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The phenomenon of death in computer games

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Jon Irenicus, the villain of the game *Baldur's Gate II*, has been defeated. Punishment meted out was well-deserved. He must suffer the consequences of his ferocious and sanguinary life. He is cast down to hell. This annihilation appears to be his final defeat. Nevertheless, he wakes up laying on a piece of rock surrounded by the sea of molten lava. "Is this how I'm supposed to end?" – he asks himself terrified, not being fully aware of the gravity of situation. He is about to face a far worse penalty – another death. Unexpectedly Irenicus is being assaulted by demonic beasts. Unable to defend himself he is doomed to fail – he is cast into the molten lava. His demise is crowned with yet another annihilation, even though it seemed that being cast down to hell is a definite end.

This example proves that death in computer games does not necessarily mean the end of everything. Obliteration existent on the computer screen is an indispensable element of video games. It is a fundamental component of all games, both the simplest and the most complex ones. Here we encounter not only various images of death, but also its new dimensions. A great liberty in creating virtual worlds provides unlimited possibilities in presenting and experiencing life processes in different forms. Death may be unexpected and quick, it may deprive of strength or motivate to continue to struggle, often unevenly, it may be a condition for moving to the next level, it may be sorrowful, glorious, quiet or cruel, premature or tragic, etc.

Since the old times entertainment was accompanied by death. Although it would seem that death and amusement are mutually exclusive, numerous examples of their co-existence can be provided. Already in the Ancient Rome gladiatorial games were organised, as the most popular form of entertainment of all classes [1]. In the games, where death played the major role, took part over 10 000 gladiators (107 AD), and the games themselves were organised to celebrate important anniversaries, festivals or openings of new structures [1].

Entertainment of which death was the fundamental element has been vastly popular even in the modern times. Knight's tourneys, being the most favourite source of amusement for the social elite, were considered to be an immensely bloody sport. Fatal injuries were

frequent and dying during tournaments was a common sight. It has been happening so often, that the Church decided to "firmly prohibit those detestable markets or fairs" [1].

Contemporary world, where humanitarianism and subjective approach towards the others are given the most prominence, displaces death from the world of entertainment. But is it really so?

The most appreciated sports are those being the most spectacular and contact. Boxing matches or MMA are unusually brutal and the possibility of being seriously injured (not excluding dying) is very high. Those factors contribute to their ratings and appeal, since the most important values are being endangered – human life and health. When we take account of other sports such as speedway, car races or ski slalom, one may easily notice that even though we do not consider them brutal, fatal accidents occur there uncommonly often. The reason for it is that sportsmen push the boundaries further and further to be quicker and better. They are getting dangerously close to the thin line between courage and desire to compete, and balancing on the verge of death. The more imminent danger the more interesting spectacle – does it differ in any way from the Medieval tourneys?

Examples above undeniably dispel the myth that death was introduced to the world of entertainment by computer games – it has always been there. It became something desired, increasing the attractiveness of the show and making it more engaging.

Death is an indispensable element of our existence. We encounter it throughout the whole life. Modern world, thanks to virtualization of life, is capable of presenting death in a more abstract, but also more substantial way. What once used to be described in books with the use of words is now presented as visualisations on computer screens. It is a result of technological progress. Previously, the written word was the main source of knowledge. Nowadays, in a highly computerised environment, it has no such clout. For modern people, who obtain information in a multisensory manner, virtual reality becomes the most appealing and at the same time the most natural environment for gaining knowledge and absorbing it via different senses.

Virtual world gives the possibility to interfere in the definition of death. It may assume the form of multidimensional and versatile phenomenon, which does not necessarily mean the end of the existence. It differs from what we encounter on daily basis. Definition of death provided by August Weismann states that it is a simple stagnation of life, which cannot be resumed either partially or wholly [2]. In gaming, however, the phenomenon is very frequently reversible (e.g. in RPG, feature games) and when a character dies we can give him

a potion or cast a spell to return him to life. Hence it is better to state that in the virtual reality exists a phenomenon which possesses characteristics and consequences of death, but is not entirely it.

