the avatar through the prism of Meer's narrative. This is important because it moves away from the acceptance of death via the designed gameplay mechanic towards emotional decision making and the active avoidance of death as framed by ongoing experiences of explicit and implicit death, with 'max.power' suggesting that 'I get the feeling that this is the proper way to play this game'.

The latter entries of the diary continue to juxtapose these encounters with death in a way that shows explicit death as a violent interjection in the more contemplative narrative that Meer offers around implicit death. For example, on finding a former old people's home near a fictionalized version of Salem, Meer (2015d) offers the following reflection:

Oh, an old people's home. A form of looking death right in the face, I suppose. It's a grim scene in here, old people doing old people things like playing draughts and tending flowers at the moment the bombs dropped, their browning skeletons now frozen into those quiet, lonely moments forever.

This rather poetic description demonstrates another facet of Jenkin's 'spatial stories', whereby game designers 'may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene' (2005, pp.676), but the story that is told is Meer's, exercising interpretive skills based on the human and object features of implicit death. Meer outlines the horror of the apocalyptic event by expanding on the lives of those in the home and, in doing so, shows his own emotional response and concerns about ageing and being left behind. Crucially, this rumination is punctuated by another explicit encounter with death, as a death squad enters the building and attacks the avatar (Meer, 2015d). Here, the explicit encounter overrides the

implicit, troubling the player-defined narrative by impelling the player to kill or be killed; by the penultimate entry in the diary (Meer, 2015e), the emotional toll of these disruptions is made clear by the author, stating that ‘I’m not quite at the “praying for the sweet release of death” stage yet, but this moment-to-moment survival, living only off what I scavenge, almost never encountering a friendly face or somewhere to hang my hat for a short while is an arduous existence.’ Although Michael the avatar is a fictional character, the extra-narrative - in conjunction with the gameplay mechanics that force the player to engage with hostile NPCs – demonstrates a continuing emotional investment on the part of the author, supported by the commenters below the line of the article.

Michael dies in the 11<sup>th</sup> entry (Meer, 2015f), killed by a hand-held nuclear weapon wielded by a giant irradiated man. Meer describes this as ‘not a noble death. Not a fair death’, which again implies a level of emotional connection that is undone by the explicit encounter. This is partially echoed by the reaction of commenters, with a number of messages stating ‘RIP Michael Radiatin’ and similar, or the user ‘Skooba’s more tongue-in-cheek ‘He died as he lived. Radiatin’’. Alongside this some commenters question the validity of Meer’s discourse in choosing to challenge the Supermutant. ‘rommel102’ says ‘Boo. Guess you got bored. Michael would have used the ocean to swim around...and certainly wouldn’t have engaged’, with ‘Solidstate89’ commenting that Michael’s ‘death was meaningless’, followed by ‘john\_silence’ stating ‘It always is. It always is’ (Meer, 2015f). These two responses are telling because they again move beyond the gameworld to proffer real-world assessments on the actions of the author: explicit death in the gameworld enables players to consider mortality by applying their own frames of reference to a fictionalized experience.

What does this suggest more broadly about encounters with death in the gameworld? Firstly, it shows that explicit death has the power to disrupt the spatial stories told by players by introducing violence to particular gameworld environments; for example, the gameplay dynamic intercuts Meer’s consideration of the dead in the old people’s home – the object and human features of implicit death - by forcing him into the kill/be killed binary. Secondly, explicit death is unavoidable, a part of what King and Krzywinska call ‘spectacular destruction’ (2006, pp.116). This may include the death of the player through the proxy of the avatar, or the death of NPCs at the hand of the avatar, but the outcome is the same: a ‘gratuitous spectacle of violence available to the player’ (ibid). Thirdly, explicit and implicit encounters facilitate the development of extra-narratives that are collectively engaged with beyond the confines of the gameworld. Meer develops a long and detailed narrative based on an initial premise, and this is responded to by numerous other players. Similarly, these

encounters are the basis on which players consider their own experiences and ideas in relation to death - met with emotional responses – and an active avoidance of dying. This can be seen in commenters encouraging the avatar (and narrative) onwards through voting and suggested courses of action. Death in the gameworld is not simply about the generation of spectacle – the witnessing of the cause and effect of death at the hand of the player (King and Krzywinska 2006, pp.117) – but also about the agency of players in contributing to narratives based around the varying degrees of realism as presented in the gameworld and imported by the experiences of players themselves (ibid).

