DEATH IN VIDEO GAMES // A TAXONOMY

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00

// Abstract & Introduction

0.1 // Abstract

The growth of video games is conspicuous in contemporary society, with an expanding presence in our daily lives. This surge is notably propelled by the burgeoning fascination with metaverses, wherein corporations increasingly leverage video game mechanics to fabricate immersive and enjoyable digital realms, and among the plethora of mechanics intrinsic to video games, death emerges as one of the most pervasive and pivotal.

Its significance is multifaceted. Death functions not merely as an impediment to engender challenging experiences but also as a catalyst for contemplation on social and sensitive issues. In the complex world of video game design, the mechanics surrounding mortality play a pivotal role in shaping both the gameplay dynamics and the thematic explorations that games offer.

In video games, death assumes diverse representations. However, within the scholarly discourse, a comprehensive classification of in-game deaths appears still to be achieved. This research undertakes the challenge of establishing a systematic taxonomy for categorizing the various modes of death in video games. This taxonomy is rigorously constructed, drawing from a thorough exploration of the existing literature and substantiated through the alignment of representative case studies. The taxonomy is validated through survey and in-depth interviews with experts in the field of game studies, who provide their seminal knowledge. The insights derived from the process informed a consequent refinement and implementation of the initial version.

The taxonomy is systematically organized into three main categories, each comprising distinct subcategories and dimensions:

- *Death as a narrative element*,
- *Death as a ludic element*, and
- *Death as a combined ludic and narrative element.*

From a scientific perspective, this taxonomy serves as a great framework for the meticulous analysis of the interaction of mechanics and narrative associated with death in video games. On the design front, it provides a foundational resource that designers can relate on to enrich their creative efforts in implementing death within the fabric of a video game artifact.

0.2 // Introduction

The concept of death in video games, as explored in this thesis, concerns not only the experiential aspect for the player but also acknowledges its role as an entity with agency, influencing both the player and in-game entities. Despite its inherently dark connotations, the paradoxical centrality of death in video games becomes evident, underscoring its significance in shaping the gaming experience.

Indeed, the multifaceted nature of death in games manifests through its dual role as both a mechanic and a narrative element. This complexity is particularly evident in the varied ways players encounter death as a gameplay mechanism, whether as a tool to overcome challenges, a narrative device addressing social issues, or even a means of asserting dominance over other players, as observed in instances of griefing. In narrative-focused games, the mechanics often take a back seat to allow the story to unfold. Conversely, some games skillfully intertwine death as both a mechanic and a narrative element, creating a shaded and impactful player experience.

The research methodology commenced with an exhaustive desk research approach, incorporating a comprehensive scientific literature review. This involved scrutinizing academic publications from the game studies field alongside gray literature, including forums, websites, and videos, to glean insights into the perspectives of players. To increase the understanding of the research field, an exploration of topics associated with game design beyond the specific realm of death in video games was also conducted. This holistic approach aimed to establish a robust foundation for the subsequent phases of the research.

The research is initiated by exploring the concept of games as a secure environment for experiential learning, providing players with an opportunity to experiment with diverse interactions. Subsequently, the role of death within this realm was delineated, and an extensive review of scientific literature addressing this theme was conducted.

The research process, guided by the theoretical framework, progressed to the validation phase, where a first version of the taxonomy was built by looking at the references and was sent to different experts to validate it and, eventually, update it. This process was done by sending a survey to the experts, and for some of them an in-depth interview was organized in order to better understand their thoughts on the subject.

The culmination of these efforts guaranteed a comprehensive and validated taxonomy of potential death modes in video games.

CONTENTS/STRUCTURE

The research analysis unfolds across distinct chapters, each dedicated to a specific phase of the research to afford appropriate attention to each examined point. These chapters are outlined as follows:

1) DEATH IN VIDEO GAMES: In the initial phase, overarching reflections on the role of death in video games are presented. Subsequently, the primary trajectory of the research is delineated, accompanied by preliminary findings into the eventual outcomes. Furthermore, these key findings are discussed, offering interesting insights that may guide future research developments in this domain.

2) THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: This chapter initiates with general reflections on game design, drawing important results from seminal studies such as Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" experience and Huizinga's metaphor of the "magic circle". This context is fundamental for comprehending why death serves as a fundamental game mechanic and the ensuing implications, including the concept of "positive negative experience" as articulated by Montola (2010). From this solid foundation, it was then possible to vertically investigate the theme of death in video games and how and what has been already done by the academic research.

This theoretical foundation lays the groundwork to discern the importance of death in video games and underlines the necessity for a comprehensive taxonomy to elucidate its diverse manifestations, providing game designers with a tool to design death with meaning for players.

3) THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The third chapter explains how the references have been clustered, in order to better define the field of research. Also, the process of selection of the case studies for the taxonomy is addressed and the clusters that collect the references rigorously explained.

4) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: The fourth chapter delineates the methodological framework employed in deriving the subsequent results and the primary objective is to expound upon the tools and analytical strategies instrumental in the research process. The initial phase of the research concentrated on an exhaustive examination of existing literature, systematically collating various death modes prevalent in video games.

The methodology is split into main parts: the research process (how the research on the literature was organized and which criteria were used for the selection of the case studies) and the validation process (how the validation with experts was organized).

5) TAXONOMY DEVELOPMENT: The chapter starts with the outcomes of the validation process, and so the results of the survey and in-depth interviews, allowing for an exploration and elaboration of the experts' thoughts.

At the end of the validation process, an updated version of the taxonomy was defined, with some changes from the original version. The updated taxonomy is systematically organized into three overarching categories, each comprising distinct subcategories and dimensions: 1) *Death as narrative*, 2) *Death as ludic*, and 3) *Death as ludic* and narrative element. From these overarching categories, a spectrum of sub-categories and dimensions emerges, each delineating specific death modes. To elucidate each death mode's unique characteristics, emblematic case studies are employed, offering detailed intuitions into their distinctions within the broader landscape of video game design.

6) DISCUSSION: The focus is on doing a sum-up of which findings came up, and which future investigations could be done on the subject in order to enrich the research.

7) CONCLUSION: This segment presents an analysis of the results of this research, and conceivable communicative strategies at the disposal of game designers. Also, eventual limits and conflicts in the research are faced and explained.

8) ANNEXES: This chapter includes all the materials that have been useful for the research. Here can be found: the initial taxonomy before the validation process, the full list of contents of the survey and the raw dataset derived from it.

9) REFERENCES: A comprehensive compilation of all references utilized throughout the research, underscoring the scholarly foundation of the study.

10) ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: Concluding with expressions of gratitude and acknowledgments, this chapter recognizes the contributions and support received during the research.

01

// Death in video games

1.1 // Dying and killing

The concept of death in video games did not appear recently, but it exists since video games were born. From the early arcade games in which the player had a limited number of chances, death was present and it already was a fundamental mechanic, presented in both forms of dying and killing. In the famous old-school arcade game *Pac-man* (Namco, 1980) the player controls Pac-man, a character similar to a "yellow-circle", and it has to complete a series of levels represented as mazes by eating all the yellow dots present on the path. Once all the dots have been eaten, the player advances to the next level.

However, in order to make the experience more challenging, the game designer Toru Iwatani thought about a smart mechanic to make it more difficult and appealing: adding enemies (represented as ghosts) that will follow the player in the maze, each one with its own distinctive color and "personality". For example, the red ghost (called by the game designer Blinky) will directly follow the player while the orange ghost (Clyde) will sometimes follow the player and other times escape from it. If Pac-man is caught by one of the four ghosts, the player will lose one life. Once the player loses all the lives, (three in total), the game ends. Fortunately, Toru Iwatani gave us the possibility to answer back at those annoying ghosts, by leaving inside the maze four bigger dots than the others. Those big dots, if eaten, will make our character invincible for a few seconds and, always in this time frame, we will be able to eat the ghosts. This will remove them from the game for a few seconds, and after that, they will return to chase us again.

Pac-man was just one example of the many old arcade games in which death is present, but just as a mechanic, since an explicit story is completely absent in the game. In fact, the first games were very simple, something thought to be used by the player for a limited amount of time in an environment outside its house. And they were extremely hard, in order to make the player lose and spend more money for the credits necessary to play another match once the game-over was reached. You always had the chance to answer back, by attacking enemies for example, in order to give the player the idea of a possible escape from the fateful death.

With the arrival of game consoles in our houses, the paradigm of gaming changed, and so consequently death. From the classic "limited-life" structure, we arrived at games in which you can die multiple times without losing any progress in the game, and at the same time, we have games that try to make the opposite by giving you only one chance to proceed in the game (also known as "Permadeath" mechanic). And the same happened with killing in games: from killing only enemies controlled by the game itself, we can now kill enemies controlled by other players (also known as avatars) thanks to online games, especially PVP kind/multiplayer game modes. And how not to mention those games where killing is not only possible, but is present to give ethical dilemmas to the player.

In general, we can find many different examples of experiences in which the player can kill and be killed. Actually, death can be described as something more than just a mechanic; sometimes it can also be a theme, a diegetic part of the storytelling of the game or used to make players think. A game genre that sums up both concepts of death as a mechanic and theme are "souls-like" games. The origin of this RPG sub-genre is accredited to the game designer Hidetaka Miyazaki with his fortunate game series "Souls", starting with the title *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009). Death has a predominant role in the experience, for both the player and the Not Playable Characters (NPCs) that populate the game world. In fact, with the term souls-like, we define all those games that have a high difficulty level and where death is always behind the corner and the respawn of the player is justified narratively and it is a core element of the gameplay experience. Also, killing is an important element: the death of other enemies is necessary for the player to upgrade their own character and, in rare circumstances, killing a friendly NPC (or any other character that is explicitly important in the narrative of the game) can change the progress of the story.

In the next paragraphs, the structuring of the research and the challenges encountered in attaining the stipulated objectives will be expounded upon.

Fig. 1.1
Screenshot from the video game Demon's souls (Fromsoftware, 2009). The dark atmosphere and terrifying enemies immerse the player in a dangerous environment.

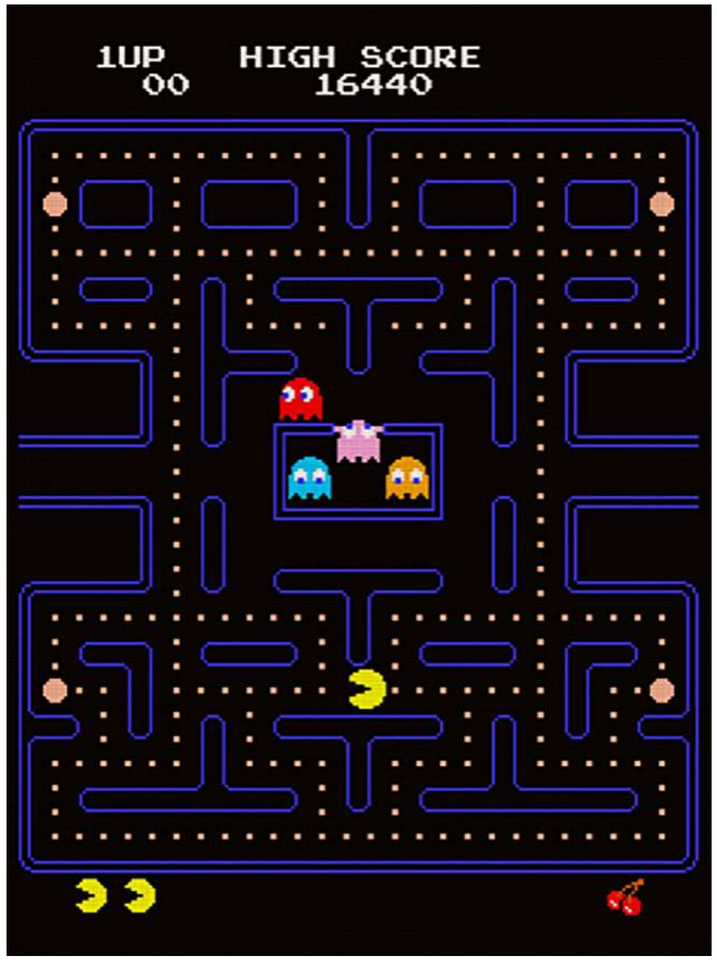


Fig. 1.2
Pac-man (Namco, 1980). The maze structure creates an uncanny feeling while we try to escape from the ghosts.

1.2 // Main stream of research

This study wants to undertake a comprehensive examination and classification of the principal modes of death encountered in video games. By drawing upon the existing body of literature, as well as incorporating original insights and conducting interviews with industry experts, the ambition is to provide a great tool for both game studies researchers and game designers who seek to create positive negative experiences by leveraging the portrayal of death within video games. This analysis aims to establish an as complete as possible taxonomy that splits in three distinct perspectives: death as a thematic element that helps to the narrative experience, death as a gameplay mechanic that directly influences the core interactive elements of the game and death that acts on both narrative and lucid planes at the same time.

These three categories are delineated based on a specific thought. The objective is to categorize various death modes contingent upon the contextual framework within which they manifest in video games and the classification into these categories serves the purpose of distinguishing between death modes, considering the emphasis on either gameplay or narrative elements within the respective video game. In instances characterized by a prevalence of narrative components over gameplay, the term “death as narrative” is employed. Here, the conceptualization of death mode is deeply tied to the narrative dimension rather than being primarily governed by gameplay mechanics.

On the other hand, there exist games where the mechanical aspects take precedence over the narrative elements. In such instances, the emphasis is on the gameplay mechanics governing death modes.

Lastly, a category concerns games in which the ludic and narrative dimensions are closely aligned, with neither subsuming the other. These games feature mechanics that are seamlessly integrated and justified within the narrative, illustrating a complex relationship where killing or dying surpasses mere mechanical functionality without compromising the narrative coherence.

One of the initial challenges arose during the course of this study, as delineating whether a game is narrative-focused, mechanic-centric, or a combination of both proved to be a complex task.

To address this challenge, an approach grounded in existing literature was adopted. Games that received explicit attention in the literature with a distinct focus on the narrative aspects were categorized under “death as narrative”. Conversely, games where the ludic elements were prominently emphasized in the literature were classified under the “mechanical” category. For instances where the literature explicitly addressed both narra-

tive and ludic dimensions of death modes, these were categorized under "death as both narrative and ludic". This literature-based methodology provided a structured means of classifying and contextualizing death modes within the selected video games. In fact, the overall analysis started with a theoretical background on the already existing literature: this helped not only in the categorization of the different death modes, but also to understand what kind of contributions were made to the argument.

Speaking about death in video games, Sicart and Juul (2009, 2013), in their studies, have highlighted the challenge of introducing "bad" feelings into games, as it may risk diminishing player motivation. At the same time, they recognize its importance to create a sense of challenge (the theory of flow) and how it can be a useful tool for the player to overcome obstacles (for example, by killing other dangerous NPCs),

However, death in video games often serves merely as a mechanic/ludic component, a means to propel players forward by penalizing mistakes. Nonetheless, the potential of death extends beyond being just a gameplay element and speaking about that, Montola (2010) introduces the concept of "positive negative experiences" where negative emotions, such as fear and shock, provide a gratifying and meaningful experience.

After these considerations, the research navigates in the landscape of game-over scenarios, uncovering the player's unique relationship with failure. The research then faces the evolving terminology surrounding game-over, contrasting the traditional "game over'' with the more contemporary and personal "You Died". This shift is analyzed not only in terms of its impact on player immersion but also in terms of its role in minimizing the disconnection between the player and the avatar.

An essential dimension of this exploration is the contribution of horror games, where death is deeply woven into the fabric of storytelling and atmospheric design. By examining the works of scholars like Barnard Perron (2018), the research investigates how horror games, whether survival horror or psycho-survival horror, utilize death to generate meaningful failures and unforgettable experiences for players. The study concerns the psychological aspects of player vulnerability, the disorienting impact of sanity mechanics, and the profound connections between death, atmosphere, and gameplay mechanics (Mariani, 2016).

As we explore the landscape of death in video games, the concept of Permadeath emerges as a powerful and increasingly prevalent mechanic, reshaping player experiences and challenging traditional gaming norms. In more recent games, Permadeath influences the narrative too, by embedding in the story of the game the death of the player or the other character they meet (Abraham, 2013; Copcic et al., 2013; West, 2020). The role of Permadeath in the game *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013), is a great example of how this mechanic can be used in creating intense social interactions and "uncanny" gameplay within a post-apocalyptic setting. Permadeath adds a profound sense of risk and consequence to players' choices, by creating a high level of tension, immersion, and storytelling. The dynamics between players lead to memorable and emotional moments, bringing to player-driven narratives that stand out from traditional scripted storylines. The concept of "greed play" is important too, highlighting players' self-serving actions, which can manifest in aggressive behaviors and opportunistic actions, especially in games with competitive and limited-resource environments. The text then explores the concept of griefing in *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), emphasizing its acceptance by both game designers and players as part of the experience, shaping a unique and intense gaming atmosphere (Carter et al., 2013a; Carter, 2015; Kelly et al., 2014; Paul, 2011).

The mentioned artifacts are games where killing other players is just optional. In some circumstances, killing other players is the main objective, such as battle royale and online shooters, using *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) as an illustrative example. Additionally, the text explores the portrayal of death as a primary objective in certain online games, introducing the concept of "kill cams" and their impact on player experience (Rusk and Ståhl, 2020; Wright et al., 2002). Of course, we need also to mention those games where you kill other NPCs, in single-player game modes and PVEs in general) (Glas, 2015; Linderoth, 2012).

Storytelling is fundamental in shaping the gaming experience, emphasizing its potential to immerse players in fictional worlds and elicit deeper emotional connections and death and/or killing serve as potent tools for narrative development, contributing to the complexity and depth of the overarching story. The narrative possibilities within digital storytelling are explored in the research, highlighting the interactive nature of games where player decisions directly influence the narrative direction. The concept of persuasive games is introduced, emphasizing the medium's potential to address complex social, cultural, and political issues. At times, the player is not subjected to direct mortality within the gaming experience, as their character does not succumb to death. In such instances, the simplicity of gameplay may be intentionally compromised, yet the thematic element of death persists in a way not so explicit.

Typically, the primary aim of such games is to systematically address societal issues, particularly themes related to loss and grief, in a deliberate manner, meticulously conceived by game designers. Commonly classified as Existential Games, they aspire to prompt users to contemplate existential concerns encompassing topics such as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. The role of video games, as an emergent form of media,

in fostering individual well-being is pointed up by their potential to stimulate reflective engagement with mortality, akin to the established role of traditional media in this regard (Beaumont, 2020; Bogost, 2010; Carter et al., 2013b; Chittaro and Sioni, 2018).

The incorporation of themes of killing and morality in video games is inevitable when games have death modes on both ludic and narrative planes. The study *Playing a 'Good' Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games* (Reynolds, 2002), It explores the criticism faced by such games, which challenges the straightforward labeling of violent games as immoral. The study adopts ethical theories such as Consequentialism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics to analyze the morality of games, emphasizing the distinction between fictional and real-world contexts. The discussion extends to games like *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team ico, 2005) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager, 2011), which employ fixed justice and moral responsibility, respectively, to create engaging experiences for players. The implementation of moral choice systems in games like *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware, 2011) addresses and explores the complexities and potential superficiality associated with such systems. Also, it compares games like *Dishonored* (Bethesda Softworks, 2012) and *This War of Mine* (11 Bit studios, 2014), which present morally ambiguous protagonists and challenging ethical choices, providing players complex narrative experiences (Bosman, 2018; de Smale et al., 2019; Jørgensen, 2016, 2015; Keogh, 2012).

1.2.1 // Main directions from the literature

A notable observation arising from the review of existing literature is the prevalent focus on in-game deaths leading to game-overs, rather than deaths caused by the player themselves. This discrepancy underlines the importance of further exploration and understanding of player-inflicted deaths within the gaming context. By going further into this subject matter, future research can show the dynamics and implications of these player-driven deaths, providing findings for both scholars and designers alike.

The initial phase of the theoretical background involved the development and dissemination of a preliminary taxonomy to experts in the field of game studies. Subsequently, important insights were gathered through collaborative discussions, leading to the refinement of the taxonomy. The final version was carefully delineated, incorporating minor adjustments and providing comprehensive descriptions for each mode of death. Within the final taxonomy, the intention is to refer not only to deaths or killings in which the player is directly involved but also to those indirect instances that nonetheless hold significance for mechanics, narrative, or both aspects concurrently.

Also, players themselves help to the evolution of death modes by introducing self-imposed challenges, such as the "Ironman rule", altering the gaming experience and intensifying the stakes. The case of *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2010), where players embraced the Ironman rule before the introduction of "Hardcore Mode", illustrates the symbiotic relationship between player practices and official game design. This dynamic interaction highlights the significant role players play in shaping the evolving landscape of video game mechanics. Although undoubtedly interesting, and the Ironman rule was initially included in the taxonomy, the original goal was to focus on those death modes already present in games and designed by the game developers. To streamline the research, the emphasis was placed on death/killing modes designed by game designers and any death modes classifiable as "death as a choice" by the player may serve as a basis for future updates on the topic.

Each death mode is accompanied by a case study, illustrating a video game where that death mode is effectively implemented. Another challenge arises from the fact that many case studies may coexist in different death modes. For ease of reading, it was decided to maintain various case studies within a single death mode, without implying that this death mode is the only one possible for that particular game. The choice of a case study for a specific death mode was made based on interviews and the scientific literature.

The findings from this research will foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role of death in video games and offer intuitions for game designers seeking to craft meaningful and immersive experiences. Through the synthesis of existing knowledge and the inclusion of original contributions, this study strives to stimulate discourse and inspire the development of games where death as a role is coherent with the game presented. Ultimately, the goal is to enrich the overall appreciation and understanding of the complex interaction between death, gameplay, and player experiences in the field of video games.

1.3 // An ongoing analysis

Despite the significance of death in games and the numerous references on the argument, there exists a lack of comprehensive cataloging that concerns its diverse manifestations. The need for a comprehensive cataloging of the diverse iterations of death in games is emphasized to deepen

our understanding and facilitate further research in this domain. In order to better understand death in games, we can start with a simple question: why do we accept death in video games? If it is true that death is something negative and sometimes is an obstacle to our experience, why have games like Demon's Souls had such a huge success?

In the analysis of existing studies, it becomes evident that death in video games is far from a monolithic concept. Instead, it assumes various roles and meanings for players within the gaming context.

Firstly, death can function as a formidable obstacle, carefully calibrated to pose a challenge that aligns with the player's abilities. Secondly, it may also serve as a potent tool in the player's arsenal, a means to overcome certain in-game hindrances. In this context, death becomes a tactical element, allowing players to employ it strategically.

As we said, death also extends beyond mechanics, functioning as a narrative element in many games. It serves as a device that prompts players to contemplate social issues and struggle with the emotional implications of loss. This narrative dimension shows the capacity of video games to evoke empathy and reflection. Additionally, death is wielded as a means to introduce moral ambiguity into games. Players often find themselves at a crossroads, where choices regarding the lives of non-playable characters impact the narrative. This ethical dimension invites players to consider the consequences of their actions, whether they opt for ruthless efficiency or strive to maintain moral integrity.

Death in video games is a powerful device in making positive-negative experiences, but there is a lack of organization and definition of the possible death modes in video games, intended as both game over death and death towards others (both other players and NPCs).

02

// Theoretical background

2.1 // First steps into the analysis

Death permeates various iterations within video games, and the extant body of research on this theme is notably extensive. However, as previously highlighted, there exists a conspicuous gap in consolidating the possible ways of death in video games. The theoretical background constructed herein emanates from an initial segment devoted to the principal literature in the field of game studies, particularly emphasizing the significance of games as secure spaces for diverse experiences.