Death constitutes a vital element of computer entertainment. It is typical, common, and one may risk calling it inherent (except from those games aimed at the youngest children) – it appears in most of computer game genres. It may assume various forms, from direct to symbolic one. Most actions taken by players in a conducted game lead to the realisation of a particular goal, and hence eliminating obstacles that stay in their way. Even if the obstacle takes form of other units that need to be annihilated. The reality of games may be compared to a performance where the action , in which player participates, takes place. It does not provide the sense of security but it also does not put in front of powerlessness – it gives possibility of enjoying all the correct moves and regretting all the mistakes [3]. Innocent jumping over mushrooms and throwing the turtles off the platforms in the game *Mario* are nothing more than just elimination of obstacles placed in the path to achieving the goal. Death here is, of course, symbolic in a way different from those in games for adults, where it can assume the form of a more realistic agony or a sophisticated murder.

Dying in the virtual reality is on the one hand filling people with dread and terror. On the other hand, it is a reason for certain reflection. Computer characters usually have "several lives" and thus are capable of multiple deaths. Even if their death seems to be a finality, the resumption of the game resurrects them again. This phenomenon, according to many scholars, is of unreal character, it does not arouse any feelings, thereby it may provoke a dangerous desire to experiment. Death in computer games has lost its rightful place, hence its role as a driving force has significantly decreased [4]. This is the one side of the coin. On the other, the society which we live in constantly tries to remove death from our consciousness - to "move it out of the house". Dying became a phenomenon present in hospitals, nursing homes and hospices. Modern man pushes it away as far as possible, not accepting his impermanence and necessity to pass. Present civilisation emanates the cult of eternal success and in this approach death means failure [4]. In this case, computer is the only place where we might encounter death, and it symbolically returns to our homes whence it was unnaturally removed.

With all certainty the world of computer games, thanks to its epic nature, enables presenting death not only as the definite part of human existence, but also as the multidimensional phenomenon. It may assume various forms, depending on whether it is concerned with the main or the minor character.

Death of the game hero

There are as many varieties of death as there are computer game genres. Jesper Juul provides definition of the computer game stating that it is a rule-based system having variable, quantifiable outcomes, in which the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values [5]. It is of vital importance to draw attention to rules and quantifiable outcome. Rules condition and provide information about the game itself, and thanks to the quantifiable outcome the player can see whether the actions his character undertakes aim to achieve the main objective. The objective is to acquire a positive result, in other words, to end the game according to intended rules. The game may have a negative result when the rules are not properly understood or followed. And this is the moment of death's appearance. Is it, however, true death of the hero? In the computer game death is nothing more than just a result of the incorrect application of the rules and conditions of the game. Failure is the indication that the player either put insufficient effort into the game, or did not comprehend its principles.

Ernest Adams in his book *Fundamentals of Game Design* presented three most popular forms of avatar death [6].

Permanent death

It is the most extreme form of the game. In extremis both the character and the player are helpless. It is an absolute annihilation of the character without the possibility of resurrecting him again. Usually this form of death appears in platform and arcade games, very often deprived of extended plot and subplot. The emphasis in those games is very much on skills and logic, which in quick and measureable way provide a feedback on the correctness of the entertainment. After defeat player must start over from scratch. The game *Mario Bross* is an excellent example, where the moment of encounter with the enemy or jumping out of the boarders of the presented world ends with avatar's death and forces the player to replay the game from the start.

Resurrection with reduced attributes

If every game ended with permanent death it would probably discourage a number of players from spending time in front of the computer. The aim pursued by gamers, achieving which demands a lot of effort, would become unattractive in a situation when the penalty for making mistakes is too severe. Especially, when this would happen in such games as RPG and feature games. Improper conduct of the game by the player in adhering to the rules must be met by negative consequences, but they have to be adequate to the work and effort put in the

game. In contrast to simple and usually quite short in duration games, those with episodic and extended plot require a large amount of work. Death, of course, is still a penalty for not adhering to the rules, but it is not its permanent form. After the failure the avatar dies, but it is resurrected in the same place or in a designated area on the map. The negative consequence, coupled with death, is the loss of certain attributes or skills of the character. In this case death itself is not the worst punishment. It is because death is not final and does not mean the end of the game. It is only a pause or being set back by a few levels. A much worse thing here is being deprived of things gathered with such an exertion (experience, vital traits of the character) rather than being dead, a state which is reversible.