### **Case study two: Implicit death through skeleton tableaux (Yin-Poole, 2015)**

To continue to explore differing encounters with death, the comments thread discourses that follow Yin-Poole's article will be utilised as a data source on implicit encounters more specifically. The article is a discussion of the situating of skeletons within the gameworld (an example of spatial narrative architecture). It begins with the author's thoughts on what the skeletons might have been doing in the world before the apocalypse and is followed by extensive comments. There are two narrative forms of discourse that can be identified in these exchanges (all Yin-Poole, 2015): *responsive narrative discourses*; and *questioning narrative discourses*.

#### **Response narrative discourses**

Responsive narratives involve players responding to Yin-Poole's article through the mutual sharing of their own interpretive experiences of the gameworld, in relation to what will henceforth be known as 'skeleton tableaux' (the situated skeletons in-built in the gameworld environment). All of these responses, as in the quote opening this paper, demonstrate familiarity with the milieu of the game, and the context in which the skeletons may have existed as people pre-apocalypse: from the outset this establishes broad object and human features of the game as a proxy through which death can be explored. For example, 'El\_MUERkO' recounts the following experience:

*There's one pair I found lying in bed together in a crummy self-made fallout shelter, that was sad, what was sadder still was the two small graves at the back of the shelter, one with a baseball and catchers*

*glove on it, the other with a small teddy on it.*

*Hit. Right. In. The. Feels.*



Here we see a discourse developed in response to what the player sees as a horrific scene. ‘El\_MUERkO’ offers an imaginative interpretation of the arrangement of object features in the gameworld; a fallout shelter, a baseball and glove, a teddy. Through the telling of this story we see also emotional engagement, which suggests that these sorts of implicit encounters enable players to engage with ideas around death through their own experiences: for ‘El\_MUERkO’ the implied death of two people is sad, but the death of their children, and the fact that the player implies that the children were buried by their parents, is sadder still. All of this is framed by the interconnection of object and human features. ‘Dadrester’, while not commenting directly on ‘El\_MUERkO’’s post, discovered the same scene:

*I found a private bomb shelter in some scrapyard. The husband and wife had killed themselves after having buried their two young sons, presumably after starvation... The fridge was very empty. A couple of lines of text and a few well placed bones, toys and a shovel told a stronger story than any cutscene so far.*

The discourse here is similar to ‘El\_MUERkO’’s though the details differ - the inclusion of the shovel underscores the act of burial more clearly - and ‘Dadrester’ augments this with additional object features such the empty fridge from which they have deduced that the family died of starvation. This discourse demonstrates a type of emergent narrative (Jenkins, 2005, pp.677) where we see the tacit interplay between the stories told by the programmers and those constructed by the player through implicit encounters, whereby the skeletons, the fridge and the mounds of earth become a story about the challenges of survival and eventual, prolonged death.

‘KrazyFace’ reiterates the sense of sadness in the previous examples in their engagement with the skeleton tableaux by actively identifying the emergent narrative and the role of the skeleton tableaux in facilitating these ruminations about the end of the world:

*But a lot of them are just sad, the skeleton in the bath that just didn't see the mushroom cloud coming, the couple that had a suicide pact laying (sic) in bed together with stacks of meds on the side-table, the lone guy in a hole in the ground, still holding his gun but not his head. So many silent stories.*

The response that connects these discourses – as in the reflections in Meer's piece (2015a) - is an emotional one, framed by a silent question: what would you do in the same situation? 'Drendari's response narrative operates in a similar sense, building on the earlier shared stories of implicit encounters with death:

*One of the best skeletons was one I found alone in a shack, an audiolog nearby had her explain that she just ran away and was hiding in her safe place but, unlike earlier, now just made her feel scared... That was so sad and touching.*

This scene is designed to be upsetting such is the arrangement of objects throughout this environment and 'Drendari' again explains their story through an engagement with these objects – in this case finding the skeleton, and listening to the audiolog which develops the narrative by allowing the voice of the dead girl to be heard – and through their own emotional response. Implicit in this experience are implicit reflection that position the player as the dead girl: the idea of being afraid, of thinking you are safe when you are not, of dying alone. These object and human features have an emotional impact which becomes social when shared via the comments thread. Finally, 'Kinky-mong' furthers this perspective by focusing on an everyday tableau rather than the spectacular scenes outlined above:

*I found a pair of them sitting hugging on a couch watching a TV, which was quite poignant to think of how they spent the final seconds before the bombs dropped.*

In this case, the emotional response comes from a reflection on how the arrangements of object and human features mirrors the sorts of things we do on an everyday basis (embracing a loved one, watching the television) and the ways in which



these might be recast by death to become a reflection of the things we once did. The skeletons in this tableau are, ‘Kinky-mong’ implies, regular people, sharing their lives as ‘the bombs dropped’: they could be any one of us, and this is why their deaths are considered to be ‘quite poignant’. Again, these responses – as with Michael Radiatin’ – demonstrate the complexity of representations of death and how death is interpreted which moves beyond the confines of the murderbox.