Prominent works, such as *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2002) and *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Juul, 2013), served as foundational pillars in this exploration. The subsequent exploration goes into more specific topics, including the examination of Permadeath in games, as delineated in *Permadeath: A Review of Literature* (Copcic et al., 2013), and the analysis of the ubiquitous play-die-restart structure, alongside other manifestations of death in gaming. Even more, an analysis of death in conjunction with the narrative dimensions of games was imperative. *Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games* (Bosman, 2018) elucidates the multifarious iterations within this context. Augmenting this exploration, the scholarly work *The Dark Side of Gameplay: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (Mortensen et al., 2015) significantly contributed to the study, such as the ethical considerations pivotal in dark-themed games. This research served as a resource that substantially informed further investigations, thereby enriching the theoretical undergoing of this study.

By scrutinizing and systematizing perspectives derived from the existing body of literature, a series of pertinent areas emerged for comprehensive analysis. These areas were then organized into clusters, serving as a theoretical framework for categorizing the literature, as outlined in the theoretical framework (chapter 3).

Initially, foundational concepts pertaining to the relationships between players and their gaming experiences were explored, including the notions of the "Magic Circle" and the concept of "flow." From this preliminary analysis, the significance of providing users with a secure space to engage in novel experiences inherent to the gaming realm became apparent. Exemplifying these experiences are instances involving death and killing within the gaming context. Also, the discourse on controversial play extends to discussions of morality and ethical dilemmas, themes prominently addressed in numerous recent games.

Another important topic to analyze is death's role in gaming and game design. Death can be a meaningful part of gameplay, examining mechanics like respawn systems and Permadeath implications. It dives into the intersection of storytelling and gameplay mechanics. Essential game design theories, covering narrative, level design, and player engagement can't be avoided when we talk about death in the ludic environment. Player experience (PX) is strictly connected to game mechanics. It demonstrates a synergy between player experiences and game design, emphasizing the iterative nature of playing in a fictional world.

The examination also analyzes the psychological aspects of player behavior, including motivation and the impact of in-game rewards. Also, it explores the social dimensions of gaming, emphasizing video games as hubs for complex interactions, community building, and the roles of guilds and forums in shaping these dynamics.

Moreover, it must be taken in consideration the narrative of the game and its relation with the mechanics and the fictional worlds in which the player acts. In fact, there are games that focus on the narrative by sacrificing complex mechanics and others that try to mix these two planes into one unique strong structure without having to exclude the ludic part of the experience.

2.2 // Games as a safe space for experience

The act of playing constitutes a significant facet of human existence, permeating our daily lives in various forms. Even in routine interpersonal interactions, individuals often find themselves assuming distinct roles shaped by the context in which they operate. Implicitly, these interactions adhere to a range of rules that govern permissible conduct, communication, social hierarchies, and more. This prompts an exploration into the underlying logic that underpins our behavior during social interactions and experiential engagements, such as playing.

The comprehension of the mechanisms that govern human interactions and the integration of games into this overarching framework necessitates an initial exploration of the theory of frames. Following this foundational examination, the focus of inquiry will shift towards a more detailed analysis of how this theory harmonizes with and is operationalized within the context of games. To elucidate, the concept of reality can be conceptualized as a wide series of frames, as postulated by Goffman (1974), a series of levels in which, at the base, there's reality. These frames are generated by humans and this way of organizing reality isn't something related to just our inner mentality, but something that eventually relocates also outside, and influences the way we interpret reality and interact with society. It is a tool to incorporate objective data and stimuli that we catch from the outside world and because of this analytical nature, frames are schemes too.

Frames are essential cognitive structures that help individuals understand and interpret various experiences, including gaming and social media interactions. They not only play a role in shaping how people engage with video games but also influence their interactions on social media platforms. "Playing" is not limited to the traditional notion of gaming; people engage in playful activities in various circumstances. Whether it's playing video games, having social media interactions, or even doing imaginative and creative efforts, playful behaviors are prevalent in many aspects of daily life. Understanding frames is fundamental for comprehending the context of a person's experiences rather than solely focusing on the motivation behind their actions (Stenros, 2010). Frames provide a lens through which individuals interpret and make sense of the world around them, influencing how they perceive and engage with different activities and platforms. By understanding the frames individuals employ, researchers and observers can gain findings into the broader context and significance of play in diverse settings, from gaming to social media engagement and beyond.

Basically, framing is the way people make sense of their experiences. An effective example of how we use frames in everyday life is explained by Staffan Björk in the book *The Dark Side of Play* (2015). She says:

> Frames are metaphorical rims that delimit a social activity. […] For example, a pistol pointed at somebody is normally perceived as a potentially dangerous threat, while one pointed at an actor on a stage by another actor during a rehearsal is interpreted differently.
> […] Frames can be also inside other frames […]. If the stage play is performed by amateurs or students. In this case, the judgment on the quality of performance is likely to be affected by personal ties to the actors and their lack of experience. (Björk, 2015, p. 413-414)

To sum up, we can say that the context in which we do experiences it's fundamental to understanding what kind of sense we should give to that moment in which we act.

Given that individuals construct their own unique experiences and subsequently react to them in ways influenced by their distinct social backgrounds, it is reasonable to question whether these frames are entirely subjective. However, the answer is not absolute subjectivity. In fact, there are instances in which individuals from vastly different backgrounds adopt analogous framings. This phenomenon becomes particularly evident when examining the act of playing games. In this context, each individual perceives themselves as a player, introducing the concept of "shared frames" into the discourse (Björk, 2015). This is important in order to underline the fact that when we play games it doesn't really matter the genre: whether we are playing *FIFA* (EA Vancoucer, 1997) or *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003), we recognize that on us there is the player's frame inside the bigger frame of the game.

Exactly like any other social activity, every game exists within a frame, and this frame is demarcated by time and space. When we play, we are isolated from the ordinary world and we create our own time and space, giving us the feeling of "safe space" (Jakko, 2012). This frame has been called by many scholars as "Magic Circle", and still today is a valid metaphor to understand the relationship between playing and reality.

This term has been coined by Huzinga in the book *Homo Ludens* (1951) and the game designers Katie Salen and Katie Salen popularized the term in the book *Rules of Play* (2002), by referring to it as: «[…] a game is a safe way to experience reality. More accurately, the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2002, p. 90)».

The rules of a game are fundamental for the play experience: in order to be played, the game creates a set of meanings through rules and these meanings guide the play of the game. They also explain why they use the term Magic Circle' as a metaphor:

> […] The term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game. The fact that the magic circle is just that-a circle-is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribed a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility. (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2002, p. 107).

With the sentence "something magical", Salen and Zimmerman (2004) refer to different aspects, such as the nature of the game of being able to totally isolate the player from the outside world by giving it, at the same time, the possibility to come inside the boundaries and leave them at any moment. Also, it is a metaphor applicable to any possible game: every game needs a geographical area in which it operates, represented here by the shape of the circle, but it is also true that every single game has its own rules. In short, we are talking about "a finite space with infinite possibility". When we start a game, we are literally entering a Magic Circle: if we see a basketball on the ground, that can be just a decoration or something useless, but when we start to play basketball, the perception of that object totally changes and so the ball is something fundamental for the game itself.

It is important to recognize that the magic circle is not an entirely closed environment. While it delineates the space for play, it can be influenced by the outside world, and this influence can manifest in various ways. One significant factor that can impact the dynamics within the magic circle is preexisting relationships among players. In fact, a group of friends playing a game together will bring their social dynamics and interactions into the gameplay experience, blurring the boundaries between the game world and reality. This constant interaction between the outside and inside worlds enriches the complexity of the gaming experience.

Roger Caillois, a French sociologist and game theorist, offers a different perspective on the play environment. In his work *Man, Play, and Games* (1958), Caillois explores the nature of play and distinguishes between various ways of play experiences. He argues that play must be distinct from ordinary life and is characterized by several essential attributes, such as freedom, separateness, uncertainty, unproductivity, regulation, and fictitiousness. Caillois says that when play lacks these essential features, it can no longer be classified as play but instead becomes something else entirely. Goffman provides an interesting contrast to Caillois' perspective on the separation between play and ordinary life. He sees everyday life as inherently similar to games in many aspects. He observes that games offer a simplified representation of real-life situations and interactions, immersing players in a demonstration of various possibilities. When players return to the world after engaging in games, they carry with them a sense of having experienced a structured and regulated environment, ready to reduce life to its liveliest elements, much like games (Goffman, 1970).

Players are rarely completely absorbed by the play, leaving room for (meta)communication about the play experience. This opens the door to discussions and reflections on the game's mechanics and players' understanding and enjoyment of the game (Jaakko, 2012).

Furthermore, Sicart (2010) emphasizes the importance of safety for playful engagement. While safety does not necessarily imply physical safety, players need to feel secure and comfortable in the play environment. This emotional safety fosters a sense of trust and freedom, allowing players to fully immerse themselves in the experience and explore their creativity and agency.

The concept of the magic circle extends beyond traditional gaming experiences and finds relevance in the context of pervasive games. Pervasive games challenge the conventional limitations of games, pushing the boundaries of spatial, temporal, and social dimensions. These games blur the line between playful and serious states of consciousness, often disrupting social norms and behavioral rules. In pervasive games, the magic circle expands to cover broader aspects of players' lives, bridging the gap between the game world and the real world.

Markus Montola, an expert in pervasive games, defines them as games that feature one or more salient features that expand the traditional magic circle of play socially, spatially, or temporally. Every game, even pervasive games, is influenced by elements outside the magic circle. These games present a unique opportunity for spatial, temporal, and social expansion, offering players novel and immersive experiences that challenge their understanding of play and reality (Montola, 2005). The advent of pervasive games further complicates the idea of the magic circle, pushing the boundaries of play and inviting players to engage with games in unprecedented and transformative ways.

Another fundamental consideration about games made by Zimmerman and Salen is the concept of "lusory attitude" (2004), a state of mind required to join a game. In order to play a game, players must accept a set of rules, and this means possible limitations to players' actions; even if it can seem paradoxical, these limitations are what make the game enjoyable, by making it a balanced experience for the players.

The term "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" was introduced by Bernard Suits in his book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, (1978). Within this book, Suits presents a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes playing a game. He provides a more detailed definition, stating that to engage in gameplay is to strive for a specific state of affairs, known as the "prelusory goal." Players pursue this goal using only the means allowed by the game's rules, referred to as "lusory means". It must be noted that these rules intentionally prohibit the use of more efficient methods in favor of less efficient ones, establishing what Suits refers to as "constitutive rules". Moreover, the players willingly accept these rules because they enable and structure the playful activity, an attitude he terms, of course, the "lusory attitude".

Suits' definition incorporates the essence of play within the context of games. Players voluntarily and purposefully immerse themselves in the challenge of overcoming unnecessary obstacles to achieve a predefined objective. The rules of the game establish the framework within which players operate, dictating the allowable actions and shaping the gameplay experience. The intentional limitation of more efficient methods adds an element of creativity and engagement, compelling players to think strategically and adapt their approach to the designated constraints (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2002).

2.2.1 // Rules as the architecture of the magic circle

As said previously, rules are a fundamental part of the game and game designers must understand how to use them in the most efficient way.

In his book *Half-Real*, Juul tries to give a definition of what is a game, by defining a model. A game must be composed of: 1) a rule-based formal system, 2) with variable and quantifiable outcomes, 3) where different outcomes are assigned different values; 4) a place where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome; 5) the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome; 6) and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Juul, 2005; McGonigal, 2011) [Fig. 2.1].

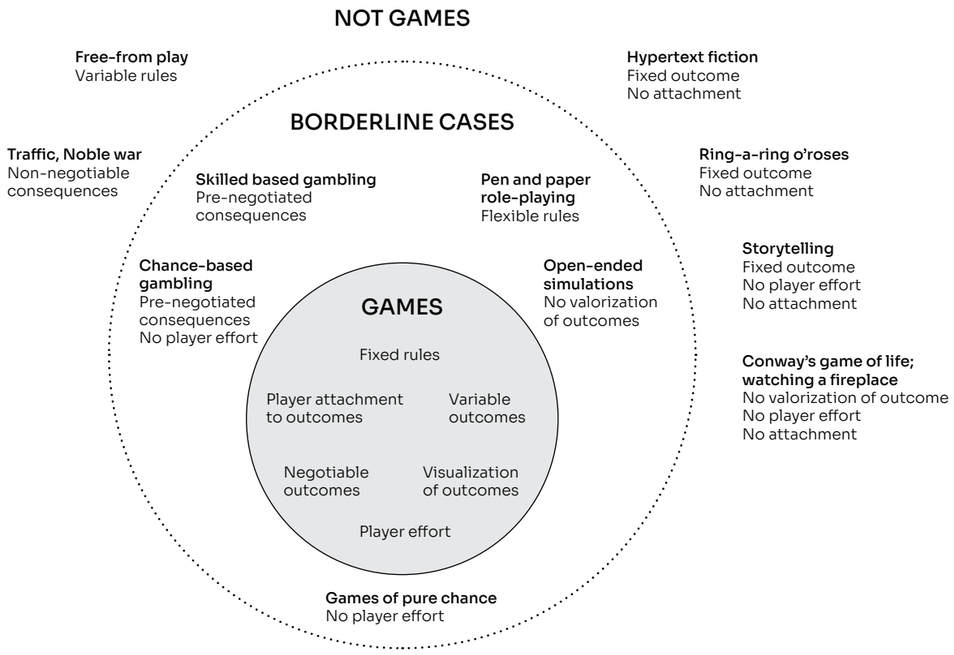


Fig. 2.1
Visual elaboration of the scheme from the book Half-Real (2005, p.120), where Juul shows the fundamental parts a game is made, with also what is "not a game".

To sum up, we can identify a game as something with specific rules in which the player can influence the possible outcome by acting in the game, a system where both players and NPCs are agents inside the game and they act by following a set of rules (Sicart, 2009). Another important aspect to underline is the necessity to have a challenge. It is necessary for a sort of effort from the player in order to influence those outcomes, not only to keep high attention to the game but also to make it emotionally attached. Juul gives the following paradoxical sentence:

> […] When rules and fictions do not match perfectly it can still generate a positive effect, working as a way of playing with the player's expectations, as a way of creating parody, and finally as a way of foregrounding the game as a real-world captivity. (Juul, 2005, p. 165)

The inclusion of challenges and negative experiences in games is paradoxically essential for generating player engagement and fostering significant emotional moments. Jesper Juul explores this concept in his book *The Art of Failure*, where he posits that playing a game is akin to an emotional gamble—a voluntary investment of time and self-esteem in the hope of achieving success. This investment must hold meaning; otherwise, overly relaxing games can lead to monotonous and unfulfilling gameplay experiences (Juul, 2013).

Understanding the value that tough challenges offer to players is decisive, and these challenges and feelings of failure can be expressed not only through game mechanics but also through storytelling. An exemplary case of meaningful negative-emotional gaming is found in *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010). Here, the main character controlled by the player, John Marston, must ultimately sacrifice himself (and thereby fail) to save his family. While the player has no alternative but to fail, the sacrifice is far from meaningless, as it secures the safety of the protagonist's family.

Players in games have the opportunity to utilize their unique qualities and skills to complete a game, making challenging situations (both narrative and gameplay mechanics point of view) a necessary aspect of gameplay. Quoting Juul: «Transforming frustration resulting from failure into a source of motivation for learning becomes the key to eventual success (Juul, 2013, p. 150)».

Balancing the level of challenge is essential; while game rules should be easy to understand and learn, there must be enough difficulty to maintain the player's attention. An excessively easy game can become boring, compromising the experience, while an excessively challenging one can lead to frustration and disengagement (Mariani, 2016).

In the gaming realm, some players may attempt to break the magic circle's boundaries by choosing not to adhere to the game's rules—cheating being a common example. Such disruptive behaviors can ruin the immersive experience for other players by interrupting the illusion of the fictional world (Consalvo, 2009).

The adherence to rules becomes important in maintaining the integrity of the fictional world within the magic circle; cheaters and other disruptive (or transgressive) behaviors can pose a significant threat to this cohesion. In online games, aggressive behaviors are particularly prevalent and varied, falling under the category of "greed play" (Smith, 2004). This kind of disruptive behavior often undermines the gaming experience for others, but it can sometimes be a very effective tool in the hands of game designers. In fact, there are many games where it is necessary to act ruthless in order to survive or overcome the other players: exactly like challenges, this way of playing it is related to creating negative emotional moments useful for the definition of meaningful experiences.

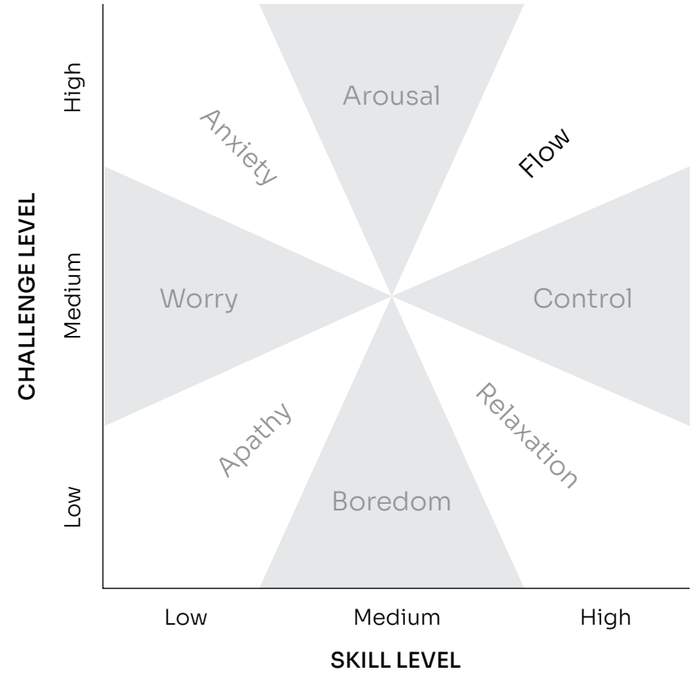
From a "mechanic/player experience" perspective, negative experiences are indeed decisive in games (Cuerdo and Melcer, 2020). These experiences, that can be challenges, obstacles, and failures, play an essential role in shaping the gameplay and, consequently, player engagement. While it is true that some of these mechanics are a threat to the core of the game itself, they also present a great opportunity for game designers to create meaningful and immersive games. Negative experiences in games serve multiple purposes. First of all, they add a layer of complexity and depth to the gameplay. Without challenges and obstacles, games risk becoming monotonous and boring. The sense of achievement that comes from overcoming these negative elements provides players with a satisfying and rewarding experience. Negative experiences can also help to a player's emotional engagement in the game (Perron, 2018). When players encounter setbacks or failures, they become more determined to improve and succeed in their goals.

This aspect has been explained efficiently by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi through the concept of "Flow" (1998). In his studies, he focuses on what makes us find pleasure and satisfaction in activities in general, and games are involved too. We play games because, as said previously, we like to face challenges. However, it is important for these challenges to be balanced for the player, in order to avoid any feeling of frustration that can compromise the playing experience. And it's here that Csikszentmihalyi's theory helps us, by giving us a list of fundamental elements that can influence the flow, and so the engagement, of the activity: the activity must have clear goals, the feedback of the activity must be clear and immediate and the challenge must be balanced with the skills of the player (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998).

These three conditions, in a game design environment, are reflected by these elements:

- *Rewards*: a game must guarantee a series of rewards that should be instant and guaranteed.
- *Clear goals*: the objectives must be clear and easy to understand.
- *Loss of consciousness*: the player is in a state in which it doesn't have to think about what is doing (automatic actions).
- *Loss of sense of time*: the player is completely isolated by the time outside the game activity.
- *Direct and immediate feedback*: the player is guided and immediately knows what to do next.
- *The balance between player skills and challenge*: a game must be neither too hard nor too easy, and to avoid this is important to have clear in mind the skills of the player.
- *The player controls the situation and the activity*: the player thinks the objective is reachable.

Fig. 2.2
A graphical representation of the emotional states the player can face depending on the skill level and challenge level. In order to reach the flow, there must be a balanced level of challenge and skill required by the player. (Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life, 1997, p. 31)



The flow is reached by having a high level of challenge that reflects the player's skills. In a case where there is a lack of both, the user reaches an apathetic state, while a too-hard activity can result in anxiety for the player and a too-easy challenge can bring a sense of relaxation or boredom.

Indeed, achieving a well-balanced gaming experience is fundamental, when considering the inclusion of death as a gameplay element. As exemplified in the study *Death Loop as a Feature*, (Leino, 2012) in the game *Fallout New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010) faces challenges with its spawn points and save file system. While it is acceptable for players to encounter difficulties and face death in the game world, the issue lies with the respawn mechanics and save points. Frequent deaths can lead to frustration if the spawn points are poorly placed or if the save system does not offer fair opportunities for players to continue their progress seamlessly.

When players continuously face obstacles and repeatedly encounter unfavorable spawn points after reloading a saved file, it can disrupt the natural flow of the gaming experience. The frustration from encountering challenging situations is expected and can even be embraced as part of the gameplay's emotional journey. If the game mechanics fail to provide appropriate checkpoints and/or spawning mechanisms, it can have a negative impact on the player experience [Fig. 2.2].

Two distinct types of flow can be found: microflow and macroflow. Microflow refers to a brief yet intense sequence of emotions that may recur

several times during the gaming experience. On the other hand, macroflow pertains to the progression of challenges that adapt to the player's skill level. These two forms of flow can be strategically employed to enrich the overall gaming experience. Microflow, for instance, is harnessed to reinforce the rewards system or establish the rhythm of gameplay. Conversely, macroflow is instrumental in shaping the overarching balance of a game's difficulty curve (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Daniel, 2021).

From all these topics, we can define the challenge for a game as a fundamental aspect, because it is what makes the experience meaningful and keeps the player focused in a state of total flow (Mariani, 2016). The player must be able to answer back to some dangerous situations but at the same time it can't be invincible; it can kill and be killed, exactly like in *Pac-Man* or Souls games we already talked about. Death, as a mechanic, has a fundamental role and it is present in almost every game, and we accept it because it is what makes the game difficult for us (when we are victims of it) and it is also what makes us proceed in the game (when we are responsible for it). Besides death is a dark topic in our ordinary life, when we enter the magic circle of games, death can assume other meanings and it may be even an opportunity for game designers to create balanced experiences while for the players to experiment and face new challenges.

Edward F. Melcer and Marjorie Ann M. Cuerdo (2020) conducted a comprehensive study on the roles of death in video games, particularly in platformer games. The study analyzes how each game presents a distinct and varied experience while following a common cyclic pattern.

Titled *I'll Be Back: A Taxonomy of Death and Rebirth in Platformer Video Games*, the study presents a detailed taxonomy for platformer games, categorizing them based on five key dimensions. These dimensions include:

1. *obstacles*,
2. *death conditions*,
3. *aesthetics*,
4. *changes to player progress*, and
5. *respawn locations* [Fig. 2.3].

Within each dimension, various classifications can be identified. For instance, respawn locations can include save points, checkpoints, or the absence of respawning altogether. Obstacles represent challenging barriers that can take the form of environmental elements or intelligent adversaries, such as non-player characters. Additionally, the study quoted examines death conditions, which define the circumstances under which a player dies. They can encompass instant death, depletion of health, or even scenarios where death is not possible.