Resurrection with some property missing

Similarly to the resurrection with reduced attributes, death here (player's defeat) is accompanied by repossession of some valuable items belonging to the character. In this case it is the loss of part of the equipment or valuable property that took a lot of effort to gain. And as in the former example, death here is not the supreme penalty because it is reversible. More disturbing is awareness of the loss of property rather than the phenomenon of death itself.

Of course, the examples described above refer primarily to so-called game mechanics related mainly to the course of the game.

Death of the opponent

In computer games the opponent is treated as an obstacle which one must overcome in order to achieve the goal. This impediment must be overcome, in other words one must either use a variety of measures and actions that would prevent direct confrontation, or in this direct confrontation eliminate the obstacle. Overcoming the obstacle is usually met with self-satisfaction. The more demanding killing the enemy is, the more satisfied one may feel after doing so. Death is the means of not only eliminating the opponent from the game, but also of bringing profits. In role-playing games, after defeating our enemy, we may use his equipment.

There are, of course, as many forms of eliminating the opponent as there are of elimination of our own character.

Inferred death

Inferred death occurs when the player does not see the agony of his opponent, but in an inferred manner the enemy is being removed from the game. In *Mario*, when we push the turtle from the platform it falls out of our sight – as if pushed from the magic circle – the fictive area in which the game is played [6]. There is the annihilation of the opponent by eliminating it from the game area, thus his death remains in the inferred sphere.

Transitional death

Death may be of transitional nature when the annihilation of the adversary is temporary. Defeated enemy is killed and the player may usually benefit from his death in a form of points of experience or pieces of equipment. His demise, however, is brief. After either a period of time or a restart of the game opponents once defeated appear again (e.g. *Diablo II*). This pattern is usually used to enable playesr to gain extra points of experience via defeating the same adversary several times.

Permanent death

Finally, death of the opponent may be of permanent nature. The player is assured that his adversary has been defeated and will not return to the game. Just as in the case of the character mention in the introduction – Jon Irenicus – the negative hero from *Baldur's Gate II*, whose passing is certain.

However, in the world of computer games nothing is ever as it seems. Here the important role is that of producers who very frequently interfere with the appearance and plot of the game. Very often is happens drastically – also in the case of death. Example illustrating this is the ending of the game Diablo I. Player sees as his character takes from the defeated demon's body the Soulstone, which ultimately ends his opponents life. No-one expects the main character, that the gamer steered and associated himself with, to become the same monster that he fought with. Instead of destroying the stone – the essence of negative energy – he unites with it and becomes the new Master of Hatred.

Both death of the hero and death of the opponent may assume various forms, depending on the game genre. Frequently, it appears at every turn (e.g. FPS video games) and is expressed only by the number of frags (eliminated opponents). Usually those numbers (concerning both our own deaths and those of the enemies) do not attract much attention. It is, however, different as far as RPG games are concerned, where the player puts a lot of effort into developing not only his own character, but also auxiliary units that accompany him. The duration of playing either one or several characters is, of course, directly proportional to the feeling of loss after their death. Many players experience grief after the loss of their companions or characters important for the game. Rankings are conducted to show which of the various death forms existent in computer games were the most vital [7]. Certain deaths from computer games have gone down in history. Death of Aeris, heroine of *Final Fantasy VII* [8] or passing of Hellscream from *Warcraft III* were connected with loss that entered very deeply into the hearts of millions of players. Sorrow that accompanied them could be

compared with the death of someone close, even though in reality it was concerned only with virtual values.

Even if death is being inflicted by players themselves, it does not leave them indifferent. Recent researches have shown that killing the opponent is not, as it was believed, relaxing [9]. It is connected, however, with even greater stress as eliminating the adversary does not determine our success in the entire game.