### **Questioning narrative discourses**

Sharing stories also facilitates a second form of narrative discourse, one that is underscored by interpretive differences. In relation to the comments thread, interpretive difference manifests in several ways. Firstly, players challenge the narratives suggested by others. For example, the opening anecdote Yin-Poole offers is accompanied by an image, one that ‘Gurrah’ argues misses key elements of the real story:

*Did you know the partyking in picture one faces a cage with skeletons and corpses that tell a different story than him just being someone who knows how to party. He was watching fellow humans tear each other apart in that cage and making quite a lot of money besides. So I stole the fuckers pre-war cash, stomped his teddy and dragged his skeleton out of its reverie and dumped it down the tracks.*

In this response, we see ‘Gurrah’ challenging the initial interpretation of Yin-Poole as a player, namely his understanding of the *human features* of implicit death. ‘Gurrah’'s narrative is one that foregrounds sadism on the part of the dead voyeur, accompanied by suggesting that any player's interpretation of the scene would be lacking were the confluence of human and object features in the environmental misunderstood. ‘Gurrah’'s response is also emotive, including brief profanity and a description of their own actions which shows disapproval at what the skeleton represents and the retribution they feel is necessary, as well as disestablishing both the human features (‘...dragged his skeleton out of its reverie...’) and object features (‘...stomped his teddy’...) of the implicit encounter.

Secondly questioning narrative discourses shows how players respond to the implicit narratives programmed in to the game: the ‘embedded’ narrative, to the player’s ‘emergent’ narrative (Jenkins, 2005, pp.677). For instance, the two skeletons arranged at the bus stop are ‘embracing for the final time’ in Yin-Poole’s narrative rather than just waiting for a bus that never arrives; here, the intention of the programmer is unknown – are they embracing or not embracing? – so the scene is ambiguous, and the player-based discourses that stem from the human features of the scene are similarly ambiguous and open to interpretation. Broader interpretive concerns about death, which connect the microcosm of skeleton tableaux to the macrocosm of the gameworld, are built on this uncertainty; for example, ‘Straga27’ has the following to say about environmental storytelling in *Fallout 4*:

*There is a lot of environmental storytelling with the scattered skeletons that I like to see but I feel that the skeletons should be removed from settlements when people move into them. We see that the environment can change when you are not around on the world map so why not this?*

The skeleton tableaux offered by programmers are, in this account, incongruous with the other NPCs who occupy the gameworld: implicit death is inconsistent. ‘Straga27’ points out that a number of aspects of the environment change over time – in particular, the weather cycles between sunshine, rain and radioactive storms as well as the day/night cycle – but the skeletons remain in place. A particular example of this can be found at the Drumlin Diner, occupied by a trader named Trudy, her addict son and, in one of the booths, a skeleton: as an example of a supposedly functioning business operated by survivors of the apocalypse, why would they choose to keep the skeleton in place? Would it not be a gruesome reminder of the past? Would it not scare away business?

‘Mwulf’ builds on this, and suggests that the skeletons actually speak to the relationship between death implicit in environmental design and wider speculation about how society might operate in this scenario:

*If Fallout 4 took place 2 years after the war, or even 20 years, yeah, all the skeletons would be fine. And the ruins. And the scrap. And the*

*lack of any kind of manufacturing. And the lack of controlled currency. And lack of government. And 90% of the NPCs whining about the war every other line. But its [sic] been 200 years, so NONE of that belongs.*

‘Mwulf’'s interjection again highlights how narrative exchanges question the established narratives of programmers. For ‘Mwulf’, the idea that a society that exists 200 years after the apocalypse has not attempted to rebuild and restructure relations but has instead arranged itself around destroyed objects and the dead is simply an example of unrealistic spatial narrative architecture. Moreover, in offering this critique, ‘Mwulf’ is demonstrating an additional performative aspect to sharing his understanding; they are showing what they know about society, and tacitly implying it is more realistic than what the programmers have forwarded.