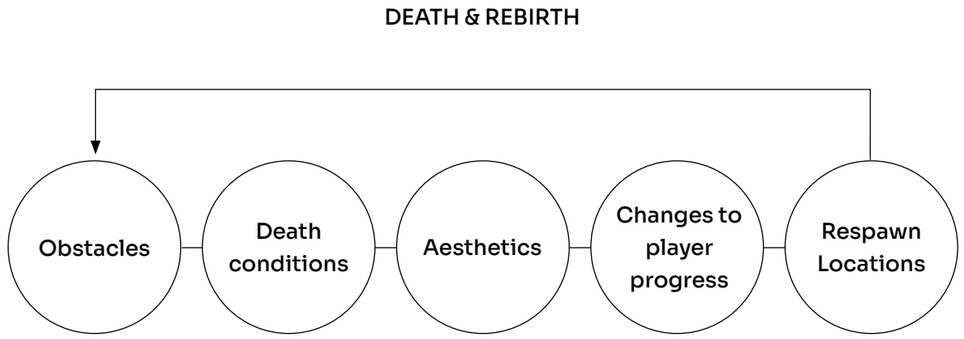


Fig. 2.3
A scheme of the 5 dimensions of death in Platform games. It is a cyclic path, where the player face each dimension every time they die. ("I'll Be Back": A Taxonomy of Death and Rebirth in Platformer Video Games, 2005, p. 4)

One intriguing aspect highlighted in the study is the consideration of death not only as a challenge when facing the death condition but also as a concept that carries consequences after its occurrence. Whether the player is the victim or the instigator of death, the consequences are evident. Killing enemies, for example, may impact the game world in various tangible ways. Player's death can lead to changes in gameplay mechanics, such as upgrades or modifications to the inventory, or alterations to the game's narrative, including unlocking or locking specific story paths, depending on what kind of games we are talking about.

It is relevant to emphasize another fundamental aspect when talking about death in video games: namely, death as a theme. In fact, as we said about Demon's Souls, death can have a central role in the storytelling of a game, in order to influence the atmosphere of the playing experience or to make players think about the topic itself. This aspect is rigorously explained In paragraph 2.4.3.

2.3 // The player, the avatars and the fictional world

The player-game relationship is a fascinating and complex subject that has obtained significant attention from scholars and game studies experts. This chapter focuses on the definition of what is a player and explores the various dynamics between players and games, by investigating the role of avatars as intermediaries in facilitating player-game interaction and examining the diverse manifestations of death within the gaming landscape. As the first step, it is essential to define what a player is: as the game researcher Jakko says in *In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play*:

> The psychological bubble is personal, a phenomenological experience of safety in a playful (paratelic/telic) state of mind. If a person plays alone, she

> need not negotiate or meta-communicate with others (though usually she does signal play unconsciously). There is a 'border' around her experience, a frame that guides her interpretation of the situation. A player needs to feel safe in order to be playful, though it is not necessary to actually be safe. (Jaakko, 2012, p. 14)

This engagement signifies a deliberate and purposeful involvement wherein the player undertakes actions and decisions within the game environment, thereby contributing to the progression of the gameplay experience. Another definition, sees the game as a formative force that shapes the player's experience and, simultaneously, the player acts as an active participant, by making decisions that directly influence the course of gameplay (Aarseth, 2014; Papale and Fazio, 2018).

These considerations elucidate that the player-game relationship is inherently complicated, far from being unidirectional and it engenders many different influences. Players, while exercising agency through their decision-making processes, concurrently find themselves ensnared within the immersive fabric of the game world. This dynamic can potentially evoke emotional and cognitive responses within players. Importantly, the gaming experience is not self-contained; it remains susceptible to external factors and influences that can profoundly mold player perceptions and responses (Jaakko, 2012; Rafinski and Zielke, 2013; Zimmerman, 2012).

The interaction between the player and the fictional can take place through a variety of modalities. Foremost among these there are avatars, which serve as manipulable entities representing the player within the game environment. Since avatars usually are characters with well-defined personalities, they can have a profound impact on players' identities as they navigate characters with distinct behaviors and goals (Banks, 2015; Papale and Fazio, 2018). Usually, it can happen in action adventure games like *Uncharted 2* (Naughty Dog, 2009) where the player has to follow a ready-made path coherent with the story told in the game and with the character that they are controlling. However, in some games avatars lack predefined personalities, enabling players to shape their attributes and abilities throughout gameplay. This is a storytelling strategy used many times in MMORPGs, where gamers have the opportunity to shape a character coherent with their own beliefs and behavior. Also, not all games require players to control avatars, and in many cases, the avatar is not present at all: abstract games, such as *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1985), focus on gameplay mechanics, where players interact with elements that do not embody specific characters or personas.

Several studies have been conducted on the matter, exploring how Avatars function as doubles, providing players with the opportunity to experiment with dangerous situations within the fictional realm (Wolfendale, 2007). Game designers can change the avatar's characteristics depending on the genre the game is related to, in order to create a better-balanced experience with the fictional world for players: they can be avatars with over-the-top strength in action-adventure games to extremely weak or vulnerable in horror games. This last genre employs various techniques to create duality within gameplay experiences: Survival Horror games frequently employ a third-person perspective, presenting the avatar as a heroic character triumphing over various fears. In contrast, Psychological Horror Games tend to favor a first-person perspective strategy, immersing players in the horror arising from internal sources rather than external ones (Elferen, 2015). In games like *Amnesia: the Dark Descent* (Frictional games, 2010) the game is entirely played in first person point of view. By viewing the game world through the eyes of the protagonist, Daniel, players are subjected to the same fear and unsettling environments he traverses [Fig. 2.4]. This immersive aspect heightens the psychological horror element, as players not only observe the sinister occurrences but also actively engage with them, instilling a deeper sense of fear and vulnerability. Unlike third-person perspectives, which often provide players with a more detached view of the game world and their character, the first-person perspective compels players to confront the horrors head-on, intensifying the emotional impact (it will be further explored in paragraph 2.4.2.2).

Fig. 2.4
Screenshot from Amnesia: the Dark Descent (2010). The total absence of interface/HUD immerse the player in the dark atmosphere of the game.

This research focuses on games that allow players to act within the game world through avatars, as they provide an environment where death is present as a mechanic and/or narrative element and can be witnessed by the player directly or indirectly through the presence of NPCs. Death in games can occur in various contexts, such as when the player causes death to non-player characters or other players. It can also manifest as an obstacle impeding the player's progress, a fundamental gameplay mechanic, or a thematic element within the narrative. The possibilities are almost infinite, and these possibilities are well expressed in those games called "Persuasive" (Bogost, 2010), which frequently incorporate different possible mechanics/themes, such as death, to stimulate critical thinking among players. The presence of death in these games serves as a tool to engage players in profound reflection and decision-making processes.

Transgressive gameplay is a concept that has garnered significant attention in game studies, providing thoughts into how players interact with video games and their systems, including the issue of death within these virtual worlds. It involves players deliberately bending or subverting the established rules and norms of a game to achieve their objectives or assert power, often in ways not intended by the game designers (Aarseth, 2014).

Building upon this discourse, it is possible to derive that how transgressive play manifests in several ways:

1. *Exploiting game mechanics*. Players may exploit the mechanics to gain an advantage. For instance, in multiplayer games, players might manipulate respawn points or character abilities to ensure they have an upper hand over their opponents. This can lead to unconventional strategies and tactics, challenging the traditional norms of gameplay.
2. *Bypassing death*. Some players seek ways to avoid or bypass death consequences altogether. This can involve finding glitches or unintended features in the game that allow them to survive situations where death would typically be unavoidable. In doing so, they break the immersion and intended challenge of the game, engaging in a form of transgressive play. This is a strategy used a lot by speedrunners, in order to finish the game the fastest as possible.
3. *Defying narrative outcomes*. In games where death affects the narrative, players may intentionally make choices that lead to character deaths or undesirable outcomes. This transgressive approach aims to subvert the game's intended storytelling and challenge the idea of player agency within the game world.
4. *Competitive advantage*. In competitive gaming, transgressive play can manifest as strategies that prioritize victory above all else, even if they involve unsportsmanlike conduct. This might include exploiting bugs or glitches that lead to the death of other players unfairly or employing tactics that prioritize winning at any cost.
5. *Social interaction*. Transgressive play can extend beyond the game mechanics and into social interactions among players. Trash-talking, griefing, and trolling are examples of behaviors adopted by some players in order to ruin the gaming experience of others, often involving in-game deaths to achieve this objective.

Transgressive gameplay is a complex phenomenon, and its implications for the video game experience are many. It can lead to creative and innovative ways of engaging with games but also has the potential to understand fair play, disrupt the player experience, and challenge the intended narratives and obstacles crafted by game designers.

Also, certain games are inherently designed to encourage transgressive behavior. These games may have mechanics or systems that invite players to break the established rules, fostering an environment where transgression is not only permitted but sometimes encouraged by designers or even necessary for progress. This intersection between game design and player behavior in transgressive play explains the evolving nature of the player-game relationship and the dynamic role of death as a device within this context (Bertozzi, 2008).

2.4 // Death as "positive-negative" experience

> You die and nothing changes, it returns back to the same state it was in a few moments ago. It's even less a solution to a conflict than in a common story, it just halts everything. Outside of games, a story can continue without the main character. In a video game death is an error in the fabric of the universe. Which means death of the player doesn't really exist, it's just a punishment framed as death. The closest thing to actual death is if the player gets bored of the game and doesn't return, after that, it's to actually lose something they won't see again (like a newly generated world).

This sentence is an extract from a post made by the user *Indiana-Jonas* on Reddit, precisely on the subreddit *game design*. In this post, the user wants to point out that death in video games is not like the traditional death we think about in traditional life: it's something neither permanent nor impossible to overcome, it's just a step back from the action (www.reddit.com/r/gamedesign/comments/qcy7nk/games_dont_treat_death_like_death/). Sicart and Juul (2009; 2013), in their studies, always referred to games as environments in which it is hard to create "bad" feelings, since it would be easy to lose a player's motivation into playing the game and so, death is used in many games as just a mechanic. Eventually, there are games that try to give it a more meaningful role (like in Permadeath games), it must be underlined that death may be something more than

that. In fact, death is an important tool to create "positive and negative experiences" (Montola, 2010). With this term, we refer to all those experiences that can be meaningful and gratifying for the user even without being necessarily funny, and instead face a dark topic or put the player in situations usually seen as risky or not enjoyable. Horror movies are a strong example: they are scary and usually tell stories that are not so positive, with sometimes even bad endings. They trigger in us feelings of fear, disgust, and shock; all feelings are generally considered negative. However, we still watch them and there is definitely a strong fan base for those kinds of movies. This happens because, since they face not mainstream topics, they can trigger in us interesting insights or give us experiences totally out of the ordinary (Mariani, 2016).

But if we think about games, we can definitely say that is' a stronger negative experience than movies, since the player interacts directly with the game itself by controlling an avatar. The concept of games delivering positive experiences through socially considered negative experiences is explored in the journal *Pivotal Play: Rethinking Meaningful Play in Games Through Death in Dungeons & Dragons* (Sidhu and Carter, 2021). One such experience is death, which can serve as a mechanic to help players learn from their mistakes (Sidhu and Carter, 2021), as discussed earlier in this chapter. Death can also be a theme that prompts deeper reflection. Zimmerman takes the tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons and Dragons* to highlight the strong relationship between players and the characters they control within the game. In this famous game, death holds significance not only for the player but also for the dungeon master. The dungeon master, responsible for guiding and building the game's narrative, must interact with the player whose character has died; this interaction emphasizes the impact and memorability of death in the game. In this context, death is utilized as a tool for meaningful play, offering opportunities for growth, contemplation, and emotional investment in gaming experiences.

As mentioned previously, players have the capacity to venture in and out of the magic circle, adopting unpredictable ways of play that challenge traditional norms. Transgressive behaviors and elements typically considered disruptive in our society can become exceptional opportunities for gameplay and storytelling within video games and death, in particular, usually is seen as a potential tool to explore and exploit these boundaries. In some instances, the borders between the two are blurred and expanded in a way not so clear to the player, as observed in pervasive games (Montola, 2010). In other cases, players knowingly operate on the edge of this boundary, engaging in what Cindy Poremba (2007) calls "Brink Play".

Pervasive games break free from the confines of traditional spatial, temporal, and social dimensions, allowing players to interact with the game world in unconventional ways. Instead, Brink Play acknowledges the boundary between the game and the real world, embracing it as a fundamental aspect of the gaming experience. Players knowingly tread on the edge of this boundary, drawing upon elements from both realms to enrich their gameplay and storytelling. In both pervasive games and brink play, death can play a significant role in shaping the narrative and gameplay: despite having different aims, the essence of the phenomenon remains the same: both approaches utilize the contested space at the intersection of games and life (Stenros, 2010).

Exactly like movies, we can have interesting thoughts and new points of view that we wouldn't usually consider, but with an important addition: the bleed ideal. With this, Montola (2005) refers to a situation in which the player may be influenced emotionally by what happens in the game (referred to as bleed out) and the player's ordinary life can influence the game (referred to as bleed in). This ideal is very important when we talk about games in general because it is a threat to the magic circle: the player's safe space is intentionally weakened and emotions bleed between those playing and their characters (Björk, 2011). By breaking this magic circle, the player is out of their comfort zone and this is a huge opportunity for both player and game designer. It is a chance to face experiences different from the ordinary that could be unforgettable, and so meaningful. A possible way to break this magic circle and generate Bleed Out is through "fabrication" which is described as:

> The intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on. (Björk, 2011, p. 428)

As we'll see, fabrication is often used in the video game's mechanics, for example by using friendly fire in online FPS as corrective hoaxing, or in the storytelling, for example by using what in film jargon is called "MacGuffin". In our previous discussions, we explored Montola's perspective on pervasive games, viewing them as an avenue to expand the boundaries of the magic circle and we touched upon the notion of death as a potent tool for achieving this expansion. Moreover, death in games can also be identified as a dark pattern. A dark game design pattern refers to intentional patterns employed by game creators to evoke negative experiences in players, often going against their best interests and occurring without their full consent (Zagal et al., 2013). This stands in opposition to the player-centric nature that games should ideally possess. It is essential to distinguish dark patterns from bad game design, which may simply waste players' time unintentionally, while dark patterns are purposefully implemented by game designers.

Various kinds of dark patterns exist, such as temporal dark patterns, monetary dark patterns, and social capital-based dark patterns (Montola, 2010; Zagal et al., 2013). Temporal dark patterns, for instance, employ strategies like grinding and appointments, where players must wait for specific time periods to continue playing the game. These patterns are deliberately designed to ensure constant player engagement.

As pointed out by the scientific discourse on the matter, death can also serve as a dark pattern in games, particularly considering its temporal nature, as it often causes players to take a temporary step back from the game's progress. However, the concept of death in games is multifaceted, as it is usually experienced both as a victim and as a responsible agent within the game world. The prevalence of death varies depending on the genre of the game too. In some games, death may be a common aspect, while in others, it might be a rare event. Further investigation is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies surrounding death in video games.

In light of this, the notion of dark play emerges as a helpful tool to go deeper into the relationship between death and dark patterns, exploring how they can craft meaningful negative experiences for players. Dark play represents the dark side of gameplay, wherein contemporary games explore challenging and problematic themes such as war, disasters, human decay, post-apocalyptic futures, cruelty, and betrayal. Even within the most playful genres, players are now faced with difficult ethical and moral dilemmas, giving rise to dark play behavior (Mortensen et al., 2015).

Overall, the exploration of dark patterns, death, and dark play offers new views into how game designers can craft meaningful experiences for players, leveraging negative emotions and dilemmas to create engaging and thought-provoking gameplay scenarios.

In the next paragraph, It will shown through the literature how dark play and more specifically death can be used to generate positive negative experiences, by analyzing two possible roles of death in video games: death as a game mechanic and an important element for the storytelling and atmosphere, by giving sense of threat through in-game deaths or by putting death as a central theme of the gaming experience. For this analysis, it is necessary to begin by looking at horror games, which are a great example of how to use death as a dark pattern in order to create meaningful experiences for players.

2.4.1 // The atmosphere of dark play

As anticipated previously, death can be a fundamental element for creating the right atmosphere inside a game and this can happen by taking into consideration different points, for example what the player sees when they die (when they reach the so-called Game-over) or what kind of consequences they will have to face once killed one or more NPCs.

Speaking about game-over, almost every video game has its own way to show the avatar's death, but we can identify two main possibilities: first-person view death, in which the player sees through the avatar's eyes the moment of death (and this is very common in FPS) [Fig. 2.5], and third-person view death [Fig. 2.6] in which the player sees the consequences of the game-over as a spectator towards the avatar (West, 2020).

Fig. 2.5-2.6
Screenshots from the games Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (Activision, 2007) and The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013), showcasing first-person and third-person death screen differences.

Both strategies are useful and there is no specific solution, this can depend on the kind of game we are talking about or what kind of feelings we want to print in the player's mind. Jesper Juul (2010) takes as an example the video game *DOOM* (Id Software, 1992) to explain how, as a mechanic, Game-Over death in video games works. In short, it is something you survive and learn from and in *DOOM* it works very well because, when the

player dies, there is not a stereotyped Game-Over screen: they just see with the eyes of the dead body what is going on, until the player presses a button or loads a previous save point. This is not just a style choice, but a very smart gameplay strategy; it is an opportunity to see what killed you and eventually learn from your mistakes. For Juul, in-game death is «the death you survive and learn from» (1999). Even if it can seem paradoxical, the feeling of failure is what makes the experience Important for the player and always Juul identifies four critical points to remember when we want to make it a positive negative experience in the book *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (2009): 1) the player does not want to fail (feels sad or inadequate); 2) failing makes the player reconsider his/her strategy (which makes the game more interesting); 3) winning provides gratification (especially when the player can feel the sensation of challenge); and 4) winning without failing leads to dissatisfaction (this can be a connection to the previous paragraph when we talked about the flow experience of Csikszentmihalyi).

But, how can the game-over be something more than just a mechanic for the learning experience of the player and transmit the sense of failure? An article from *The Escapist* titled *Why 'You Died' Works Better Than 'Game Over'* (Pechalin, 2021) explains how it is important not only the death itself but also what the player sees after the game-over event through the user interface: in fact, there's an important difference in showing the words "You Died" instead of just "Game-over". This strategy comes from horror games like the first *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) and it has been used also for modern video games like soulsborne series, as a necessity to make game over death more meaningful (Perron, 2018). The traditional concept of "Game-over'' is becoming less prevalent in many games today, as players are often able to retry a small section instead of the entire game. We can identify three main reasons for this shift: one reason is that "Game-over" can break immersion, whereas "you died" serves as a reminder that the player is part of a fictional world where death is possible. However, the immersion in the avatar's death is not as strong because the player perceives the avatar as a separate identity. In the article, is quoted an important observation by Sam Barlow in *EDGE magazine*: while the avatar may die, the player continues to live (2022).

Certain games, like *Dark Souls* (Fromsoftware, 2012), attempt to overcome this challenge by incorporating the respawn mechanic as an integral part of the story. The article suggests that the repetition of "You Died" in these games reinforces the game's core themes and signals that the cycle is about to restart. Here we can identify the second reason for the shift: the use of "You died" minimizes the disconnection between the player and the avatar. The final reason why "You Died" works well is rooted in semantics. The term "you" is considered an indexical and a form of direct reference. In essence, it is more immediate and personal compared to the generic phrase "Game-over". By directly addressing the player, and speaking to them, it creates a more effective and engaging experience overall.

Another help for the creation of positive negative experiences through the game-over comes directly from Horror games. The Horror genre's effectiveness lies in its ability to tap into the concept of the uncanny, as explored by Sigmund Freud. The uncanny refers to a feeling of unease or fear caused by something that is familiar yet strange or unsettling. To generate the uncanny, creators must create a sense of uncertainty in the audience, which can escalate into fear. This feeling is not solely based on traditional fright (Freud, 1919); instead, it aims to evoke fear stemming from childhood traumas or anxieties, such as the fear of darkness and monsters portrayed in games like Amnesia.

Freud described the uncanny as a "Helplessness dream state", where the individual feels vulnerable and powerless. In Horror games, this sense of helplessness is often amplified, as players find themselves facing dangerous challenges and overwhelming threats. Death is not limited to the Horror genre; it can be a meaningful mechanic in various game genres. In fact, death is a pervasive element in nearly every game, serving as an effective tool for enhancing gameplay experiences (Cuerdo and Melcer, 2020; Hanussek, 2022; Sidhu and Carter, 2021).

In the book *The World of scary video games: a study in video ludic horror*, the author Barnard Perron (2018) deeply analyzes the genre of Horror games, by focusing on their story and development during the years, and on the fundamental mechanics that makes a game horror. The book also stresses the topic of death, and how it can generate meaningful failures and experiences for the player through a dark and creepy atmosphere. The discussion divides horror games in two main categories: Survival Horror and Psycho-Survival Horror.

In Survival Horror, death is feared as it manifests as a macabre and violent event for the player-controlled character as seen in games like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). This genre of games is often associated with the term "heroism of horror", where it is clear that the player must achieve a positive ending to successfully complete the gaming experience. In Psycho-Survival Horror, death or game over is feared because it can lead to unexpected and surprising outcomes, as in the game *Amnesia: the dark descent* in which the story is cryptic and the sanity mechanic can lead to unexpected outcomes. Generally, the objective of the game is not completely clear to the player, distinguishing it from the heroism of horror. In these games, the first-person perspective is often preferred over the third-person (Perron, 2018). Also, achieving a "Game-over" state is relatively easy due to the main character's vulnerability and inability to fight

back against the menacing creatures in the game world. The protagonist's weakness helps to a high likelihood of facing defeat in encounters with these hostile entities. Moreover, the gameplay is further complicated by the introduction of a sanity level mechanic: staying in close proximity to monsters or remaining in dark areas for extended periods causes the character's sanity to drop, resulting in challenging gameplay conditions. The diminished sanity affects the player's ability to control the character effectively, leading to disoriented movements and hindering their progress.

Despite the character's extreme vulnerability and the ease of dying in the game, the experience manages to avoid excessive frustration. The game's success in achieving this delicate balance can be attributed to the inclusion of the sanity mechanic and the creation of a chilling and eerie atmosphere that aligns with the game's fictional world. By integrating the sanity mechanic, the developers have added depth to the gameplay experience. This element not only emphasizes the character's vulnerability but also introduces a psychological aspect, making the player feel the impact of the frightening environment on the protagonist's state of mind and lucidity (Hanussek, 2022).

Furthermore, the game's creepy atmosphere plays a significant role in making the character's vulnerability feel justified within the context of the narrative. The unsettling and eerie setting gives a sense of constant danger, which is integral to the game's atmosphere. The player doesn't fear only the temporal step back of death: but also the idea of facing once again the dark and claustrophobic levels of Amnesia (Zagal et al., 2013).

Eventually, death can have an important role also in traditional Survival horror games. A great example of how death can be used (both as game over and killing NPCs) as a fundamental part of the storytelling to create atmosphere and anxiety for the player is *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008). In *Dead Space* [Fig. 2.7], players assume the role of Isaac Clarke, an engineer who finds himself in a dangerous situation: the spaceship Ishimura mysteriously stopped any communication with the outside world, and so Isaac and a group of soldiers are called to investigate what's going on. They discover that the vessel has become a breeding ground for a mysterious alien virus that takes control of deceased bodies, transforming them into grotesque monsters.

Death in *Dead Space* is not merely a mechanical occurrence; it is an intrinsic part of the game's atmospheric design. As players progress, they are confronted with the haunting reality of their mortality. The traditional play-die-restart structure is employed, but what truly amplifies the fear factor is the inclusion of graphic visuals when the player's life points are depleted by the menacing creatures. These visceral and gory depictions serve to immerse players in a truly chilling experience.

Fig. 2.7
Dead Space (Viscerla games, 2008), like Amnesia, has a almost total absence of interface/HUD, providing a thrilling experience.