The issue takes on a different dimension when we consider online games, so-called MMOG (Massive Multiplayer Online Game), where the action takes place in the virtual reality and behind the avatar are hidden real people [10]. In this situation their relations are even deeper. The online reality notwithstanding, they are aware of the fact that they cooperate with authentic people. Similarly to MMO games such as *World of Warcraft,* they can organise themselves into teams and carry out "raids", special missions that require team work. Striving for the same goal and cooperating within the same team creates a social model of "us" group in which strong bonds are formed. The overriding aim is the good of community, hence everyone gathers around it, protecting each other during dangerous missions. When one of the companions dies the feeling of loss manifests itself as a real sadness. Even if it is temporary, bonds formed within the group make the feeling stronger.

As I have indicated at the outset of this article, considering games one should think about the attempts to present death rather than about the phenomenon itself. Visualisation of death may be most realistically reflected, yet it will never possess the same depth and sobriety of the real experience. Every now and then some significant games appear, treating themes of transience and passing away with all seriousness. Among such titles are *To The Moon* and *The Graveyard*. The main character of *To The Moon* is an old man, whom throughout the whole game player tries to help in fulfilling his life's dream. The final stage is, however, man's demise [11]. In another example, The *Graveyard*, we assume control of an elderly woman visiting cemeteries. It is a sentimental and grave journey through the necropolis [12]. These are examples of two games that in a very realistic manner attempt to present issues of passing and death. Unfortunately, in the virtual reality those phenomena are too often treated thoughtlessly, almost en masse.

"Save" option is an indispensable element of every video game. Saving your game, in case you will be forced to start from the particular moment after a failure (and not from the very beginning) is a vital feature of gaming. This system accompanies computer games market from almost its beginnings. Walking through the game from start to finish is possible

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in simple and short games. The need for saving your game at any given moment or at some special point developed alongside the virtual world. It is mostly connected with length and complexity of the game that cannot be completed at one sitting. "Save" is nothing more than an interference in the character's death, the protection against it. Players are able to load their last "save" and try to face their obstacles again or to find different solutions whenever something goes wrong . Cheating the destiny, which caused the fiasco, is the most important. Every death is reversible, ergo it is actually not death but rather a situation similar to it – having the same features but not the same consequences. Another typical element of, especially, arcade games are "lives". Frequently, one may increase their number by gaining extra points during the game. The more lives, the more possibilities for making mistakes. Mistake, or failure, in this case is the situation in which player loses one "life". If the mistakes are numerous and are repeated whilst playing with only one "life" left the player will ultimately kill his character.

Occasionally media begin the discussion on violence and death in video games. Presenting excessively aggressive, brutal and undeserved images of death in computer games and on television is unacceptable. More attention ought to be paid to the games created. Most computer games producers, having no better idea to offer, release products with bloody and thoughtless death as the main objective. In most games, however, violence and death are not the main issue. They are simply one of the elements of entertainment. In modern times those games have replaced books, where noble kings, brave princesses and courageous knights used to prevail. They have also been committing acts of violence by either taking or losing their lives. Those images were created by our imagination while reading. Currently, it is computer that generates them. Electronic devices present brutality and death in the same manner as books, however, they do so with a dangerously realistic and direct pictures on the screen. Especially in our times, times of rapid development of multimedia technologies and 3D images that in an extremely accurate and faithful way reflect those acts of violence. Hard work of " the society of knowledge and reason" ,which tried to marginalise death and removed it from the consciousness, turned out to be futile. Death and dying established its place of importance in games and entertainment for good. Modern world is very frequently the world of people at a loss. They live in the society where death is strange and pushed to the margins. It used to mean something more and giving up live to the just cause was considered a noble deed. Every one of us, sometimes even subconsciously, wants to have a meaningful and purposeful life. We want to be remembered [13]. Most often, however, we notice the

infantilism of life and, at the same time, absurdity of death. Games that we encounter have a great power and scope of influence. If the real sense of passing away was shown in them, it would certainly enable recipients of mass entertainment to understand the true meaning of the phenomenon. In the world of computer games, where players would struggle with virtual, temporary annihilation and where they could see death, their lives and dying would become more meaningful. Perhaps by defending their virtual kingdom and defeating their enemies they would, in fact, fight against the illusory image of modern death and give it a special meaning.

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