Skeletons are indicative of wider issues around the depiction of society post-collapse, particularly in relation to the logic of the embedded narratives presented by programmers and this prevents some players from suspending their disbelief as they play. Questioning narrative discourses highlight issues with the viability and believability of the scenarios as presented. For instance, ‘Garibaldi’ situates their concerns over how convincing the gameworld is in relation to earlier iterations of the *Fallout* franchise:

*Bethesda's Fallout games would work far better if they were set five or ten years after the bombs. Fallout 1&2 showed a progression with society rebuilding, and the only old world places were unmolested for a reason (heavy automated defences like Sierra Army Depot, or heavily irradiated like The Glow.) Seeing skeletons still lying round in these dramatic poses just feels a bit odd two HUNDRED years since the bombs.*

For ‘Garibaldi’, the temporal distancing in the gameworld – opening in 2077 before moving to 2277 - is problematic, because the staging of the skeleton tableaux implies a lack of progress. In previous *Fallout* games, society was looking to start over, but in *Fallout 4* things appear to have stagnated. ‘Mwulf’ adds to this, suggesting that players should...

*...just ignore the fat (sic: fact) that people just seem to ignore corpses in the wasteland rather than bury them. It's one of those things you have to ignore. It's a good game, sure. And a good setting--but Bethesda doesn't understand the setting at all. God knows why you think this is an ego thing: these are measurable, objective problems.*

Here 'Mwulf' speculates about design choices in a broad sense (stating that the developer has built an unconvincing gameworld), but also problematizes the sorts of society that emerge after the bombs fall. That NPCs ignore corpses rather than burying them speaks to the collective actions of a future society, but also reinforces ongoing concerns about death, particularly the idea that despite cities being destroyed by nuclear weapons, there is an expectation that society should have a moral imperative to bury the dead. Each of these concerns is predicated on an engagement with the object and human features of implicit encounters with death in the gameworld

The final line, part of an exchange with other users, demonstrates a potential hierarchy based on knowledge. 'Mwulf' feels they are entitled to share their narrative because they consider themselves to be objective and the issues they highlight are about 'measurable, objective problems'. Setting aside the validity of this contention, the response from other users to 'Mwulf's position shows a variety of narrative responses that range from the emotive ('Yourchosenusername' tells 'Mwulf' to 'get over yourself, it's a good game and a cool setting') to those that question the right of other users to speak at all ('ziggy\_player-guitar' says to Mwulf: 'don't mind me asking, but, how do you know?').

'OliverH' continues the discussion of the viability of the skeletons as human features of the environment, offering a number of responses to 'MWulf's complaints. He suggests that

*...the bones indeed wouldn't have decomposed, but the tendons holding them together certainly would have. So what we should see is piles of bones representing a skeleton, but certainly not skeletons with functioning joints.*

In a scientific sense, ‘OliverH’ is arguing that the tableaux are a fabrication, a narrative that does not add to the gameworld but instead destabilizes the suspension of disbelief. ‘Silverflash’ continues this notion of ‘objective’ understanding by discussing the skeletons in relation to the previous *Fallout* game and the nature of the nuclear event itself:

*I actually felt like they were more apropos in Fallout 3, actually. DC felt like it had been completely obliterated by multiple bombs, thus justifying (for me) the "frozen in sudden death" poses. Boston looks like only one bomb hit it, so the sudden death poses are a harder sell in my mind.*

The skeletons in ‘Silverflash’'s discourse do not make sense because of the type of event that has taken place. ‘Silverflash’ uses the tacit knowledge of others on the thread to recall and compare *Fallout 4* with the depiction of Washington DC in *Fallout 3*, as a way of delegitimizing this alternative future. Questioning narrative discourses then enable players to question each other and, by moving towards tacit hierarchies of gameworld/real world knowledge, challenge the programmers’ use of human and object features in relation to implicit encounters with death – through the skeleton tableaux – and the broader spatial narrative architecture in the game.

## **Concluding discussion**

The context and form of *Fallout 4* produces a series of intersecting, programmer-designed narratives that use explicit and implicit engagements with death. Explicit death pertains to ludic experiences of killing and dying with parallels to the notion of the ‘murderbox’ (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016), but these associations are problematized by player-based narratives framed by environmental design (Jenkins, 2005) where death is an implicit feature of the gameworld. Players subsequently construct their own narrative discourses via public discussion on comments threads. These discourses take the form of emotional responses to death as well as questions about the validity of the end-of-the-world as depicted in the game.