The act of killing the monsters in *Dead Space* also adheres to this grim and unsettling atmosphere. Since Isaac Clarke is an engineer rather than a trained soldier, the game cleverly equips players with futuristic engineer tools like plasma cutters and circular saws as weapons. This not only allows the player to defend themselves in a manner consistent with the game's storytelling but also provides opportunities for gruesome and splatter kills.

The cohesive use of death throughout *Dead Space* creates an exceptional atmospheric quality. Just as the monsters meet their demise in horrific ways, the player themselves can also succumb to gruesome ends. This consistency creates a sense of tension and dread that permeates every corner of the game's environment. Horror games, like *Dead Space*, serve as exemplary instances of utilizing death to increase the overall atmosphere. This integration of death on both ludic and narrative planes typical of horror games, delivers an intense and spine-chilling experience for players (Elferen, 2015).

2.4.2 // The ludic role of death in video games

We've already seen before how death is often an effective tool for games designers to create challenges and keep a blanched experience and we have seen one of the most common kinds of death mode: play-die restart. It is usually just a quick step back before coming back a few moments earlier before dying thanks to the presence of checkpoints and/or save points (Cuerdo and Melcer, 2020). With checkpoints, we refer to a scripted

event where the player we'll spawn once they die. It can be, for example, the bonfire in *Dark Souls* or the flag in *Super Mario Bros*: all elements present in specific places inside the game. In some games, like *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational games, 2013), players respawn at the exact point where they died. This approach allows players to learn from their mistakes and try different strategies to overcome obstacles without significant interruptions. Save points, on the other hand, are decided by the player: once the avatar dies, instead of respawning in a specific location/checkpoint scripted by the game, the player we'll restart to play in the most recent moment they saved the game. We already discussed this mechanic previously with *Fallout New Vegas*, where a not so well made save point system can create moments of death loop. While the play-die-restart death mode is effective in many cases, it is worth noting that its overuse can lead to predictability and a lack of novelty in gaming experiences. Some players may find this repetitive respawn system to be less immersive and might prefer alternative approaches that offer more varied consequences for failure (Melnic and Melnic, 2018).

Some game designers have been actively working on refining the death mechanic to enrich the gaming experience. Games like *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) and *Super Meat Boy* (Team meat, 2010) exemplify this effort by introducing frequent deaths as a core element of their gameplay. Despite having infinite lives and relatively short levels, dying in these games is a common occurrence due to their intense difficulty. This combination creates a high level of challenge that is remarkably well balanced, keeping players engaged and motivated to improve their skills.

Repetition as discussed by Grodal (2003). It allows players to gradually become familiar with the game mechanics, and challenges through repeated play: facing multiple times the same obstacles, gives you the opportunity to study new strategies and it also increases the sense of accomplishment when players finally master a previously daunting section.

Fig. 2.8
Each time you die in SIFU (Sloclap, 2022), you become older and the aspect of the character changes every time you respawn.

We have mentioned before *Pac-man*, a game where you don't have infinite tries but a limited number. In its early days, limited lives were a common design choice to heighten challenges and push players to spend money to get credits useful to continue playing. Players had to employ strategic thinking and careful maneuvers to make the most of their limited lives and progress through the game.

However, in modern gaming, the use of limited lives is less prevalent, and many games have adopted a more forgiving approach with infinite lives or generous respawn systems (Copcic et al., 2013).

One of the few examples that still has a limited number of tries and it is also emblematic is the game *SIFU* (Sloclap, 2022). Players control a young Kung-Fu disciple seeking revenge for the death of his uncle, killed by another Kung-Fu master. The game employs a unique death and respawn system, completely different from other action games, that is seamlessly integrated into the narrative. Upon defeat, the protagonist respawn instantaneously but aged. This experience is intended to encourage a sense of growth and improvement, as players are given the opportunity to learn from their failures and adapt their strategies accordingly, but at the same time they must be careful to not die too many times: in fact, once the character reaches at least 70 years, at the next game over, it won't respawn and this time it will be a true game over. Moreover, before the protagonist reawakens, the player can choose to improve a specific skill. This respawn mechanic aligns with the martial arts theme of the game, where learning and mastering techniques are essential for progression. By emphasizing the importance of introspection and perseverance, the death and respawn system in *SIFU* becomes an integral part of the narrative and character development (Papousek, 2022). As we said, every time the player respawn, the age of the protagonist we'll increase and once the protagonist is too old to fight (age 70+), it will be a permanent game over and the player is forced to restart again from the last level or even the beginning of the entire game [Fig.2.8].

The death and respawn mechanics in *SIFU* differs from the classic play-die-restart model and the more challenging Permadeath concept. As you will see in the next chapter, Permadeath is another way to create challenging experiences, by making the player's death a true punishment: once you die, you must restart the game from the beginning.

2.4.2.1 // Permanent Death

The prevalence of this particular death mode has been increasingly evident in recent video games. It has gained popularity not only among indie developers but also within AAA software houses, as exemplified by the game *Returnal* (Housemarque, 2021). To gain a deeper understand-

ing of this phenomenon, we can turn our attention to an illustrative case, namely, *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule, 2009). In this 2D platform game, players are able to create levels and share them online with other players and one of the most popular kinds of levels were the bomb survival. In an article from the website *The Gamer*, titled *Nothing Made Me Feel As Alive As LittleBigPlanet's Bomb Survival* Issy Van Der Velde says:

> Bomb survival is exactly what it sounds like. You're plonked down into a small level that runs deep while bombs rain down from above. Your only task is to survive long enough to get to the bottom and reach the level's exit. As the bombs drop, they leave craters that bore into the ground, leading the way to freedom [...]. The longer the round went on, the bigger the bombs were and the more frequently they fell. (Van Der Velder, 2022, p. n.a.)

These kinds of levels adopted a true Permadeath mechanic, and this is why they became so much famous in the LBP community: the high level of anxiety and challenge of these levels was what made them so popular [Fig. 2.9]. He continues:

> [...] The bombs would make their way through the ground above, threatening the sanctuary, or a small bomb would shoot down the entrance and bounce around, making us both scream and shit our pants. They were proper little fallout shelters, filled with beds, shelves, and other trappings. More than once our skin was saved from a close explosion by sacrificing a pillow, leaving us both charred to show how close we came to death. No video game moment has ever made me feel more alive [...]. (Van Der Velder, 2022, p. n.a.)

Fig. 2.9
Screenshot of a bomb-survival level in LBP (Media Molecule, 2009). The random bombs drop at each new play, makes the experience unique.

When we talk about Permadeath, we can refer to different ways to implement this kind of death mode.

In a traditional "Roguelike" game, dying means starting over from the very beginning. The player loses all their progress, including items, abilities, and levels attained during their playthrough, and this high level of challenge and permanence of death adds an intense and often cruel aspect to the gameplay. Players must be cautious and strategic, since one single wrong move can delete an enormous amount of progress.

On the other hand, Roguelite games introduce some differences to the traditional Roguelike formula.

While they maintain many of the Roguelike elements, they are generally more forgiving when it comes to death. In Roguelite games, players may retain certain elements of progress even after dying, and this could include unlocking permanent upgrades, character progression, or other benefits. The idea is to provide players with a sense of advancement, even if they do not reach the end of the game in a single playthrough.

The distinction between "Roguelike" and "Roguelite" games has been a subject of debate within the gaming community and game studies environment. Some believe that the term "Roguelite" should be reserved for games that significantly depart from the traditional "Roguelike", since the Permadeath is not so frustrating as this last category (Kayleigh, 2023).

Developers continue to explore different ways to challenge players and create engaging gameplay experiences, and the distinctions between these subgenres continue to evolve as the gaming landscape expands (Hanussek, 2022). The already mentioned *Returnal* is a perfect example of Roguelite: despite having to restart the game from the beginning every time the player dies, some up-grades can be maintained and also the story proceeds further.

In some cases, the players themselves decide to add a challenge to the game by imposing a Permadeath mode even if it is not present in the game; this way of playing by imposing challenges in a game is usually defined as "Ironman rule" (Abraham, 2013).

Minecraft also saw players adopting the Ironman rule on their own before the game officially introduced "Hardcore Mode." In Hardcore Mode, the world is set to the hardest difficulty, and if the player's character dies, they are permanently banned from the world and cannot continue playing in that particular save file. This mode has proven popular among players who seek the ultimate challenge and thrill of facing permanent consequences for their in-game choices. The adoption of the Ironman rule and the subsequent addition of Hardcore Mode in *Minecraft* demonstrates how players can influence the game design and shape their own gameplay experiences. Developers often pay attention to player feedback and may incorporate new popular play styles or house rules into official game modes,

providing players with additional options to customize the gameplay and so their experience (Keogh, 2013).

The Ironman rule, since it is not a mechanic thought by game designers, players apply it to various games and It is a way to create a more immersive and intense gaming experience.

2.4.2.2 // The dark side of playing: killing

DayZ (Bohemia Interactive, 2013), as already said before, is a perfect example of a game that uses Permadeath to create intense social interactions and immersive gameplay. The game world is vast and dangerous, filled with both zombies and other players, making every encounter a potential threat. The presence of Permadeath in *DayZ* adds a profound sense of risk and consequence to each decision a player makes and every action carries weight, knowing that one mistake or unfortunate encounter could mean the end of their journey. This creates a heightened level of tension and immersion, as players must constantly assess the risks they take and the trust they place in other survivors. The possibility of permakills, where players permanently eliminate others from the game world, adds an extra layer of complexity to the social dynamics: the decision to take another player's life becomes a moral dilemma, as it means potentially robbing them of hours of progress and effort. The tension between self-preservation and empathy for other players becomes a central theme in the game (Carter et al., 2013) [Fig. 2.10].

DayZ's smart use of Permadeath and "permakills" not only intensifies the gameplay but also encourages emergent storytelling. The interactions between players can lead to memorable and emotional moments, creating player-driven narratives that go beyond the scripted storylines of traditional games (Smith, 2004). On the Reddit page of the game, the user Vyrthian explains this critical moment in the game:

> Once I entered the place I found some guy literally in the front door with his back turned, I got really spooked because I had no idea someone would be there so I instantly shot my shotgun to his head and he died. He is one of my first kills, and I felt really bad about it since he was unaware but I told myself how could someone be this unaware in a place like this knowing I was full-on running for a bit outside the house. But I told myself I should have used my mic to hold him up since he didn't have his gun out. Do you guys think I did the wrong thing? (Reddit u/Vyrthian, 2023, p. n.a.)

The game's unforgiving nature fosters a strong sense of community among players, as survival often requires cooperation and alliances. Friendships and rivalries form as players navigate the challenging environment together, all relations that can last forever (Formosa et al., 2022).

Fig. 2.10
A player in DayZ mod (Bohemia interactive, 2013) hiding from other players. The atmosphere is tense, since a single wrong movement can ruin the entire experience.

Indeed, the behavior described in *DayZ* and similar games, where players prioritize their own advantage and game experience over others', is often referred to as "greed play" (Foo and Koivisto, 2004). In this context, players are primarily focused on their own survival and progression, even if it means engaging in aggressive actions against other players. Greed play arises from the competitive nature of these games, where resources are limited, and survival is challenging. Players have to face difficult decisions to ensure their own survival, and this leads to conflicts with other players: the desire to gain an advantage, secure valuable items, or eliminate potential threats can influence players to act in self-serving ways, even if this means to ruin other player's experience. It can also lead to ambushes, betrayals, and opportunistic actions, where players take advantage of vulnerable situations to gain an upper hand (Mariani & Gandolfi, 2016; Carter et al., 2013).

However, it's essential to note that greed play is just one aspect of the complex player behavior observed in these games. Players' motivations and actions can vary widely, and not all interactions are necessarily hostile or self-serving: many players engage in cooperative gameplay, in order to work together for mutual benefit. Also, some players could decide to kill other players just for fun or as a way to establish their power in the game world. For example, in *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), you can find this kind of playing experience. Players are immersed in a distant future where ultra-futuristic capitalist corporations compete for the control of the universe's resources and the game embraces player-driven dynamics, allowing and even encouraging transgressive behaviors that might be considered disruptive in traditional gaming environments (Aarseth, 2014; Carter, 2015). This way of playing is defined with the term "Griefing", a way to play adopted by experienced players to target and exploit the vul-

nerabilities of newer or less skilled players, just for fun. This practice involves exploitation of the game's mechanics to cause frustration, loss, or, as the name suggests, "grief" to casual players or not skilled ones (Carter et al., 2013b; Chen et al., 2009).

Griefing can manifest in various forms in other games. In *Minecraft*, griefing often involves malicious actions aimed at destroying other players' creations, structures, or possessions. Players who engage in griefing may derive pleasure from causing frustration or grief to others, and it can lead to tense social dynamics within the gaming community. Griefing in *EVE Online* can take various forms. For example, some experienced players might trick rookie players into accepting beneficial alliances or agreements, only to betray them later for personal gain. Moreover players are encouraged to use pervasive strategies to achieve their objectives. In the context of the game's universe, such deceptive actions are viewed as natural consequences of an ultra-competitive and cutthroat society. While griefing might be seen as disruptive and harmful in other gaming environments, it is explicitly allowed and even expected in *EVE Online*. The developers have embraced this approach to create a truly player-driven experience, where the actions of the participants shape the game's universe: this sandbox approach encourages players to find their own paths, form alliances, and engage in power struggles, which often involve acts of deception and manipulation. Players must be cautious and vigilant, as they can never fully trust others they encounter in the vast virtual universe. *EVE Online*'s environment and community are not for everyone. While griefing might be a source of frustration for some, for others it is an integral part of the game experience [2.11].

Fig. 2.11
Screenshot from a YouTube video of the channel "Resurrected Starships". On the web, there are many guides for rookies that want to approach EVE online, and many of these focuses on how to survive griefing. (Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AA1oxLLdGNg)

In EVE Online, griefing is seen as a form of "power imposition" (Rubin and Camm, 2013) that is deeply tied to the game's political narrative, economic warfare, and player-driven narratives. In such a hostile and competitive environment, players must be aware to navigate the complexities of the game world successfully (Kelly et al., 2014). In the study by Marcus Carter on *Massive Multiplayer Dark Play*, there are different interviews to players that plays *EVE online* with the purpose to grief other players, and one of them explained in an effective way the sensation of gratification that griefing can give to you and, in some circumstances, it can help in training your social skills too to trick others (2015):

> I started playing when I was 16 or 17 years old, I was in highschool at the time and not very popular. During my time griefing other players and later being a con-man of sorts helped tremendously with my personal life. I learned, through my avatar, the functions of social interaction, I learned that the worst thing anyone can ever say is "No", I grew from it, and while I was nowhere near as malicious in real life as I was in game, it helped me become more social and lose my social anxiety altogether. By the time I started college I was fearless of being socially awkward, made a great many friends. [...] I missed the hunt, the search for a target. Looking through their contracts, looking up their killboards, finding out if their corpmates are possible targets as well. (Carter, 2015, p. 473)

Players' behavior in online games can indeed be influenced by their mindset while playing and the opposite can also happen. The concept of telic versus paratelic mindset can help in understanding players' motivations and actions in online gaming environments: telic mindset refers to playing the game as intended, by focusing on achieving the objectives and goals set by the game. Players with a paratelic mindset, instead, play for the enjoyment and experience of the activity itself, by being more interested in exploring the game world and experimenting with gameplay mechanics.

Jakko Stenros (2010) has further identified three different levels of paratelic mindset:

1. *Playing the players*: As the name suggests, in this level, players adopt an aggressive approach towards other players. For example, by causing grief or frustration to others, seeking power imposition, or prioritizing their own gaming experience over others.
2. *Playing the system*: At this level, players focus on finding loopholes, exploiting bugs, or using unintended mechanics to gain advantages within the game. They are driven by the challenge of "beating the game" at its own conditions.
3. *Playing the game*: This level concerns playing the game as it was in-

tended to be played. Players with a paratelic mindset at this level still enjoy the gameplay and activities without overly fixating on achieving specific goals. They appreciate the overall experience and the immersion the game provides.

The first category, "Playing the Players", is where griefing and greed play are most prominent, since it is a way to play where players prioritize their own enjoyment at the expense of others.

Understanding players' mindsets, whether telic or paratelic, is fundamental because it is helpful for game designers to make game mechanics that cater to both goal-oriented players and those who seek enjoyable experiences without strict objectives that can lead to a more diverse and engaging gaming environment.

Eventually, there are games where killing other players is the main objective. For example, most Battle royale games and in general online shooters are all focused on accumulating the highest kill ratio. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012) is an emblematic example of how killing other players can be an important mechanic: it emphasizes competitive gameplay rather than narrative, where the main focus lies in the competitive nature of the experience. However, death in video games holds significant importance, even if it is just a mechanic within the game. In fact, online games have brought about noteworthy innovations in the portrayal of death: there are games where death serves as a primary objective, such as in online deathmatch fights between players. In these games, players must strive to kill their opponents while being cautious not to die too many times, as each death awards the opponent's team with a point (Mariani, 2018). The introduction of kill cams has played a prominent role in this genre of games. In an article by Dragoş M. Obreja in the journal *Game Studies* (2022), the influence of kill cams on gameplay is discussed. They provide an advantage for the player who has been killed, allowing them to observe their mistakes and learn from them while placing the killer at a disadvantage. This creates a paradox of failure, as players are motivated to play again, aiming to avoid the mistakes they observed. The relationship between the observer and the observed is intriguing, as the one who has been killed becomes the observer when watching their own kill cam. Although the specific games may vary, technologically, kill cams share similar characteristics across different titles.

Some multiplayer games offer Player versus Environment (PVE) gameplay, where they confront NPCs rather than other players. *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2008) is a popular example of such a game. Additionally, there are games that combine PVE and Player versus Player (PVP) elements, allowing players to face both NPCs and other human opponents, like the already mentioned *DayZ*. Killing as a gameplay mechanic extends beyond MMORPGs and online games, as it is prevalent in many single-player games as well, like the already mentioned *Uncharted 2*. In this game, killing serves to overcome obstacles and challenges that the player will encounter and NPCs are the primary targets that must be eliminated to progress in the game's narrative. Engaging in combat, strategically approaching enemies and mastering combat skills are all aspects that shape the sense of challenge and excitement that players face in action-adventure games. However, we'll see later that killing as a mechanic in this kind of games can create ludo narrative dissonance (Glas, 2015) if not well implemented with the narrative.

These confrontations add a layer of tension and drama to the game's narrative and the player, as the protagonist, believes to be the driving force behind the story's progression even if they are following a pre-imposed path (Davidson, 2011).

Actually, there are games where the decision to kill a character rather than another one can have consequences on the gameplay mechanics. We can take as an example the many fantasy role-playing games (RPGs) on the market, like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks, 2006), where players can obtain experience points (XP) by killing enemies in order to make their character stronger. In fact, in *TES IV: Oblivion*, the act of killing an NPC may not have a direct impact on the main storyline, but it does for sure affect the player's experience and progression within the game. This aspect of the game design adds depth to the decision-making process, since an easier enemy to kill will bring you a few XP points while a stronger one can be tougher to kill, but it will give you more XP (Aarseth, 2014; Lankoski and Björk, 2007). By incorporating XP rewards for actions like killing, game developers encourage players to engage with different gameplay styles and approaches, which can lead to diverse and personalized gaming experiences. Nevertheless, the broader exploration of consequences in games and their connections to mechanics and storytelling requires more in-depth analysis and research to fully understand the extent of their impact on player experiences.

Death and killing as mechanics are ubiquitous in the world of video games. They have become directly involved in the gaming experience and are widely accepted by players as essential aspects of many game genres. In conclusion, death and killing as mechanics are integral components of video games. They build the excitement, challenge, and immersion that players seek in their gaming experiences. While they are widespread and widely accepted, they coexist with a wide range of gameplay mechanics that together create the rich environment of gaming adventures enjoyed by players worldwide. Killing and dying in video games is a strong narrative element too rather than "just" a gameplay mechanic.

2.4.3 // Death in the storytelling

Storytelling plays a crucial role in shaping the game experience. When a product manages to create a believable and immersive fictional universe, it helps players to engage in it and In the field of digital storytelling, the possibilities are virtually endless. Games offer a unique interactive platform where players are not mere spectators but active participants in the narrative. The decisions they make within the game world have consequences and directly impact the direction of the story, in both explicit or implicit ways. This element of agency gives players a sense of control and ownership over their gaming experience, making it more personal and meaningful (Bergström, 2011).

Death and killing emerge as powerful tools for narrative development. Beyond being "just" gameplay mechanics, they can contribute significantly to the overarching storytelling. The emotional weight of character deaths or the moral dilemmas surrounding the act of killing can add depth and complexity to the narrative. The consequences of these actions can shape the player's understanding of the game's world and its inhabitants, fostering a deeper connection with the story being told.

Many games try to overcome the potential ludo narrative contrast by making death not only a central point for the atmosphere of the game, but also as a true main theme for the video game. In fact, games can be an opportunity to analyze tough topics, like death, in a different way from movies and literature, since the user is directly acting in the story.

They are often eventually used to help people think about reality matters. Ian Bogost, as already mentioned previously, describes those games that install critical thinking inside players as Persuasive games (2010), that is, those that have the potential to serve as powerful tools for expressing and examining complex social, cultural, and political issues. They focus on sharing a specific message or promoting a particular viewpoint rather than just giving random entertainment or escapism, and they seek to engage players intellectually and evoke meaningful reflection. More specifically, Bogost (2010) emphasizes the importance of game design as a form of rhetoric, suggesting that games can be seen as persuasive arguments, similar to essays or speeches. He thinks that game designers should use the unique qualities of the medium, such as interactivity and simulation, to create meaningful experiences that invite players to adopt critical thinking, since games have the power to convey meaningful messages. Procedural rhetoric, a concept Bogost introduces, refers to the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, moving beyond traditional forms of communication like spoken or written language. By carefully crafting the laws and rules within a game, developers can effectively communicate specific ideologies, making games a powerful medium for conveying ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, Bogost (2010) encourages game designers to address a diverse range of topics through persuasive games, including politics, social issues, and environmental concerns. By exploring these subjects in an interactive format, games can potentially foster empathy, raise awareness, and encourage players to critically analyze complex problems (and of course, persuasive games can be pervasive too).

We can identify many games in which death is a central theme in the experience, each one with its own way to address the topic. Marta Abruzzese (2019) identifies two main groups for death as a theme: death as a secondary or derivative element and death as a main element. In the death as secondary/derivative, death does not have explicitly central to the game but plays a significant role in the storytelling. An example of this is To the Moon (Freebird games, 2011), where death is a part of the narrative, but the gameplay itself is not directly influenced.

On the other hand, in games where death is the main element, it is not only present in the storytelling but also holds a central position within the game's fictional world and directly impacts the gameplay. Within this category, two subgroups emerge: games with an entertainment purpose and games for social change (Mariani & Gandolfi, 2016).

Gris is an example of a game that addresses death with an entertaining purpose. In this 2D platformer developed by Nomada Studio (2018), players solve environmental puzzles while exploring the theme of acceptance of grief and death. The gameplay mechanics are simple, in order to vehicle the attention of the player to the real purpose of the game: conveying the emotional journey of accepting loss. For instance, Gris has been analyzed by Ni Putu Anindhitha Ayesha Sandra (2022) in terms of how it presents the five stages of grief, as outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969), through environmental design and gameplay mechanics. The use of colors and shapes in the game's environment reflects the different stages of grief, and players learn new mechanics that correspond to each stage, such as destructive actions associated with anger, while the primary color in the environment is red [Fig. 2.12].