These two case studies of extra-narrative engagement underscore the importance of the environment in facilitating player-developed discourses around representations of

death, and the ways in which players understand and ‘make real’ the horrors of death through own story-telling. In the first case study, this is presented as a first-person narrative showing how explicit death intercuts implicit encounters: the avatar is put in a position where engaging with the central gameplay dynamic of killing is problematized by player-defined limitations, thereby attempting to disrupt violent engagement. However, death is still present in an explicit sense through the perpetual threats of violence against the avatar and in a broader sense, reflected in the comments of other players who are worried for the safety of the avatar and mourn his eventual demise.

In the second case study, engagement with death can be seen through the interpretive, and emotional, discourses of player’s story-telling and the questions they ask: where some see ‘hope’ in the tableau of the couple at the bus stop, others see ‘hopelessness’ in the shape of the graves of children. The reactions of players expand upon the explicit encounter with death through discussions of object and human features which facilitate moments of self-reflection around broader notions of dying and mortality: the critical dystopia of *Fallout 4* facilitates the contemplation of death, the dead, and what should or should not continue to be remembered once the bombs fall (Schulzke, 2014).

The analysis of these discourses has built on earlier work that explores the prevalence of violence in videogames (King and Krzywinska, 2006) and, more recently, perspectives which foreground the role of ludic engagement with death through the notion of the ‘murderbox’ (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016): expanding on the latter, this paper suggests that beyond the ludic act of killing or being killed, there is a more nuanced engagement with death, whereby player’s responses to the environment itself contributes towards the architecture of story-telling (Jenkins, 2005).

There are two interesting aspects related to this analysis. The first is that the extra-narratives offered by players – which we might think of it as a type of ‘fan-generated’ content - suggests a relationship with participatory or convergence culture, described as ‘where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways’ (Jenkins, 2006, pp.2). It can be argued, however, that the discourses explored in this paper do not correspond to some of the other research in this field - for example, Comunello and Mulargia (2015, pp.57-80) situate convergence in videogame culture through digital platforms provided by developers, such as the Playstation Network, whereas the discourses around *Fallout 4* develop *subsequent* to

engagement with the game – or the wider framing of convergence as a way of monetizing bottom-up consumer participation (Jenkins, 2006). Instead, the relationship between explicit and implicit encounters with death creates a space for players to consider, in a shared sense, both their own mortality and notions of social death outside of ludic engagement. What we see is a form of meaning-making that unpacks interactive cultural representations of death through a consideration of particular situations in which death is ever-present: this feeds in to the second aspect of this analysis.

In Kennedy's (2002) landmark paper on the role and multiple representations of Lara Croft, she discusses how the protagonist of the Tomb Raider franchise fulfils a variety of different roles depending on player perspective: this includes Lara as a femme fatale; as a departure from 'the typical role of women within popular videogames'; as a proxy through which gender is performed (male players as female avatars). The crucial point in Kennedy's argument is that owing to the multiplicity of intertextual perspectives on who Lara Croft is and what she represents, it is difficult to situate her in a satisfactory, stable narrative. Therefore she can be seen simultaneously as emancipatory – a strong female lead-character – or the object of male fantasy. How this relates to the player's narratives in *Fallout 4* is that, when the initial identification of the role of death (killing or dying) is understood in this sort of detail, in relation to the delineation of explicit and implicit encounters, similar problems of representation are encountered: the narrative architecture of the game is extended beyond the death of the avatar and the skeleton tableaux, representing the interconnection between designed environments, individualized responses of players to death and the social contingency of those discourses when they are shared. These fan-based narratives escape the confines of what has been programmed so as to tell other, more personal stories. In essence, this paper suggests that the typifying of games of this nature as cultural zones of exception needs to be expanded to consider the broader ramifications of this sort of fan-based agency in relation to multifaceted representations of death.

The discourses explored in this paper can be thought of as a form of fan-based participation that shows how the personal interpretive apparatus of players contributes towards a shared social dialogue, which in turn underscores the problems of earlier interpretations of representative death as a binary distinction between 'kill, or be killed'. Going forward, to fully understand the nature of the 'ludic thanatadrome' (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016, pp.1303) increasing complex engagements with, and representations of,

death and dying will need to be considered through the prism of explicit and implicit encounters.



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