Eventually, there are games that are even more focused on the social aspect, and they exist in order to share a message before entertaining the player: those games are defined as "Games For Social Change" (G4SC). Unlike conventional games that primarily aim to entertain and engage players for leisure, games for social change have a broader mission of educating and advocating for social causes. Due to their unique purpose and emphasis on social impact, games for social change often receive different treatment from traditional games from the critic. Game reviewers and critics may adopt alternative approaches to evaluate these games, rec-

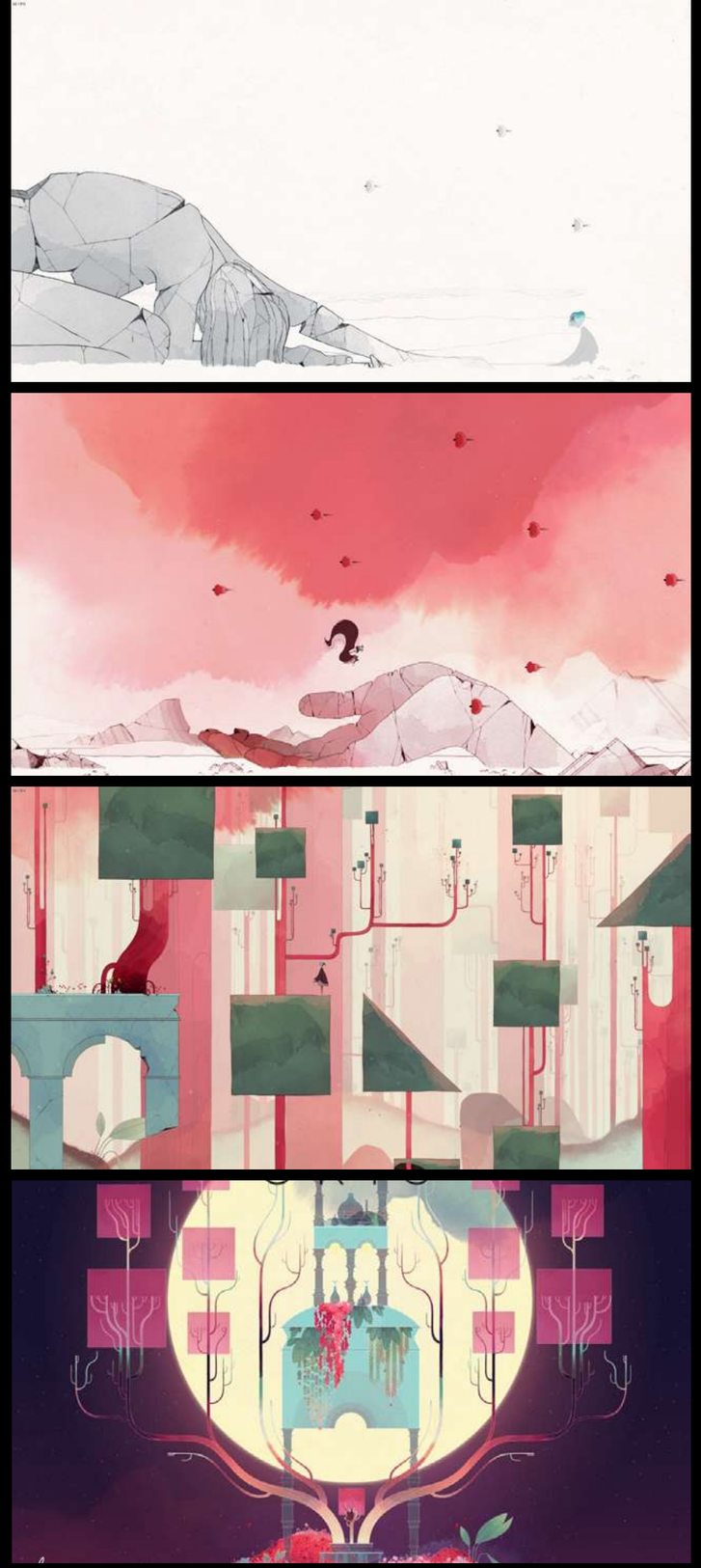


Fig. 2.12
In Gris (Nomada studio, 2018), each new area add a new color that represent a specific stage of acceptance of loss. It should be noted, that no color is erased when a new one arrives, rather they mix together to create new shades.

ognizing that their value lies not only in entertainment but also in their potential to effect positive change. As such, conventional review scoring systems might be avoided or modified to reflect the specific impact and purpose of these games (Schott, 2017).

There are many G4SC that address the theme of death and more specifically loss, but the main example is for sure *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016). This emotionally charged game presents the true story of a family struggling with the devastating loss of their five-year-old child to cancer. Unlike traditional games with a clear win state, That Dragon, Cancer does not follow a conventional gaming structure: the game's design and narrative invite players to contemplate and recognize the profound impact of the loss, as well as the moments of hope and connection that the family experiences during their difficult journey.

It is a deeply personal yet universal story, striking a chord with players as they navigate through the emotional terrain of loss and bereavement. Throughout the game, players encounter bereavement cards scattered throughout the hospital ward, which were written by the game's Kickstarter funders. This gesture points up the collective nature of grief and the power of shared experiences. The game's creator, Ryan Green, reflects on the essence of life and the absence of definitive answers. He acknowledges that life's most profound moments often lack easy solutions but emphasizes the importance of walking together with others amid the uncertainty (Schott, 2017).

We should remember the role of death when caused towards other NPCs when we want to create coherent storytelling in video games. In fact, while we are thinking about how to make the game funny and entertaining through the gameplay, it's easy to forget the role of storytelling in the immersion of the player in the fictional world. Renè Glas in the book *Dark Play* (Chapter *Of Heroes and Henchmen: The Conventions of Killing Generic Expendables in Digital Games*, 2015) explains this contrast well by taking for example the action-adventure video game *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. The player effortlessly dispatches numerous NPCs, unaffected by their actions due to the dehumanization of these characters. The same happens in games such as *Bioshock Infinite*, in which it highlights the issue of engaging with a serious game where the player kills numerous individuals without any consequences or acknowledgment. This narrative style of the protagonist eliminates various characters developed from Hollywood action movies, featuring exaggerated scenarios and dehumanized characters. This approach often presents polarizing characters, with the hero being unequivocally good and the villain entirely evil. This can result in ludo narrative dissonance, where excessive focus on gameplay challenges disregards the narrative and the protagonist's relationship with other NPCs, leading to peculiar and inconsistent situations.

However, it seems like that killing in games is a theme that is faced in a completely different way from death. In fact, there are no games where killing has only a narrative or thematic role, but it is also an important mechanic of the overall experience: there are many video games where killing (and in some circumstances even death) can have a role as both mechanic and narrative element.

2.4.3.1 // Embedding death with the narrative

In chapter 2.4.2.1, it has been discussed how Permadeath constitutes a mechanic that goes beyond traditional gameplay. However, we should underline that this mechanic can eventually be implemented with the narrative too, and there are many modern games that succeeded in doing so and the game *The Walking Dead* (Telltale games, 2010) is a perfect example.

In this narrative game, Players control Lee, an inmate who escapes prison after a zombie outbreak plunges society into chaos and during his escape he meets a little girl, who lost her parents. Lee decides to help her and they start their journey into an America devastated by the apocalypse.

Since the game wants to be focused on the narrative, the mechanics are limited in order to emphasize the story and players can actually change it by making decisions: these choices can be simple ones, like taking a path rather than another one, or very complex, like choosing which survivor to save from certain death. And it's here that Permadeath comes into play: when a character dies, they are permanently removed from the game, with no possibility of return.

The consequences of these deaths are significant, since as we said they can alter the course of the story and they can also impact relationships with the other survivors, and this can force players to carefully consider their choices in order to accept the inevitable consequences. It intensifies the emotional impact of the game, as players become aware that their decisions have lasting effects on the characters they have come to care about. This mechanic also favors replayability: knowing that character deaths are permanent encourages players to replay the game and explore different choices to see how they affect the story. Each playthrough is a unique experience, with many alternative story paths to explore.

Incorporating Permadeath into story-driven games is a testament to how game developers are constantly exploring new ways to challenge players and create new ways to tell stories. The Walking Dead series, in particular, showcases how narrative and gameplay can cooperate to create an impactful journey for players (Pallavicini et al., 2020). We can also take as an example this post from the official Reddit page of the game, where players discuss the death of one of the main characters [Fig. 2.13].

Fig. 2.13
Meme shared by a user on the Reddit post: https://www.reddit.com/r/TheWalkingDeadGame/comments/i3h2vz/gotta_save_him/. This is one of the many examples of players complaining about the loss of character in the walking dead, underlining how Permadeath can generate meaningful experiences.

The choice between implementing Permadeath or a more "classic" play-die-restart structure in a game depends on the specific design goals intended by game designers, since both mechanics offer distinct advantages and challenges for both narrative and mechanics.

Permadeath can create a tougher gaming experience, as players must carefully consider their decisions and face the full consequences of failure. It can make the experience more realistic by making every action feel meaningful, it can emphasize risk-reward mechanics. On the other hand, the play-die-restart structure offers a more forgiving gameplay experience, by allowing players to experiment, learn from their mistakes, and gradually improve their skills. Some games may benefit from the intensity and emotional weight of Permadeath, while others may be better suited for a more accessible and forgiving experience (Bosman, 2018).

Game designers should also consider their target audience. Permadeath may be embraced by hardcore gamers seeking a high-stakes challenge, while casual players or those more interested in narrative-driven experiences might prefer the play-die-restart structure.

2.5 // The ethical dilemma of killing in video games

We mentioned before how games tend to use different ways to talk about killing and hurting others and the mechanics of killing are prevalent in a wide variety of game genres. An excellent example of this is the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series, particularly *GTA3* (Rockstar games, 2001) since it was the most discussed chapter of the series. In this game, Players control a criminal protagonist called Claude and are given the freedom to explore an open-world environment while completing various objectives. Eventually, this freedom extends to the ability to commit violent actions, including killing innocent civilians and the game's story itself often involves morally ambiguous situations that require the player to act violently.

The criticism surrounding games like *GTA 3*, particularly for their depiction of violence, is not uncommon especially from all those people that are not used to video games. In the field of game studies, many tried to explain why it is actually more complex than it seems: the study *Playing a 'Good' Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games* (Reynolds, 2002) explores the doubts of video game morality and provides facts into why such games cannot be deemed immoral.

The study takes a philosophical approach to understand the ethics of video games, including *GTA 3*, and challenges the notion that all violent or morally ambiguous content in games is for sure immoral. The author argues that morality in video games should be assessed differently from morality in real-life actions and decisions and one key point of consideration is the distinction between fictional and real-world contexts. In *GTA 3*, players engage in a fictional narrative within a virtual world. This fictional world operates under its own set of rules and boundaries, which differ significantly from the moral constraints of the real world. As a result, actions that might be considered immoral in reality may not have the same ethical weight within the game's context.

Another important aspect is player agency and choice. As we already said, players have the freedom to make choices, including engaging in violent actions. The study argues that these choices are fictional and do not carry the same moral weight as real-life decisions: since players' actions within the game do not have real consequences, the game's morality is completely separated from real-world ethics.

Another point discussed by experts is the concept of "ludo narrative dissonance", that verifies when the game's narrative may conflict with its gameplay mechanics. The violent actions of the protagonist in the game may diverge from the moral intentions presented in the narrative and this dissonance allows players to experience the game as a form of entertainment, rather than a reflection of their own moral values (Švelch, 2010).

Moving further into the research, three ethical theories are presented to understand the morality of games like *GTA 3*: *Consequentialism*, *Deontology*, and *Virtue Ethics*.

Consequentialism examines the outcomes of actions to understand their moral value: in the context of *GTA 3*, it argues that merely being the trigger of violent behaviors in a game does not automatically make it unethical. For example, cars can cause accidents, but we don't label all car games as immoral based solely on this potential outcome. Consequentialism encourages a broader analysis of the impact of the game, taking into account its narrative, artistic expression, and the players' context.

Deontology, on the other hand, focuses on a hierarchy of rights and duties. It acknowledges that games, including *GTA 3*, are a form of free speech, which is considered a fundamental right.

Virtue Ethics explains the idea that being virtuous is the essence of being human. Players make choices within the game's narrative, which often involves violent interactions with NPCs and this aspect could be considered in opposition with the Virtue Ethics principles. However, these interactions are contextualized within the game's setting, where the player portrays a criminal protagonist. This portrayal aligns with the narrative and is fundamental to the game's storytelling: while some critics may argue that the violent interactions in *GTA 3* conflict with virtue ethics, proponents may counter that it is the virtue of justice, storytelling, or freedom of expression that the game embodies.

When we talk about ethics, we can't ignore all those games (like the already mentioned The Walking dead) where game designers intentionally designed the experience to install ethical dilemmas into the player's actions. In the study *The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay*, (Sicart, 2009) the author explores how games can serve as powerful tools to create ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding killing and broader concepts of fairness.

One key aspect discussed in the study is the concept of "simulated evil", where players are presented with situations that mirror real-world ethical challenges. Games can immerse players in scenarios where they must make difficult choices involving life and death, or where they must consider the consequences of their actions on virtual societies. These ethical dilemmas provoke players to think critically about the implications of their decisions, thus fostering ethical contemplation and discussion. The study emphasizes that creating ethical gameplay does not inherently glorify violence or immoral behavior: rather, it presents these dilemmas as opportunities for players to face moral questions and understand the complexity of human decision-making.

2.5.1 // Dying and killing in video games as a meta-narrative device

When we talk about ethical dilemmas in games, we can't ignore the game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005), a true cult for games in which narrative and mechanics collide. The game presents a cryptic story and we have little information on what exactly is going on: the player controls a lone knight called Wander on a mission to save from an eternal sleep a mysterious girl named Mono. In order to save Mono, Wander needs to slay all the giant creatures that populate the game world known as Colossi. The only problem is that these creatures do not actively seek out violence or pose a direct threat to Wander. It is only when the player attacks that the colossi defend themselves. The colossi are just the guardians of the forbidden lands (the place in which the game is settled), and their deaths have a significant impact on the ecosystem of the world. Each colossus is a unique, awe-inspiring creature with its own characteristics and vulnerabilities, making their deaths even more impactful. Is saving Mono worth the loss of these magnificent creatures? The player is constantly subjected to this question, through both narrative and ludic planes of the game (Sicart, 2009). As the narrative unfolds, players may find themselves emotionally conflicted between their desire to achieve their goal and the realization that the colossi are innocent beings. This creates a compelling and poignant experience that goes beyond simple heroics and raises deeper questions about the consequences of one's actions in the pursuit of a specific goal [Fig. 2.14].

Shadow of the Colossus belongs to those games with "fixed justice" (Švelch, 2010): these games deliberately create moral engagement by presenting the player with choices that cannot be avoided. Another notable example of such a game is the already mentioned *Spec Ops: The Line (Yager, 2012),* which masterfully tackles the subject of morality and responsibility in single-player avatar-based video games.

The protagonist of the game is Captain Martin Walker, head of a military rescue team called "Delta Team" and his task is to find any survivors of a natural disaster that occurred in Dubai. As the game progresses, the player (who controls Martin Walker) has to face with morally challenging situations and decisions while the story completely changes mood: it starts has a stereotyped story for shooter games to than become something similar to the movie "Apocalypse Now", by focusing more on the mental sanity of the soldiers. The closer the player is to the end of the game, the more the narrative becomes cryptic and violent, with many scenes that break the fourth wall [Fig. 2.15].

The game wants to do something complex, and this is making killing NPCs a moral dilemma, by integrating it into the narrative and forcing

Fig. 2.14
A screenshot from Shadow of the Colossus (Team ICO, 2005). Staying in front of one of those colossi is a unique experience, a mix between fear and awe.

players to confront the consequences of their actions by hunting them with "grotesque" images and other narrative elements all focused on making the player feel guilty . This fixed justice approach holds players accountable for the consequences of their actions, emphasizing the moral weight of their decisions.

One of the game's notable techniques is the use of the already mentioned fabrication (Goffman, 1974, chapter 2.2). *Spec Ops: The Line* uses fabrication to immerse players in a carefully crafted world that blurs the line between reality and fiction. This technique tricks players into feeling directly involved in the narrative and challenges them to confront their own beliefs and values.

The game also employs an interesting strategy by taking familiar mechanics and gameplay elements from other famous war shooters, such as *Call of Duty*, and presenting them in a new and uncanny way. The white phosphorus scene is a prime example of this approach, where the game forces players to face consequences of their choices in a harrowing and unsettling way. It starts as a scene where you have to target military objectives from the screen of a computer, in order to drop white phosphorus bombs and then be able to proceed. However, once Delta Team destroyed everything, they discovered that they didn't attack a military base: they killed innocent civilians. It is all focused on the responsibility of the player when they kill other NPCs and also how game designers are involved. The game constantly gives questions to the player about this topic. The line here is defined as a post *Bioshock* game: if *Bioshoc*k put attention on the lack of choice for the player, *The Line* not only share this topic but also underlines how the player is in any case responsible (Björk, 2015; Jørgensen, 2016; Keogh, 2012; Mariani & Gandolfi, 2016).

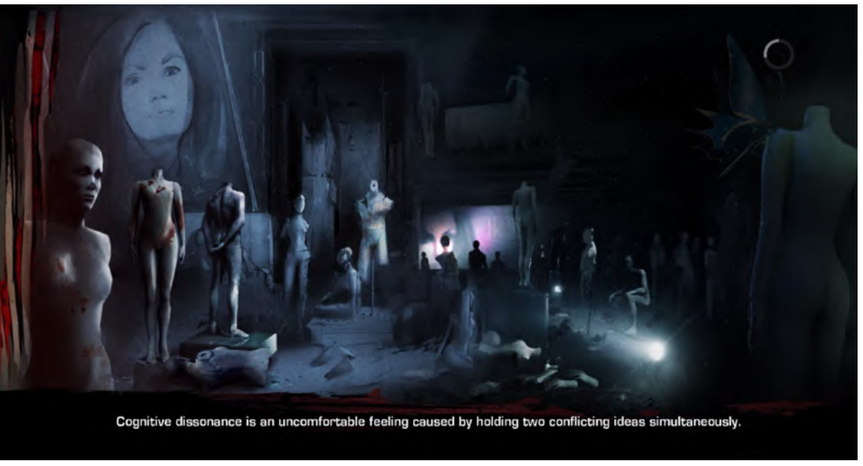


Fig. 2.15
An example of breaking the 4th wall in Spec Ops: The Line (Yager, 2012). During the loading screen, instead of appearing an advice, it appears a strange sentence about Cognitive dissonance.

There are other ways to make death and killing meaningful in games, and one of these is implementing a moral choice system that tracks the player's actions and accumulates deeds (Švelch, 2010) throughout the gameplay. *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware, 2011), one of the most famous MMORPG, is a notable example of a game that successfully employs such mechanics. Settled in the iconic *Star Wars* universe, players are given the freedom to shape the moral alignment of their characters, thanks to a robust moral choice system that has significant consequences on the story and the character's development. Players, depending on what decisions they take in specific parts of the story, can choose to follow the path of the light side (good) or the dark side (evil) and, by doing so, they will unlock exclusive contents related to the path they chose (such as specific power ups or exclusive missions). For example, It determines which companions the player can recruit, influences dialogue options, and unlocks specific missions aligned with the chosen path. Players' decisions in quests and interactions with NPCs are continuously tracked, and their accumulated deeds contribute to their general alignment, reflecting their character's moral compass (Linderoth, 2012; Mortensen, 2015).

Indeed, the criticism surrounding games like *SW:TOR* stems from the explicit and binary nature of the good and evil paths presented to players. The game's focus on replayability can sometimes overshadow the potential for deep ethical gameplay. By offering clear-cut choices between good and evil, players may find it relatively easy to understand which path to take without much ethical contemplation.

The emphasis on replayability often means that the game prioritizes providing diverse experiences for players rather than challenging them with complex ethical dilemmas. As a result, players might feel that the choices they make are more about exploring different possibilities rather than engaging in genuine ethical decision-making. This can lead to a sense of superficiality in the ethical gameplay, as the choices may lack depth and meaningful consequences and the clash between the game's structure and storytelling further compounds the issue. When players select a particular path, their character's development and abilities are affected, potentially limiting their access to certain powers or features and they may feel restricted from fully exploring their character's potential and experiencing the game in its entirety (Linderoth, 2012).

There are games that offer a more complex and morally ambiguous experience when it comes to ethical decision-making, like *Dishonored* (Bethesda Softworks, 2012) and *This War of Mine* (11 Bit studios, 2014) which are excellent examples of games of how players can be challenged with complex and meaningful moral choices. *Dishonored* presents players with many morally ambiguous situations and this ambiguity is central to the game's narrative, as the player must navigate a world where killing NPCs has significant consequences (killing too many people, we'll help a sort of plague to spread and this will affect the moral and trust of people towards you) (Jørgensen, 2015). The philosophy of consequentialism, which assesses ethical value based on the outcomes of actions, is at play in *Dishonored*. The game employs different techniques to focus on ethical choices. Firstly, it uses emotions versus ethical principles, pitting players' emotional desires for vengeance against their sense of ethical responsibility. Secondly, the game incorporates both subtracting and mirroring as techniques for ethical choice. While subtracting reflects ethical choices in the game (similar to Shadow of the Colossus), mirroring places players in uncomfortable ethical positions where they must confront their actions and their consequences.

Additionally, *Fictional Alignment and Embedded Narratives* (Bosman, 2018) play a role in shaping the ethical landscape of Dishonored, since the game's narrative and world-building are designed to align with specific ethical perspectives, creating a cohesive and immersive experience that encourages players to struggle with ethical dilemmas.

On the other hand, *This War of Mine* takes a different approach to ethical gameplay. Sicart's (2009) classification of ethical game design into open and closed designs can be applied here. *This War of Mine* falls into the closed design category, where player decisions are constrained to drive the game's main narrative. Although the overall direction remains fixed, player's choices will influence directly on who will survive, allowing for a more curated ethical experience.

The main objective of *This War of Mine* is to survive the hardships of war for several days, with days divided into two distinct parts: day time, where players must organize their inventory and accumulated resources,

and night time, when they venture outside their shelter to scavenge for goods and supplies.

During the night-time expeditions, players may encounter other survivors' hideouts and refugees. Here, players are faced with moral dilemmas that can significantly alter the course of events: for example, they may have to make tough choices, such as killing an NPC to obtain their fundamental resources. These decisions are not taken lightly, as players will have to bear the consequences of their actions throughout the game. In fact, once they come back to their base, the other survivors will be sad if you killed or stole valuable things from others.

The emotional weight of killing an innocent in *This War of Mine* is evident from the experiences shared by players, such as the user *FrostFire26* on the sub-reddit page dedicated to the game:

> I walked into the home of an elderly couple. The husband calmly walked towards me saying that they had no valuables for me to steal.
> It turns out he was lying as I found bandages and canned food in a cupboard. I pulled out my homemade knife and killed them both. They were too old and frail to run away.
>
> Feels bad man. (u/FrostFire26, n.a.)

After killing an elderly couple to acquire their resources, the player was tormented by their decision. This exemplifies the game's ability to evoke a sense of guilt and moral reflection within players, making them contemplate the ethical implications of their choices.

The consequences of such actions are not limited to in-game consequences but also deeply affect the player's emotional state. The reactions of other characters in the game to the player's actions serve to underline the weight of their decisions. The guilt and remorse felt by players after making morally questionable choices reflect the power of *This War of Mine* (and more in general games that address moral implications) in immersing players into its morally complex world.

In contrast to *Dishonored*, where players must navigate complex moral choices, *This War of Mine* presents players with challenging situations that reflect the harsh realities of war and survival. The game encourages players to confront ethical questions related to resource allocation, morality, and the well-being of others in dire circumstances (de Smale et al., 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The academic literature illuminates a dynamic terrain wherein death assumes a pivotal role in shaping immersive and substantive gaming encounters. However, some unresolved aspects necessitate deeper investigation. This entails undertaking a thorough examination of the subject matter, with the aim of augmenting the overarching discourse surrounding its import. Such an inquiry should investigate into the broader connotations and ramifications of death and killing mechanisms within video games, along with their interplay with narrative constructs and gameplay mechanics.

Hence, this study answers the following research question: *Which are the possible death/killing modes in video games? What meanings do they attach to, considering the narrative context and the game mechanics in which they are embedded? What communication strategies are linked to these death modes and how can they be exploited by game designers?*

03

// Theoretical framework

3.1 // Defining and clustering research arguments

In the initial phase of this study, an analysis was conducted on a relevant body of knowledge related to different extents to the topic, leading to their categorization into distinct groups based on the themes they address. Each article analyzed underwent a categorization process that started from an initial, individual exploration; then, those addressing analogous subjects were systematically grouped together. This process resulted in the identification of 9 distinct clusters, each centering around a specific subject.

Table 1 presents a clear organizational schema for these clusters and their references. The construction of the theoretical framework proceeds by systematically examining these specific thematic categories, by enabling a structured exploration of the academic landscape, facilitating a comprehensive and organized comprehension of the chosen research field (deeply explained at page 82).

Table 1
The topic clusters elaborated during the categorization of the references.

NO	TOPIC CLUSTERS	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCES
01	Magic Circle and Boundaries of Play	This topic is focused on the "Magic Circle" concept in video games and its impact on gameplay and the relationship between real and fictional worlds. It includes academic works analyzing this concept, originally introduced by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.*	▪ Really Fake: The Magic Circle, the Mundane Circle, and the Everyday (Zimmerman, 2010) ▪ Jerked Around by the Magic Circle - Clearing the Air Ten Years Later (Zimmerman, 2012) ▪ In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play (Jaakko, 2012) ▪ Defragging the Magic Circle: From Experience Design to Reality Design (Rafinski, 2013) ▪ There is No Magic Circle (Consalvo, 2009) ▪ Exploring the edge of the magic circle: Defining pervasive games (Montola, 2005) ▪ Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. (Huizinga, 1951)
02	Dark Play and Controversial Playfulness	An exploration of the darker aspects of gaming, enriching the comprehension of the dynamics between player actions, virtual realms, and the ethical decisions within digital gaming landscapes. It focuses on how gaming communities and designers struggle with these dimensions of play, providing perspectives on the variegated nature of the encounter.	▪ Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness (J. L. Mortensen Torill Elvira, 2015) ▪ Massively Multiplayer Dark Play: Treacherous Play in EVE Online (Carter, 2015) ▪ Dark Play in Dishonored (Jørgensen, 2015) ▪ Sonic Descents: Musical Dark Play in Survival and Psychological Horror (Elferen, 2015) ▪ Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (Bogost, 2010) ▪ The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments (Mortensen et al., 2015) ▪ The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing (Montola, 2010)
			▪ Designing player death: Using intention and meaning to add depth (Jay, 2017) ▪ Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side (T. E. Mortensen, 2015)
03	Morality and Ethical Aspects in Games	Here we find a collection of studies focusing into the ethical and moral aspects inherent in video games. It includes a wide spectrum of academic investigations that analyze how video games are intertwined with and stimulate ethical and moral contemplations. These examinations encompass not only gameplay mechanics but also the narrative content of video games, providing an interesting view of their impact on players' ethical and moral way of reasoning.	▪ Of Heroes and Henchmen: The Conventions of Killing Generic Expendables in Digital Games (Glas, 2015) ▪ Fabricated Innocence: How People Can be Lured into Feel-Bad Games (Björk, 2015) ▪ Ruthlessness as a Hyper-Social form of Play (Carter et al., 2013a) ▪ Playing a "Good" Game: A Philosophical Approach to Understanding the Morality of Games (Reynolds, 2002) ▪ The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay (Sicart, 2009) ▪ The Good, The Bad, and The Player: The Challenges to Moral Engagement in Single-Player Avatar-Based Video Games (Švelch, 2010) ▪ Morality Meters and Their Impacts on Moral Choices in Video Games: A Qualitative Study (Formosa et al., 2022) ▪ Meaningful negative experiences within games for social change (Mariani,,2016)
04	Player Behavior and Social Dynamics in Games	Its scope extends to discussions surrounding player cooperation and competition, the establishment of social structures and hierarchies within game worlds, strategies of communication within gaming communities, and the far-reaching consequences of player behavior on the overall gaming milieu. These works employ a diverse array of research methodologies, including empirical studies, qualitative analyses, and the application of theoretical frameworks for the research.	▪ Players who play to make others cry: the influence of anonymity and immersion (Chen et al., 2009) ▪ Griefing in virtual worlds: causes, casualties and coping strategies (Chesney et al., 2009) ▪ Don't play me: EVE Online, new players and rhetoric (Paul, 2011) ▪ Playing dirty – understanding conflicts in multiplayer games (Smith, 2004) ▪ Playing the system: using frame analysis to understand online play (Stenros, 2010) ▪ Object, Me, Symbiote, Other: A social typology of player-avatar relationships (Banks, 2015) ▪ Online players: engagement, immersion, and absorption across secondary worlds (Mariani, 2018)
05	Death in Games and role in the gameplay experience	Explore how death serves as an integral and meaningful component of the gaming experience. It includes the examination of respawn systems, the implications of Permadeath, and the consequences stemming from player failure.	▪ The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games (Juul, 2013) ▪ Sorry, You Died: Tipologie, significati e implicazioni della morte nei videogame (Abruzzese, 2019) ▪ A CA perspective on kills and deaths in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive video game play (Rusk and Ståhl, 2020) ▪ Death and dying in DayZ (Carter et al., 2013b) ▪ Death Loop as a Feature (Leino, 2012)

			▪ Game Studies - Play Dead (Carr, 2003) ▪ Designing player death: Using intention and meaning to add depth (Jay, 2017) ▪ Why 'You Died' Works Better Than 'Game Over' - The Escapist (Pechalin, 2021) ▪ Rethinking death (GTDK, 2015) ▪ Don't Forget to Die: A Software Update is Available for the Death Drive (Flynn-Jones, 2015) ▪ Negative Experiences as learning trigger: a play experience empirical research on a game for social change case study (Mariani, 2016)
06	Social Aspects of Gaming	Video games can be hubs for social interactions, fostering communities and networks among players. Their scrutiny extends to the dynamics that underlie in-game communication, encompassing cooperation, competition, and conflict. Also, the cluster focuses on the pivotal roles played by guilds, clans, and online forums in facilitating these interactions.	▪ Digital culture, play, and identity: a World of Warcraft reader (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008) ▪ Structural Roles in Massively Multiplayer Online Games: A Case Study of Guild and Raid Leaders in World of Warcraft (Williams et al., 2014) ▪ Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games - Playing Counter-Strike. (Wright et al., 2002) ▪ Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World (McGonigal, 2011) ▪ I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player (Aarseth, 2014) ▪ Grand Theft algorithm: purposeful play, appropriated play and aberrant players (Gazzard, 2008) ▪ Dark Patterns in the Design of Games (Zagal et al., 2013)
07	Game Design and Mechanics	The topic deeply dissects the elements that shape a game's identity: narrative, level design, gameplay mechanics, and aesthetics. It explores the foundations of game design, exploring how various mechanics like player agency, feedback, progression systems, and aesthetics affect player's engagement. The evolving nature of game design is presented, especially with advancements in technology and digital.	▪ "I'll Be Back": A Taxonomy of Death and Rebirth in Platformer Video Games (Cuerdo and Melcer, 2020) ▪ Death and Rebirth in Platformer Games (Melcer and Cuerdo, 2020) ▪ Pivotal Play: Rethinking Meaningful Play in Games Through Death in Dungeons & Dragons (Sidhu and Carter, 2021) ▪ Saved Games and Respawn Timers: The Dilemma of Representing Death in Video Games (Melnic and Melnic, 2018) ▪ When game over means game over: using permanent death to craft living stories in Minecraft (Keogh, 2013) ▪ Permadeath: A review of literature (Copcic et al., 2013) ▪ Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds (Juul, 2005) ▪ Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals (Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2003)

			▪ Gameplay Design Patterns for Believable Non-Player Characters (Lankoski and Björk, 2007) ▪ Designing player death: Using intention and meaning to add depth (Jay, 2017) ▪ Roguelike vs Roguelite (Kayleigh, 2023) ▪ Replay. Creative possibilities of repetition in video game aesthetics (Lozano, 2018) ▪ Imposed rules and 'expansive gameplay': A Close Reading of the Far Cry 2 Permadeath experiment (Abraham, 2013)
08	Narrative and Storytelling	Here are presented the main theories and methodologies concerning narrative creation in video games. It deeply investigates how traditional storytelling elements, like plot, character development, and themes, merge with the interactive nature of games.	▪ "Understanding" Narrative; Applying Poetics to Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (Meakin, 2021) ▪ Death Narratives : A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games (Bosman, 2018) ▪ The Embodiment of Kübler-Ross Model through Game Elements in GRIS (Sandra and Mutiaz, 2022) ▪ The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line (Jørgensen, 2016) ▪ Killing is harmless: A critical reading of Spec Ops: The line (Keogh, 2012) ▪ That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating life and death in a medium that has frequently trivialized both (Schott, 2017) ▪ The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror (Perron, 2018) ▪ Video Games to Foster Empathy: A Critical Analysis of the Potential of the Walking Dead (Pallavicini et al., 2020) ▪ It's All Fun and Games until Somebody Dies: Grief, Mortality Salience, and Coping in Meaningful Permadeath (West, 2020) ▪ Framing Storytelling with Games (Bergström, 2011) ▪ The Case of This War of Mine: A Production Studies Perspective on Moral Game Design (de Smale et al., 2019) ▪ Well played 3.0: video games, value and meaning (Davidson, 2011)
09	Player Experience and how it reflects on the game itself	It analyzes the nature of player experience, covering cognitive psychology aspects like decision-making and problem-solving, as well as emotional dimensions including immersion and connection with in-game narratives. Also, the synergy between player experiences and game design is highlighted.	▪ My avatar, my self: Virtual harm and attachment (Wolfendale, 2007) ▪ The Effort of Being in a Fictional World: Upkeyings and Laminated Frames in MMORPGs (Linderoth, 2012) ▪ Deception in video games: examining varieties of griefing (Rubin and Camm, 2013) ▪ Spectacular Interventions of Second Life: Goon Culture, Griefing, and Disruption in Virtual Spaces (Bakioglu, 2009)

			▪ Constructing the Ideal EVE Online Player (Kelly et al., 2014) ▪ Nothing Made Me Feel As Alive As LittleBigPlanet's Bomb Survival (Van Der Velder, 2022) ▪ Why Did We All Want to Kill Our Sims? (Cochrane, 2016) ▪ GRIS and Trauma. GRIS is a masterpiece by Nomada Studio… | by L. Beaumont | Medium (Beaumont, 2020) ▪ Hellblade's Permadeath bluff is "not as simple as people think" | PCGamesN (Purslow, 2018) ▪ Player Identity and Avatars in Meta-narrative Video Games: A Reading of Hotline Miami (Papale and Fazio, 2018) ▪ Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998) ▪ The flow experience and its significance for human psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) ▪ "I Am Shocked, Shocked!" Explorations of Taboos in Digital Gameplay (Bertozzi, 2008) ▪ The Uncanny (Freud, 1919)

CLUSTERS DEFINITIONS

CLUSTER 1 is focused on the Magic Circle concept in video games and its impact on gameplay and the real-world/game relationship. It includes academic works analyzing this concept, originally introduced by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938). Zimmerman extensively explores the concept of the magic circle, elucidating its function as a protected space for the gaming experience (2010, 2012). He defines it as an environment that fosters a sense of safety during gameplay. Furthermore, Zimmerman defends this theory against critical perspectives from other scholars. Jaako's work (2012) helps to understand the magic circle in these contexts. In this context, the research by Consalvo (2009) becomes relevant as it critically examines the magic circle thesis,and it is essential for identifying potential weaknesses in the theory. The utility of the magic circle in game design research is exemplified by Rafinski's work (2013), demonstrating its application and relevance. Montola's contribution to the definition of pervasive games begins with an analysis of the magic circle: *Pervasive games*, aiming to transcend traditional boundaries, engage with and challenge the concepts encapsulated by the magic circle (2005).

CLUSTER 2 explores the dark aspects of gaming experience, in both single-player and Multiplayer games. Ethical dilemmas and mechanics strongly related to kill and die are addressed. The primary contribution within this cluster stems from Mortensen Torill's work, *Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness* (2015). Mortensen extensively analyzes various facets of dark play, elucidating its role in addressing social issues. Dark play, as conceptualized by Mortensen, serves not only as a tool for creating social dilemmas but also as a catalyst for critical thinking. In addition to Mortensen's contributions, other experts in the field of game studies have made notable works. Carter, for instance, explains the realm of online games and dark play, specifically focusing on dark patterns and the adversarial relationships between players (2015). Jørgensen extends the discourse to single-player games, illustrating how dark play can make meaningful storytelling, adding layers of intrigue (2015). Elferen explores the contribution of music and sound design to the atmospheres of dark play (2015). The concept of "positive-negative experience," as articulated by Montola, is deeply linked to dark play. Montola characterizes this mode of play as imbued with meaning derived from elements typically considered "not safe" (2010). This concept aligns with the core aspects of Persuasive games, as expounded by Bogost (2010).

CLUSTER 3 addresses ethical dilemmas and morality in games, showcased on both narrative and ludic planes. Glas (2015) conducts an analysis of how design choices in action games, particularly in the context of killing generic characters in cinematic action-adventure games, impact challenges, rules, and gameplay experiences, often normalizing the act of killing. Björk (2015) explores in-game actions performed by players, categorizing them as instances of dark play and distinguishing between actions conducted through fictional characters and those executed by players as themselves. Švelch (2010) analyzes moral choices in single-player games, showcasing their profound impact on the overall playing experience. Formosa (2022) focuses on the "moral meter" mechanic in games with integrated morality systems. Reynolds (2002) addresses the inevitability of morality in games, especially those with strong narrative components. *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003) is cited by Carter (2013) as an example where player actions directly influence the gaming experience to everyone involved. Beale (2016) discusses power impositions on other players for amusement, known as "griefing". Sicart (2009) introduces game design recommendations rooted in *Information Ethics*, aiming to formalize ethical challenges within gameplay mechanics and integrate ethics into the gaming experience.

CLUSTER 4 is focused on behaviors and in-game interactions, encompassing player cooperation, competition, and the establishment of social structures within game worlds. It explores strategies of communication within gaming communities and examines the broad implications of player behavior on the gaming environment. Chen's study investigates the impact of griefing on social relations among gamers, highlighting its in-

fluential role in shaping interactions within gaming communities (2009). Chesney examines coping strategies employed in response to griefing practices, showing adaptive mechanisms within the gaming context (2009). Paul's case study on *EVE Online* serves as an insightful exploration of social interactions in online games, providing a deep understanding of the dynamics at play (2011). Smith explores the conflicts arising from disruptive behaviors in online gaming, contributing to the discourse on player interactions (2004). Stenros introduces the concept of frame analysis to elucidate possible interactions in online games, categorizing them into playing the players, playing the system, and playing the game (2010). Banks defines the player-avatar relationship in online games, emphasizing the common tendency of players projecting themselves onto the characters they control (2015).

CLUSTER 5 analyses in general the role of death in games. The discussion begins by emphasizing the significance of player death and how failure can be a potent tool for crafting challenging and engaging gaming experiences, as highlighted by Juul (2013). Leino (2012) explores the concept of death loops as a mechanic that can grow engagement in gaming experiences. A comprehensive overview of various interactions with death in video games is provided, starting from the research by Abruzzese (2019) and the one made by *Game Tool Design Kit* (2015). Rusk and Stahl's analysis (2020) focuses on the diverse player reactions to death and kills in *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012), extending to Carter's work (2013) on *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013) in the context of online games. Carr (2003) examines the central role of death in horror games, particularly in narratives and ludic aspects, focusing on the *Silent Hill* series (Konami, 1999-2012). Jay (2017) asserts the indispensability of player death for designing a coherent player experience. Pechalin (2021) discusses the strategy of using the term "you died" rather than "game over" to increase player immersion. Finally, Flynn-Jones (2015) explores the concept of in-game death within the framework of the Freudian death drive, analyzing how design choices can help to avoid repetitive gameplay and build incremental progress.

CLUSTER 6 is more focused on general social interactions in online games. Corneliussen and Rettberg conduct an analysis of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), emphasizing its significance as an online game where social interactions play a fundamental role, especially in cooperative efforts essential for game progression (2008). Williams focuses on the Guild system within *World of Warcraft*, highlighting its paramount role as a critical social aspect of the game (2014). Wright examines the importance of cooperation in *Counter-Strike*, emphasizing creativity as a key element for success in online matches (2002). Aarseth defines transgressive play, illustrating how players interact by deviating from implied rules (2014). Gazzard stresses the significance of transgressive play in *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-2013), shaping the overall gaming experience (2008). Zagal identifies specific dark patterns in these games (2013). McGonigal explores the educational potential of online games, showcasing how cooperation can craft meaningful experiences beyond the realm of dark play (2011). Linderoth exemplifies *Left 4 Dead 2* (Valve, 2009) as a game where cooperation fosters meaningful player experiences (2014).

CLUSTER 7 is a collection of texts that analyzes Game Design and common patterns in the development of mechanics. Juul elucidates various fundamental aspects, delineating the relationships between the fictional game world and the real-world presence of players during gameplay (2005). *Rules of Play* introduces foundational concepts in game mechanics, encompassing not only the magic circle but also other mechanisms contributing to a meaningful gaming experience (2003). Dormans focuses on defining game mechanics specifically, shifting the emphasis from the player-world relationship (2012). Lankoski highlights the potential narrative influence of game mechanics, emphasizing the importance of aligning them with the intended message of the game designer (2007). Jay explains how well-designed death mechanics can create meaningful player experiences (2017).

Addressing specific mechanics, Kayleigh distinguishes between Roguelites and Roguelikes (2023), while Guzsvinecz explores the impact of Souls-like games on RPG mechanics, challenging traditionally defined "not engaging" patterns (2023). Cuerdo and Melcer categorize death and rebirth mechanics in platformer video games, emphasizing their dual role in providing challenge and ensuring engagement (2020). Sidhu and Carter analyze the meaningfulness of death in *Dungeons and Dragons* and its potential application in video game mechanics (2021). Melnic investigates the influence of respawns and "saved games" on player experience, recognizing their integral role in game mechanics (2018). Keogh examines the phenomenon of players imposing Permadeath rules, known as the "Ironman rule" (2013), and Taggart presents the various iterations and applications of Permadeath in games (2013). Lozano explores the replay mechanic's utility in emphasizing moments associated with in-game death (2018), while Abraham discusses instances where users self-impose rules, such as the Ironman rule (2013).

CLUSTER 8 shows the fundamental theories and methodologies related to narrative creation in video games, examining the integration of traditional storytelling elements, such as plot, character development, and themes, with the interactive nature of games.

Bergström conducted an analytical examination of the framing of sto-

rytelling in video games, offering findings into how traditional narrative elements, such as plot, character development, and themes, intersect with the interactive nature of games (2011). Bosman explains the relationship between in-game death as a mechanic and its integration within the overarching narrative structure of video games (2018). Meakin expounded on the merits of non-traditional storytelling in games, using Hellblade: *Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) as a case study and outlining strategies applicable to the context of dark play (2021).

Sandra and Mutiaz highlighted *Gris* (Annapurna, 2018) as an illustrative example of how death can be strategically implemented within the narrative of a game to stimulate critical reflections on loss and grief (2022). Similarly, Schott recognized *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) as an exemplary instance of a game for social change, utilizing its narrative to address profound themes associated with death (2017). Pallavicini emphasized the potential of video games to foster empathy by incorporating social issues into their narratives (2020).

Spec Ops: The Line (Yager, 2012) emerged as a frequently cited case study, exemplifying games where death plays a central role in both mechanics and narrative. Jørgensen and Keogh conducted in-depth analyses, delineating important moments in the game's campaign where death significantly shapes the narrative and the development of a positive-negative player experience (2016; 2012). *This War of Mine (11 Bit Studios, 2014)* was identified by de Smale as another noteworthy example, demonstrating the implementation of morality within the narrative, where player choices influence both ludic and narrative experiences (2019).

Perron undertook a comprehensive analysis of horror games in *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Video Ludic Horror* (2018), exploring narrative patterns conducive to the creation of horror stories. West introduced the concept of Permadeath as a game mechanic and examined its integration within the narrative fabric (2020). Davidson discussed how narrative depth can vary in games, citing *Uncharted 2 (Naughty Dog, 2009)* as an example where story elements are present but not as deeply explored, reflecting the diverse objectives of game design (2011).

CLUSTER 9 is a collection of studies centered on the player experience (PX) in video games, exploring both cognitive dimensions, such as decision-making and problem-solving, and emotional facets, including immersion and emotional connections with in-game narratives.

Csikszentmihalyi's influential research on flow highlights its pivotal role in engagement, elucidating how activities that captivate individuals, disregarding other basic needs, induce a state of flow. In gaming, this balance between challenge and player ability is central (1988; 1998). Wolfendale examines the player-avatar attachment and its impact on the gaming experience (2007). Linderoth extends this analysis to online games, exploring player-created frames and interactions in MMORPGs (2012). Discussing player experience in online games involves addressing griefing. Rubin and Camm categorize griefing into harassment, power imposition, scamming, and greed play (2013). Case studies in *Eve Online* (Kelly, 2014) and *Second Life* (Bakioglu, 2009) exemplify the adaptation of games to toxic player behavior through rule/mechanic implementation. Van Der Velder's analysis of player experience in Permadeath games shows how the thrilling engagement derived from the risk and potential loss of progress (2022). Cochrane investigates the appeal of killing in games, even in non-combat-oriented ones like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), emphasizing players' experimentation within the game's rules (2016). Gris, explored by Beaumont (2020), focuses on a non-traditionally ludic theme, addressing loss and grief in the player experience. Similar research by Purslow (2018) on *Hellblade* and Papale (2018) on *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) explore these thematic aspects. Freud's (1919) concept of the uncanny, which pertains to experiences triggering associations with earlier psychic stages or primitive human experiences, offers intriguing insights on the relation between fear and human experience.

3.2 // Towards a case study identification

The analysis of the literature guided the identification of an array of case studies serving as distinctive examples for the topic of death in video games. The selection of case studies is undertaken following specific criteria designed to ensure the inclusivity of relevant examples while maintaining analytical rigor. This analytical approach not only bolsters the theoretical framework with practical instances but also ensures a comprehensive and cohesive taxonomy of in-game death modes. Through the iterative synthesis of theoretical constructs, representative case studies, and refined categorizations, a robust taxonomy of in-game deaths emerges, contributing significantly to the comprehension of this aspect of video games and, more specifically, game studies.

CASE STUDIES SELECTED

The case studies underwent a meticulous selection process directly informed by an examination of the references. To refine the criteria guiding the inclusion of specific case studies, a comprehensive list was established. The rationale behind selecting these case studies is twofold: firstly, to enrich the taxonomy through informative contributions, and secondly, to integrate them seamlessly within the taxonomy to elucidate its components. Table 2 delineates the key criteria employed in the selection of case studies and their description in detail.

Table 2
(Next page) The case studies' selection criteria are shown, with an exhaustive description for each one.

NO	CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION
01	Presence of death	Death presence in the game as a narrative, ludic or both ludic/narrative elements. Of course, all those abstract games where death is not at all present (like *Tetris*), were not included in the development of the taxonomy
02	Influence on game design	How the case study impacted on the field of game design. Many of these are very popular for their innovative way of playing among both casual players and game studies experts
03	Presence in game studies literature	The case studies were directly selected from their presence in the literature, and associated to a specific death mode depending on the context in which were located
04	Availability of the game	Possibility to access the game to play it and validate personally if it can be a good fit for the taxonomy or not

Employing the predefined criteria, the case studies were meticulously chosen and systematically organized into a comprehensive table. Ensuring their accessibility, the availability of each case study was verified. Furthermore, to ascertain their significance in both gaming culture and game studies, various additional details were meticulously documented, such as proof of their popularity. The references wherein each case study is thoroughly analyzed have also been cataloged. A detailed presentation of all the selected case studies is meticulously outlined in Table 3.

Table 3
Below, the table of the case studies selected. The "popularity" section is the more textual one, in order the contextualize the case study.

TITLE	DEVELOPER	GENRE	RELEASE	POPULARITY	REFERENCES
That Dragon, Cancer	Numinous Games	Adventure	Windows, macOS - 12 January 2016	Despite a not-so-high amount of sales, the game gets resonance thanks to YouTube and YouTubers famous worldwide like Pewdiepie and Jacksepticeye. Also, it received critical acclaim and won numerous awards for its storytelling. These accolades helped raise its profile within the gaming industry.	▪ Schott, 2017 ▪ Mortensen et al., 2015 ▪ Bosman, 2018
Gris	Nomada studio	Platform-adventure	Nintendo Switch, Windows - 21 August 2019	At launch, Gris had garnered sales for a total of 300,000 copies across the globe. By April 2020, it had transcended expectations, achieving sales that exceeded a remarkable milestone of one million units.	▪ Ni and Intan, 2022 ▪ Beaumont, 2020
To the moon	Freebird Games	Adventure	Windows - November 1, 2011	"To the Moon" garnered predominantly positive reviews, as indicated by Metacritic. It achieved noteworthy commercial success too, with estimated sales ranging from 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 units.	▪ Baloni, 2018 ▪ Mortensen et al., 2015
The Sims	Maxis	Life simulation, Social simulation	First release - The Sims / February 4, 2000	The Sims is one of the most successful and best-selling video game series in the history of the gaming industry. The franchise has achieved remarkable commercial success, with sales nearing an impressive milestone of 200 million copies worldwide.	▪ Bakioglu, 2009 ▪ Abruzzese, 2019
Super Meat Boy	Team Meat	Platform	Xbox 360 - WW: October 20, 2010	The game's availability on Steam and Xbox 360 collectively accounted for over 600,000 copies sold by April 2011, with a substantial 400,000 of these sales attributed to the Steam platform. The game's popularity continued to increase, reaching a remarkable milestone on January 3, 2012, achieving sales exceeding 1,000,000 copies.	▪ Abruzzese, 2019 ▪ Melcer and Cuerdo, 2020 ▪ Melnic and Melnic, 2018
SIFU	Sloclap	Beat 'em up	PlayStation 4 & 5, Windows - February 8, 2022	The game's availability on Steam and Xbox 360 collectively accounted for over 600,000 copies sold by April 2011, with	▪ Kayleigh, 2023 ▪ Papousek, 2022

				a substantial 400,000 of these sales attributed to the Steam platform. The game's popularity continued to increase, reaching a remarkable milestone on January 3, 2012, achieving sales exceeding 1,000,000 copies.	
The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth	Nicalis	Roguelike	Linux, Windows, OS X - WW: November 4, 2014	As of July 2015, the combined sales of The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth and its predecessor surpassed a milestone, with this impressive sales figure of five million units sold highlighting the game's immense popularity and popularity within the gaming community (it is defined as the king of Rogulike games).	▪ Kayleigh, 2023 ▪ West, 2020 ▪ Copcic et al., 2013
Returnal	Housemarque	Third-person shooter, Roguelite	PlayStation 5 - April 30, 2021	Returnal received numerous prestigious year-end awards.It was honored with the title of Best Game at the 18th British Academy Games Awards. Moreover, It achieved substantial commercial success, with sales figures reaching 560,000 units by July 2021.	▪ Hanussek, 2022 ▪ Kayleigh, 2023 ▪ Geller, 2022
Minecraft	Mojang Studios	Sandbox, survival	Windows, macOS, Linux - WW: 18 November 2011	In May 2020, Minecraft achieved a milestone by surpassing 200 million copies sold across various platforms. Also, the game reached an impressive player base, boasting over 126 million monthly active players at that time. The growth of Minecraft's player community showed no signs of slowing down. By April 2021, the number of	▪ Beale et al., 2016 ▪ Keogh, 2013

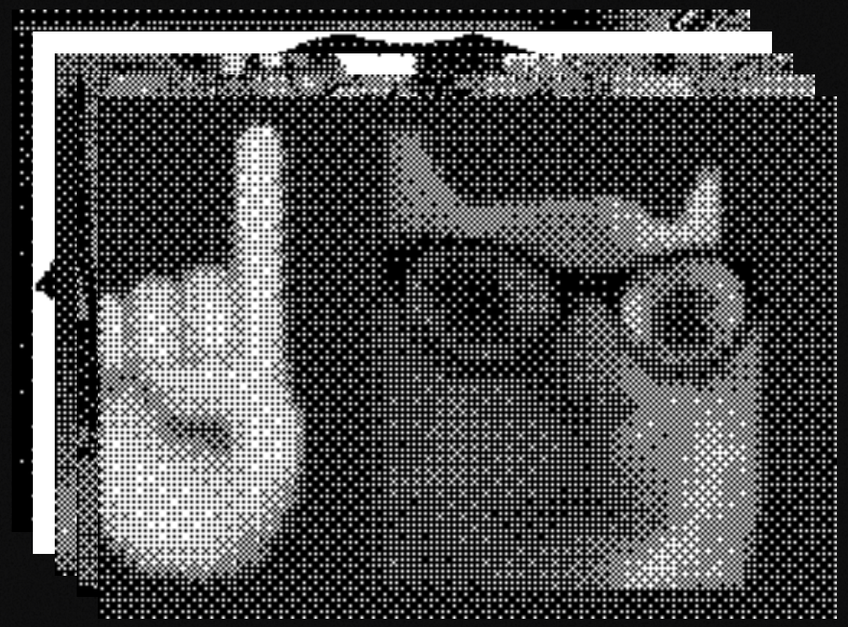
				active monthly users had further surged to an astounding 140 million.	
World of Warcraft	Blizzard Entertainment	Massively multiplayer online role-playing	AU/NA: November 23, 2004	On January 22, 2008, It reached a historic milestone by amassing more than 10 million subscribers worldwide. World of Warcraft continued to maintain a substantial player base, with over 10 million active subscribers as of November 2014. On January 28, 2014, Blizzard announced that a staggering 100 million accounts had been created for World of Warcraft	▪ Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008 ▪ Banks, 2015, Williams et al., 2014 ▪ Linderoth, 2012
Uncharted 2	Naughty Dog	Action-adventure, third-person shooter	Playstation 3 - NA: October 13, 2009	It achieved remarkable success both critically and commercially, by reaching a substantial 6.5 million copies in 2015. Beyond sales, Uncharted 2 garnered an astounding 300 industry awards, including more than 200 Game of the Year awards.	▪ Davidson, 2011 ▪ Glas, 2015 ▪ Mortensen et al., 2015
The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion	Bethesda Softworks	Action role-playing	Windows, Xbox 360 - NA: March 20,	In November 2011, it sold three million units. Critics praised the game for its progressive system of not-playble characters (NPCs) and for the game design as spectacular, immersive, and capable of providing an engaging gaming experience.	▪ Lankoski and Björk, 2007 ▪ Adams and Dormans, 2012 ▪ Glas, 2015
Counter Strike: Global Offensive	Valve	Tactical first-person shooter	OS X, PlayStation 3, Windows, Xbox 360 - August 21, 2012	CS: GO has maintained a significant and active group of players since its release. Notably, it reached a new milestone in March 2023, simultaneously reaching an all-time high of 1.4 million players.	▪ Rusk and Ståhl, 2020 ▪ Wright et al., 2002 ▪ Obreja, 2023

DayZ	Bohemia Interactive	Survival, First-person shooter, third-person shooter	WW: Windows, February 21, 2013	It was lauded as an incredible experience, earning the title of "Mod of the Year'' from Edge Magazine. During peak sales periods, more than 200 copies of the game were being purchased every minute. By the end of its first week, the standalone game had achieved over 400,000 copies sold.	▪ Carter et al., 2013 ▪ Copcic et al., 2013 ▪ Foo and Koivisto, 2004
EVE Online	CCP Games	Space simulation, massively multiplay-er online role-playing game	Windows - NA: May 6, 2003	In 2013, it was honored by PC Gamer, securing the #12 spots on their prestigious list of the "100 Greatest Games of All Time". The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) recognized the game's cultural significance by adding it to their perma-nent collection of video games in June 2013. The active players per day are almost 200 000.	▪ Kelly et al., 2014 ▪ Foo and Koivisto, 2004 ▪ Paul, 2011 ▪ Chen et al., 2009 ▪ Carter et al., 2013
The Walking Dead	Telltale Games	Graphic adventure Interactive drama	Playstation 3, Windows, XBox 360, 2012	Upon its release, the first episode of the game quickly reached the top of the charts on Xbox Live Arcade, a position it held for two weeks. As of July 28, 2014, the game had achieved a remarkable milestone, with a total of 28 million episodes sold.	▪ Pallavicini et al., 2020 ▪ Copcic et al., 2013 ▪ Bosman, 2018
Prince of Persia	Ubisoft	Action-ad-venture, platform	PlaySta-tion 3 Xbox 360 Microsoft Windows Mac OS X Java ME, 2008	Despite the public didn't appreciate the "consum-er-friendly" mechanic of death, the game reached an impressive milestone of more than 2 million copies sold, and the crit-ic praised the game for the amazing atmosphere and storytelling. Also, it was appreciated the art direction, very particu-lar and the animations extremely well done.	▪ Bosman, 2018 ▪ Jay, 2017, ▪ Rafinski and Zielke, 2013
Spec Ops: The Line	Yager - 2K	Third-person shooter	Windows, PS3, Xbox 360 - WW: June 29, 2012	Reviews of Spec Ops: The Line were over-whelmingly positive, with critics widely ac-claiming several aspects of the game. The narra-tive, themes explored, and the thought-pro-voking approach to violence within the medium of video games were particularly lauded. Despite its critical suc-cess, it faced challenges in the commercial arena.	▪ Keogh, 2012 ▪ Jørgensen, 2016 ▪ Björk, 2015
This War of Mine	11 bit studios	Survival	Windows, OS X, Linux: November 14, 2014	As of May 2022, This War of Mine had reached a noteworthy milestone by selling over 7 million copies across all avail-able platforms. In 2020, the Polish Chancellery of the Prime Minister made the decision to in-clude This War of Mine in the recommended reading list for Polish high schools during the academic year of 2020–2021.	▪ de Smale et al., 2019 ▪ Flynn-Jones, 2015 ▪ Abruzzese, 2019
Star Wars: The Old Republic	Bioware	Massively multiplay-er online role-playing game	PC - NA: December 20, 2011	Critically, the game gar-nered generally positive reviews from gaming critics, reflecting its fa-vorable reception within the gaming community. It achieved a notable score of 85 on Metacritic and an 84% rating on GameRankings, indicat-ing a favorable consen-sus among reviewers.	▪ Mortensen, 2015 ▪ Švelch, 2010 ▪ Linderoth, 2012

This initial roster proved instrumental in formulating the inaugural iteration of the taxonomy, as mentioned earlier. Subsequent to the validation process, discerning modifications were implemented to refine the taxonomy. Consequently, specific death modes were either eliminated, thereby leading to the removal of associated case studies, or substituted with more pertinent instances based on the received feedback.

04

// Methodology



4.1 // Defining the research path

The path for the development of the taxonomy can be divided into two phases: research and validation process. The research process was focused on the already existing literature: the aim was to understand which is the current state of the game studies on the subject, by grouping together the various iterations of death in video games presented by experts and the literature was then divided into different research clusters. Also, interesting case studies on the subject were always selected by looking at the scientific literature. After that, a first version of the taxonomy was developed, while trying to match for each death mode a representative and coherent case study.

The final output of the research process is a taxonomy that eventually needs to be validated by experts and in fact, the validation process is focused on this crucial aspect. Firstly, a survey was developed as a validation tool to be shared with experts around the world and before doing that, it was analyzed by two experts in the research field. The survey was consequently updated and shared with a list of experts: these experts were selected depending on how much their studies contributed to the development of the taxonomy. The experts that answered the survey were 14 in total (5 Females and 9 Males), and with some of them (3 Males and 1 Female) in-depth interviews were organized, in order to get more insights on their thoughts about the taxonomy. The insights from both survey and In-depth interviews have been the foundation for the development of the final version of the taxonomy presented in chapter 5.4.

In Table 4, you can see all the steps involved for both research and validation phase, in chronological order.

Table 4
The complete path of the thesis. For each step, there is a specific output that eventually helped in the development of a complete and exhaustive taxonomy.

STEP	PHASE	PERIOD	METHODOLOGY	OUTPUT
01	Research	May 2023 - Aug 2023 + follow up until validation process end	Literature review (gray and scientific) Initial scoping	Actual state of the game studies field on the subject, with an overview of the death modes already explored
02	Research	Sep 2023 - Oct 2023	Defining research arguments	Theoretical framework of the literature
03	Research	Sep 2023 - Nov 2023	Case study selection	List of case studies quoted by experts in the literature
04	Research	Nov 2023 - Dec 2023	Taxonomy development + Case study matching	First version of the taxonomy with, for each death mode, an exhaustive case study
05	Validation	Dec 2023	Survey development + validation via academic researchers	Survey (made with Google form) for the validation of the taxonomy. Before sharing it with the experts, it was analyzed by 2 experts in the academic research field and eventually updated
06	Validation	Dec 2023 - Feb 2024	Validation of the taxonomy via survey. A total of 14 (9 Males and 4 Females) experts have been contacted	Qualitative dataset for the development of the final taxonomy
07	Validation	Dec 2023 - Feb 2024	Validation of the taxonomy via In-depth interviews with 4 experts (3 Males and 1 Female)	Qualitative insights for the development of the final taxonomy
08	Validation	Jan 2024 - Feb 2024	Reporting insights	Final version of the taxonomy

4.2 // Research process

The research process unfolds in three primary phases. Initially, an extensive exploration of existing materials was undertaken. This phase served as a foundational step to comprehend the current state of research within the field of game studies concerning the concept of death in video games.

Then, the theoretical framework extracted from the literature facilitated the categorization of death in games into three principal domains and allowed for the identification of their respective subcategories and sub-dimensions. This process served to create a comprehensive taxonomy for understanding the diverse manifestations of death in video game.

Moreover, a case study selection was done based on the theoretical background. Each case study was selected by looking at specific criteria expressed in chapter 4.2.2 and consequently they were matched to a specific death mode. Also this step was done by following a set of rigorous criteria, expressed in chapter 4.2.3.

4.2.1 // Analysis of gray and scientific literature

The primary scholarly works addressing the subject of in-game death modes in video games have been carefully compiled, forming the state of the existing literature. The literature review process entails a bifurcation into two principal categories: Scientific Literature and Grey Literature.

In the scientific realm, the pursuit of comprehensive insight was facilitated through the utilization of reputable academic search engines,

namely Google Scholar and Scopus. The pivotal keyword employed for this meticulous research aspect was judiciously selected to yield an array of pertinent findings. These famous platforms not only serve as repositories for rigorous academic research, but also provide a systematic approach to accessing scholarly discourse on the multifaceted intricacies of in-game death modes.

In tandem with the scientific sphere, the gray literature domain was also meticulously explored to ensure an all-encompassing analysis. This process involved a comprehensive investigation through web browsers, with a discerning focus on identifying specialized websites, pertinent forums, and dedicated Reddit pages of international significance (such as r/gaming, r/Games and r/wow). The extensive and diverse nature of gray literature is particularly pertinent in this context, as it often provides insights and perspectives from an array of gaming enthusiasts, developers, and communities.

In synthesizing the results garnered from these two distinctive channels, a comprehensive overview of the subject matter emerges. The scientific literature reflects rigorous academic exploration, while the gray literature encapsulates many perspectives, discussions, and experiential narratives that help to a well-rounded comprehension of in-game death modes within the realm of video games. This methodological dualism guarantees a holistic understanding of the subject, amalgamating academic rigor with experiential intuitions that collectively enrich the discourse surrounding the profound impact of in-game death modes.

The selected keywords employed in this diligent pursuit included a spectrum of terms that encapsulate the subject matter under investigation. The keywords concerned both broad and specific facets, including: *death in games*, *death in video games*, *death modes in games*, *Permadeath video games*, *Griefing*, *Raid in online video games*, *die and killing in video games*, *Gris game*, *Spec ops the line*, *SIFU*, *dark play*, and *playing online*.

These keywords facilitated an expansive exploration across the gamut of academic discourse pertaining to the multifaceted aspects of in-game death modes. The selection of keywords was defined to encompass a diverse array of themes, ranging from the mechanics of death in gaming to the emotional and ethical considerations inherent in player actions. By deploying this comprehensive approach, the subsequent collection of scientific literature was designed to analyze the intricacies that converge at the nexus of death modes and interactive digital entertainment.

Upon the compilation of the collected literature, a meticulous phase of analysis ensued, characterized by a process of categorization and filtration. This meticulous undertaking sought to distill a refined corpus of scholarly works that intimately encapsulated the gamut of discussions surrounding in-game death modes in video games. As a preliminary step, texts that did not align with the thematic focus of the study were discerningly excluded, ensuring the precision and relevance of the literature selection.

The criteria for the selection of pertinent literature concerned different considerations, each calibrated to ascertain the aptness and scholarly significance of the chosen texts. Three salient criteria emerged are:

1. *Alignment with the Theme*: The first step was ensuring the presence of a direct connection to the theme of death within the context of video games. This was ascertained through an attentive analysis of the abstracts, determining if the study explicitly addressed the overarching subject matter.
2. *Scholarly Reception*: A key criterion involved gauging the scholarly reception and acknowledgment accorded to specific texts within the broader discourse of game studies. Texts that were repeatedly referenced and cited in diverse game studies literature were accorded a heightened level of consideration, signifying their seminal influence on the field.
3. *Authorship Standing*: An evaluative lens was cast upon the author's stature within the game studies milieu. Authors with a recognized presence and impact in game studies garnered careful scrutiny, contributing to the validation of their works as potential components of the curated literature.

In addition to these criteria, the literature review process adopted an iterative approach, wherein texts extracted from the initially identified pool of fundamental resources were examined further through their bibliographies. This recursive exploration sought to uncover additional scholarly works that emanated from the references of pivotal texts, thereby ensuring a comprehensive and interconnected compilation of literature. Through this discerning and comprehensive methodology, the resultant selection of scholarly literature exudes a scholarly rigor that underlines the subsequent analytical discourse on the intersections of in-game death modes and video game narratives.

The procurement of gray literature unfolded as a methodical procedure characterized by a judicious application of predetermined keywords. These keywords, synonymous with the realm of in-game death modes in video games, were meticulously introduced into Internet search engines, notably Google, and directed towards specialized gaming platforms and websites of prominence, including but not limited to outlets such as Gamerant, The Gamer, and IGN. This stratagem facilitated the identification and acquisition of a plethora of non-academic discourse and discussions, collectively constituting the gray literature segment.

A distinct facet of this gray literature acquisition process involved the augmentation of keyword queries with the term “reddit”. This tactical inclusion was devised to harness the insight-rich perspectives of the global gaming community congregated on the Reddit platform. By engaging with these community-driven conversations, the study could access a diverse array of firsthand player experiences, opinions, and dialogues pertaining to the manifold nuances of in-game death modes.

Subsequent to the extraction of the pertinent gray literature, a phase of meticulous care transpired. Texts were subjected to a discerning evaluation to ensure their alignment with the overarching thematic realm and their value as contributing voices to the discourse. By employing this approach, the definitive corpus of gray literature was assembled, in tandem with its academic counterpart, to engender a comprehensive theoretical background. This dually refined compendium of scholarly and gray literature constitutes the foundation upon which the study’s theoretical underpinning and case studies are poised. It conjoins the results of academic thought with the experiential narratives and observations of the gaming community, thereby coalescing a multifaceted perspective that enriches the overall analysis.

4.2.2 // Case studies analysis protocol

The theoretical dimensions analyzed in the literature review phase led to the identification of some dimensions of analysis that were elaborated into areas of inquiry and exploratory questions to analyze the case studies. These dimensions are fundamental for the next steps, focused on defining the case studies for the taxonomy.

Table 5
Each dimension is part of a specific section, and at the same time tries to answer a specific question.

SECTION	DIMENSIONS	GUIDING QUESTIONS	DESCRIPTOR
Section1: Project information	Title	What is the name of the case study?	*General data*: Which title belongs to the cases study and who published it.
	Developer	Who published the game?	
	Genre classification	Which genre belongs to?	The genre to which a game belongs. This categorization facilitated the identification of trends in the portrayal and engagement with in-game deaths, acknowledging the inherent differences in addressing death across genres, be it an online first-person shooter or a game centered on ethics.
Section 2: Relevance in the gaming landscape	Availability and release	Where and when has it been released?	When the game was released and on which global scale.
	Popularity and recognition	How many copies did it sell and did it receive any award/ other kind of recognition?	The criterion of worldwide copies sold was considered, serving as a metric of a game’s prominence within the gaming landscape. This measure illuminated the extent to which a particular game had permeated the realm of popular culture, rendering it a significant subject of inquiry.
Section 3: Death scope	Death mode	Which Death mode is related to this case study?	The case study selected must represent at least one of the main death modes presented in the taxonomy.
	Die/kill event	Is it death that the player receives or a kill event where the player is responsible for?	Defining if we are talking about a death that the player is victim of (death) or responsible (kill).
	Death presence in the game	How and in which way death is present in the video game?	The manner in which death is manifested in the chosen case study is elaborated. This involves discerning whether death functions as a thematic element, weaving through narrative layers, or as a core gameplay mechanic that shapes player interactions.
	Defining death mode	Why is it related to this specific death mode?	The specific death mode itself is described in detail, encapsulating its distinct attributes, mechanics, and implications within the context of the game.
Section 4: Strategic contribution	Influence on Game Design	What kind of influence did it have on the field of game design?	What kind of influence the game had on the game design environment. Many of these case studies have been selected not only because they are popular or recognized by the game studies field, but also because they brought several innovations to the game design side.
	Social Dynamics	Are there interactions with other users? And if so, what role do they play in relation to gameplay?	If it is present, how the social interaction happens and why is important for the gaming experience.
	Ethical aspects	Does the game address a specific ethical issue?	If it is present, how the game face a specific/multiple aspects related to ethical issues in the narrative, mechanics or both at the same time.

Section 5: Presence in literature	References	In which of the references analyzed for the theoretical background is it addressed?	Preliminary assessments of the availability and accessibility of information surrounding a chosen case were conducted. This evaluation served to ascertain whether substantial resources, including studies, and interviews, were at hand to substantiate the selected case study as an exemplar of the particular death mode under investigation. In fact, many of these case studies are useful not only to the final taxonomy, but also to define the three main areas in which death can be faced in games.

After the protocol of analysis had been defined, the dimensions were distributed into two main parts for the research: one focused on the selection of the cases studies, and the other one on their matching with the death modes.

4.2.2.1 // Case studies selection

The cases chosen for the taxonomy's construction were meticulously identified, aligning with the criteria detailed in Chapter 3. These criteria were systematically applied through a set of defined questions, as elucidated in Table 5 and then grouped into Table 6 below.

Table 6
The dimensions have been taken respectively from the section 1, 2 and 5 of the analysis protocol.

DIMENSIONS	HOW ARE USED IN CONTEXT
Genre classification	Identifying to which genre it belongs, can help exclude those games in which death is not present at all (for example, many puzzle game doesn't have it).
Availability and release	Of course, the game must be available in order to be analyzed and included in the research.
Popularity and recognition	Moreover, the case studies must be famous and recognized in the game environment by video game enthusiasts.
References	All the case studies analyzed are quoted in the references, and their presence in the academic environment is for sure a strong foundation.

As we'll see later, this process of selection of the case studies has been useful for the development of the first version of the taxonomy before validation. Each death mode has a representative case study (chosen from the literature), that helps framing in a context the death mode analyzed.

4.2.3 // Defining the possible death modes/taxonomy

The culmination of the research on existing literature culminates in the establishment of a comprehensive taxonomy delineating distinct types of death modes within the domain of video games. In essence, this taxonomy includes three primary domains, each encapsulating a distinct facet of death modes' manifestation within video games. The classification is predicated on a triangulation of established theoretical tenets, cross-referenced with an analysis of emblematic case studies. Within this schema, the delineation unfolds as follows: death modes operating as a thematic focal point (Death as narrative element), death modes functioning as gameplay mechanics (Death as mechanic), and the intriguing synergy where death modes seamlessly intertwined both as mechanics and narrative elements (Death as narrative and mechanic).

This tripartite division attains its coherence not merely through theoretical foundations, but also through the discerning examination of representative case studies. The encounter between theoretical frameworks and concrete exemplifications affords an elucidation of the manifold ways in which death modes permeate the fabric of video game design. Consequently, this taxonomy stands as a pivotal contribution to the burgeoning discourse surrounding in-game death modes, fostering a holistic understanding that transcends theoretical abstraction and extends into the dynamic realm of gaming practice.

As mentioned previously, the taxonomy has been systematically organized into three main categories. Each of these categories can further subdivide into specific subcategories to comprehensively classify and understand the various manifestations of death within video game design. For instance, within the category of "Death as a Mechanic," we can delineate two subcategories: "Permadeath" and "Play-Die-Restart Structure". Permadeath can be further subdivided into three distinct death modes: "Roguelike," "Roguelite", and the "Ironman rule". This hierarchical structure allows for a more granular examination of the diverse ways in which death functions within the gaming medium.

Within this taxonomy, each death mode is rigorously defined as a distinct event or circumstance related to the cessation of in-game life. These definitions have been crafted based on an in-depth analysis of existing literature and references presented in the theoretical background. Furthermore, the taxonomy strives for comprehensiveness by not only defining each death mode but also by providing descriptive elements that capture the essence and characteristics of these modes. These descriptors are essential for facilitating a focused understanding of how each death mode operates within the context of video games.

To guarantee the validity and applicability of the taxonomy, representative case studies have been meticulously selected and matched to each defined death mode. These case studies serve as practical examples that exemplify the respective death mode in action, thereby validating the taxonomy's effectiveness in categorizing and analyzing the diverse manifestations of death within video games.

4.2.3.1 // Case studies matching

The initial phase of developing a first version of the taxonomy necessitated the meticulous pairing of each death mode with a carefully selected case study that serves as an exhaustive example of the analyzed death mode. This pairing process was deemed essential to offer a comprehensive elucidation of the principal facets inherent to each death mode.

Each death mode inclusion is justified, connecting it to the theoretical framework or related resources. Then, the mode's role in the case study is explained – whether it is a theme, mechanic, or both. Comprehensive explanations of each mode's attributes and context are provided, occasionally supplemented by detailed case study analysis.

For each death mode, the inclusion of the respective case study is substantiated through the following components expressed in Table 7.

Table 7
In this table, are taken in consideration the dimensions from the sections 3 and 4.

DIMENSIONS	HOW ARE USED IN CONTEXT
Death mode	Understanding to which death mode of the taxonomy can be related.
Death/kill event	Defining if the main focus of the case study is on the death experienced by the player (die) or the one caused by them (kill).
Death presence in the game	Defining in detail how death act in the case study virtual environment.
Defining death mode	Describing in detail the death mode of the taxonomy in relation to the case study selected.
Influence on Game Design	How the case study influenced the game design environment, underling the relation with the death mode selected.
Social Dynamics	Defining if there's the possibility to interact with other players.
Ethical aspects	Defining if there's an address to a specific social issue.

By adhering to these criteria, the matching process encapsulated a comprehensive and diverse array of case studies, thereby enriching the typology of in-game deaths through a synthesis of global perspectives and popular culture resonances. In the process of selecting illustrative cases for a particular mode of in-game death, it is important to acknowledge that, while there might exist multiple instances within a single game that align with the chosen typology, a judicious approach is essential to maintain clarity and prevent undue elongation of enumerations. As such, a conscientious decision has been made to spotlight a solitary example from each game, in order to avoid a difficult readability of the taxonomy.

Furthermore, it warrants mention that certain games may not invariably fulfill all the delineated criteria with unwavering consistency. Notably, instances such as *Spec Ops: The Line* diverge from conventional metrics of commercial success, having not achieved substantial sales figures. However, their salience in the field of game studies, particularly concerning matters of morality and ethical dimensions within games, distinguishes them as notable anomalies.

These instances underscore the nature of the selection process, wherein significance is accorded not solely to commercial achievement but to the substantial influence and scholarly discourse surrounding certain titles within the discipline.

Through the matching process, a more comprehensive understanding of the analyzed death modes can be attained. Within the taxonomy section (paragraph 5.4), the outcomes of this matching process are presented. This presentation reveals a meticulously structured taxonomy wherein each death mode is accompanied by an illustrative example. These examples serve to refine and elucidate the role of each death mode within the broader context of game design. For the complete list of all the cases studies analyzed, see chapter 8.x.

4.3 // Validation process

Following the research phase, the subsequent step involved the validation of the developed taxonomy. Initially, each defined death mode within the taxonomy was meticulously paired with a specific case study. This was undertaken to provide precise exemplification and a concrete understanding of each death mode within the context of video games. The selection of these case studies was informed by their prevalence in the literature pertaining to the subject matter and their established significance within the field. Subsequently, a comprehensive survey was conducted, distributed to a diverse group of experts across the globe. The selection of these experts was predicated on the relevance of their studies to the taxonomy's development and their substantial contributions to the broader field of game studies. Their findings and evaluations were integral to the validation process.

4.3.1 // Validation of the survey

As mentioned earlier, the survey was sent to experts in the academic research field before sharing it with the selected game studies' experts. As a first thing, a Google Form was made to facilitate the recording of feedback and suggestions and then it was shared with two academic researchers (1 Male and 1 Female) via mail.

The first review was done in two days, and the overall structure of the survey was approved. The only thing that needed some fixes were the very long texts: in fact the main corrections were focused on them, in order to improve their readability and, consequently, the entire flow of the survey.

The direct alterations impacted certain questions or criteria outlined in the survey, which were modified based on the feedback received. Following these adjustments, the survey underwent a second review by the same panel of experts and upon completion of the second review process, the survey was deemed satisfactory and subsequently distributed to experts within the field of game studies for their input.

After the validation of the survey was done, it was shared with the experts selected via mail, with a short cover letter to support the research and explain how they can contribute to it by answering to the survey. In addition, it was specified that it would be possible to hold in-depth interviews with online calls to further explore the topic or have a discussion on the subject.

4.3.2 // Experts selection and taxonomy validation via survey

A taxonomy comprehensive of the diverse modes of in-game death was formulated. In the pursuit of its validation, a concerted effort was directed towards engaging experts entrenched within the subject matter. The meticulous selection of these experts was conducted through a rigorous evaluation process, predicated on a tripartite set of criteria.

- Firstly, emphasis was placed upon their substantial contributions to the field, manifesting in a compendium of seminal studies that had profoundly informed the construction of the theoretical foundation.
- Secondly, these experts were carefully culled from the corpus of individuals actively involved in the expansive domain of game studies, denoting their intrinsic relevance within the academic milieu.
- Lastly, a pivotal criterion was the discernible impact of their research attempts upon the broader landscape of game studies, underscoring their profound influence on the discipline as a whole.

This selection process ensured the inclusion of experts whose thoughts and perspectives held the potential to affirm the robustness and applicability of the generated taxonomy.

Following the identification of experts, a survey was meticulously designed and subjected to a validation process. Academic experts within the research domain were consulted to ensure the survey's clarity and alignment with the research objectives. The validation process adopted a qualitative approach to assess the content's coherence, its clarity and its relevance in the game studies field. The survey was implemented using Google Forms, providing researchers with various tools for questionnaire validation. A succinct cover letter was included to contextualize and support the research and a consent to participate in the study and the use of the data for implementation in the taxonomy. The survey starts with an introduction on its first page, elucidating the main objectives and research structure. The next sections are structured as follows: it is segmented into distinct parts, with the initial segment aimed at gathering demographic data such as age and geographical location. The subsequent section introduces the three primary categories of the taxonomy, and the ensuing three sections are dedicated to each of these main categories. Each question within these sections corresponds to a specific part of the category, accompanied by an image preview illustrating the relationships within the taxonomy, including sub-categories, dimensions, and sub-dimensions. A concise caption accompanies each image to aid in comprehension. For each question, distinct validation criteria are provided for rating purposes.

The validation criteria to rate are the following:

1. *Relevance*: The Categories are relevant and necessary for the completion of the taxonomy.
2. *Clarity*: The Categories are clearly explained and comprehensible.
3. *Laconicity*: The Categories are peculiar and not repetitive.
4. *Consistency*: The Categories contents are coherent with the main category that contains them.

It is asked then to Rate their level of agreement on those validation criteria, on a 4-point scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

Upon obtaining explicit authorization, the responses from participants were systematically collected. The ensuing chapters comprehensively explore the discussion and analysis of the survey results. For a detailed overview of the survey questions, the annex section provides a comprehensive reference (chapter 8.2). The survey was opened on 4th December 2023 and, after its close on 10th February 2024, some changes were made to the taxonomy, in order to give them a stronger and coherent structure. How-

ever, the main structure remains the same, always divided into three main categories, with just a change in the definition of “Death as Mechanic” in “Death as Ludic element” in order to better reflect the terminology used in the game studies field. More detailed updates were done on the sub-dimensions of the taxonomy. The final and updated version in detail of the taxonomy is available at chapter 5.4 and eventual opportunities for a future development of the research can be found in the conclusions section (chapter 7 and to see the complete survey, chapter 8.2).

4.3.3 // Taxonomy validation via In-depth interviews

*A*dditionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected experts to analyze specific segments of the taxonomy. There were a total of 4 experts contacted for the interviews (3 males and 1 female), and they decided to do this face-to-face discussion because they found the survey too “strict” to be able to give as complete feedback as possible. Some of them participated in both surveys and interviews while others decided to do only the last one, and they were held in the same time frame in which the survey was open (4th December 2023 - 10th February 2024).

Instead of a predetermined agenda, each interview was approached on a case-by-case basis, determining the relevant topics to be discussed and they were conducted online via video calls. Each call took approximately one hour, and the experts had the opportunity to stress on a specific part of the research. As discussed in the next chapters (5.2.2), the considerations made during the interviews were quite similar to the ones made via survey: eventually, this was an opportunity to better define the potential updates that could be applied to the final version of the taxonomy. These updates were majorly focused on the “Death as narrative” part and in minor part on the other two categories.

The synergy between the in-depth interviews and the survey was of great help in the development of the final taxonomy: while the survey provided an opportunity to have a lot of qualitative data on the first version of the taxonomy, the interviews gave well-focused expert viewpoints on what were the strengths and weaknesses of the artifact. In the next chapter, it is possible to consult in detail the results of the validation and the consequences of them on the final taxonomy.

05

// Taxonomy development

5.1 // The Taxonomy based on the theoretical background

Various elements were considered during the formulation of the death in video games taxonomy. Initially, the theoretical background provided a comprehensive evaluation of the existing landscape within game studies concerning this subject. Despite the wealth of studies exploring diverse facets of death and killing in video games, a conspicuous gap emerged—an absence of a comprehensive study encapsulating all possible death modes.

Drawing from these studies, the collection phase was instrumental in identifying death modes suitable for inclusion in the new taxonomy. Secondly, the insights garnered from the references highlighted in the theoretical background (Chapter 2) were systematically organized. The taxonomy has been divided into three main categories, aiming to encompass not only death modes centered on the narrative or ludic plane individually but also those modes that coexist on both planes, defined as 1) *Death as narrative*, 2) *Death as mechanic*, 3) *Death as both narrative and mechanic*.

The formulation of death modes in the taxonomy was methodically developed by anchoring it to the underlying theoretical framework. For instance, within the context of death as a narrative element, various portrayals of death modes can be discerned. This includes games that aim to address specific social issues, contrasting with those that take a more generalized approach to depicting death. Consequently, the death as narrative sub-category was bifurcated into Games for Social Change (G4SC) and those designed for entertainment purposes. This systematic approach was consistently applied throughout the taxonomy, wherein each primary category's death modes were derived from a thorough examination of the previously analyzed theoretical foundation.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, each death mode is accompanied by a case study selected based on its presence in academic literature and recognition among players (through online discussions and sales). It must be emphasized that many of these case studies may coexist across different dimensions/categories. For instance, "This War of Mine" is considered a case study for games that present players with complex moral choices but can also be classified within games where death (more specifically) plays a role in raising awareness of social issues (hence, the G4SC death mode). Also, In This War of Mine you can die too rather than just killing, but the taxonomy is located in a death mode related to kill. Each death mode has only one case study related for an easier reading of the taxonomy and the matching process was done by following the criteria expressed in the methodology (chapter 4.1.3.1).

This decision was taken for two main reasons:

- To provide a singular example, thereby facilitating a more straightforward and direct presentation of the specific death mode.
- To maintain fidelity to the theoretical background. The case studies and taxonomy were developed based on existing literature, and all these examples are drawn from specific texts addressing a particular death mode.

The full version of this taxonomy is available in the annex, chapter 8.1.

5.2 // Qualitative taxonomy validation

The first version of the taxonomy was subjected to a comprehensive review process through experts within the field of game studies, as elucidated in the earlier discussion (Chapter 4). The validation procedure constituted a focused examination, wherein the taxonomy was subjected to analysis by experts possessing an understanding of the theoretical foundations and practical applications within the domain of game studies. The engagement with these experts extended beyond mere endorsement, encompassing insightful critiques and constructive feedback that served to refine and enrich the structure of the proposed taxonomy.

The experts were afforded the opportunity to reach out to third parties whom they deemed capable of making significant contributions to the research objectives and, in certain instances, the research methodology extended beyond survey instruments to include in-depth interviews. This methodological choice was not only motivated by instances where the experts perceived a potential lack of theoretical grounding to respond comprehensively to the survey but also served as a deliberate means to investigate further into the different layers of the death modes.

The next paragraphs unveil the outcomes of the survey, meticulously organized and delineated within the overarching framework of the three principal categories. This structured presentation ensures a systematic and coherent examination of the survey findings, providing a comprehensive insight into the patterns, nuances, and divergences identified across the diverse spectrum of death modes under investigation. Also, an updated version of the taxonomy will be available in chapter 5.4.

5.2.1 // Survey results

The survey garnered a diverse array of responses over the course of approximately one month, with the Google Form remaining accessible from December 4, 2023, to February 10, 2024. This temporal span allowed for

an exhaustive collection of interesting perspectives within a well-defined time frame.

It must be highlighted that the initial segment of the survey was dedicated to acquiring demographic data, including participants' geographic locations. This strategic approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the regional distribution of respondents and allowed for findings into the potential impact of cultural and geographical contexts on the interpretations of death modes in video games.

This deliberate outreach aimed at ensuring a global representation of expertise, thereby fostering a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the subject matter.

As viewable from the outcomes, the responses came from diverse European countries, with a notable emphasis on contributions from Italy. Moreover, North American perspectives have also been significantly represented. This geographical distribution enriches the dataset with a cross-cultural dimension, permitting an exploration of how perceptions and interpretations of death modes may vary across different gaming communities and cultural contexts [Fig. 5.1].

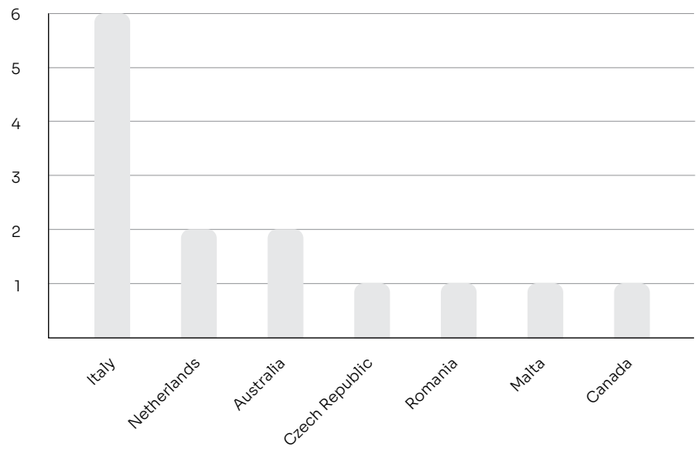


Fig. 5.1
Geographical coverage of the survey results.

Regrettably, a notable absence in the survey responses pertains to perspectives from the "Eastern" part of the world. This gap in representation is acknowledged and attributed, in part, to the prevailing linguistic bias inherent in the academic texts accessed for this research, the majority of which are composed in the English language.

The next sections of the survey analyze the taxonomy. Moving beyond demographic information, the survey transitioned into the intricacies of participants' experiences and perceptions related to death modes in gaming. This methodological progression guaranteed a holistic exploration, combining quantitative data with qualitative results, and laid the foundation for an analysis of the varied dimensions encapsulated within the taxonomy. In the subsequent sections of this analysis, the research will scrutinize and interpret the survey findings, taking into account the limitations posed by the geographic bias and emphasizing the need for future research on a larger group.

It is essential to explain that, embedded within the survey structure, participants were afforded the opportunity, at the end of each section, to provide more expansive and qualitative feedback. This open-ended feature, realized through a Google Form question formatted to elicit "short paragraph" responses, served as a way for participants to articulate and contextualized findings beyond the confines of numerical data.

In addition to the quantitative dataset, these discursive responses added a qualitative dimension to the research, offering a richer understanding of participants' perspectives on death modes in video games. The inclusion of this qualitative feedback mechanism not only enriches the depth of the analysis but also provides a platform for participants to express different viewpoints, elaborate on their experiences, and potentially introduce new considerations that may not be fully encapsulated within the predefined survey structure.

As we proceed with the subsequent sections of this investigation, both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the data will be examined. This dual-layered approach ensures a comprehensive and multi-faceted exploration of the nuances inherent in the taxonomy, allowing for a more holistic interpretation of the findings.

5.2.1.1 // Three main categories

This initial segment of the discussion centers on the primary layer of the taxonomy, dedicated to elucidating the principal categories into which the taxonomy is stratified—namely, death as narrative, death as mechanics, and the dual manifestation of death as both mechanics and narrative.

During the examination of this taxonomy's foundational layer, a notable observation emerged regarding the imperative to provide a more elucidated explanation of the subdivision among these three components. This concern revolves around the challenge of avoiding redundancy, particularly given the inherent overlap wherein various examples can potentially fall into multiple categories. The rationale behind this tripartite division is to comprehensively group all conceivable death modes within the gaming landscape. This categorization strategy aims to include the manifold ways in which death is manifested—whether as a narrative device, a mechanical construct, or a mix of both elements [Fig. 5.2].

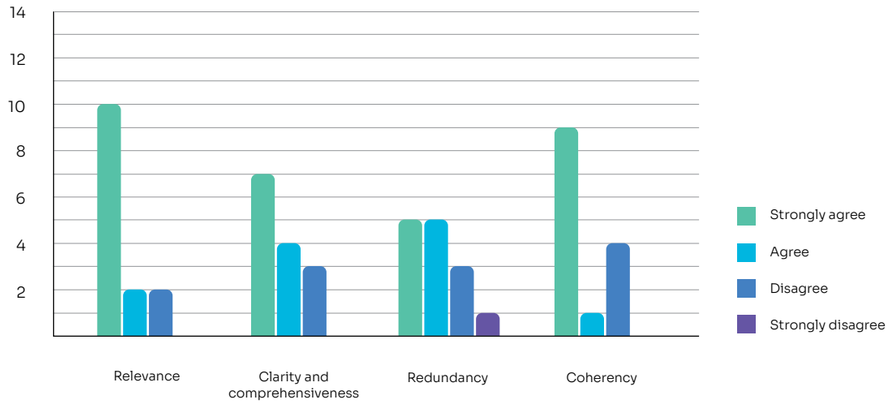


Fig. 5.2
Death in Video games main categories validation results. The colors that have been chosen in this graph are the same used in the next ones.

In the world of gaming, a diverse array of examples exists wherein the gameplay may be constrained while the narrative remains robust, and vice versa. Consequently, the presented death mode is inherently linked to the narrative or ludic plane, respectively. Moreover, there are instances in gaming where a seamless integration occurs, with narrative and gameplay intertwining without eclipsing each other. This complexity addresses the relationship between narrative and mechanics in video games.

The underlying rationale for categorizing death modes into narrative, mechanical, and the duality of both lies in the acknowledgment that games seldom adhere strictly to a singular dimension. Rather, there is a prevalent coexistence of both narrative and ludic elements in the majority of gaming experiences. It must be recognized that the taxonomy does not assert the existence of exclusively narrative or ludic games. Instead, it seeks to discern and delineate the predominant emphasis placed by designers on one aspect over the other, a choice often influenced by various factors such as the game genre or the target audience.

The intentional classification into these three categories serves to include the complex and variegated nature of death modes in video games. This taxonomy aims to provide a rich framework for understanding how designers navigate the interaction between narrative and mechanics, acknowledging the inherent interdependence while also discerning the predominant focus within the dynamic landscape of game design.

Regarding the validation criteria, it is noteworthy that the scores are predominantly skewed towards the “agree” spectrum, indicating a high degree of consensus among the experts.

Even more, as the final version of the taxonomy unfolds, subtle refinements have been implemented in the terminology employed. Notably, the term “mechanical” has been replaced with the more pertinent and widely accepted term “ludic” within the context of game studies. This terminological adjustment reflects a commitment to precision and alignment with established conventions within the game studies.

In the course of the validation process, an intriguing suggestion emerged regarding the potential inclusion of player-driven death as a distinct category. However, this proposal has not been incorporated into the final taxonomy. The reason behind this decision lies in the taxonomy’s primary focus on death modes conceived by game designers rather than those emergent from player actions. It is also important to highlight that this observation has implications for the inclusion or exclusion of the Ironman rule in the updated version of the taxonomy. Subsequent sections will expound upon these terminological adjustments and contextualize the taxonomy within the broader landscape of game studies.

5.2.1.2 // Death as narrative

The first question of this section has been split into two distinct parts, each serving a specific analytical purpose. These parts direct attention towards the dichotomy between deaths in Games for Social Change (G4SC) and deaths for entertainment purposes. The first part related to Games for Social Change, seeks to elucidate how mortality is utilized as a narrative device to impart social messages or stimulate awareness regarding pertinent societal issues. In contrast, the examination of deaths for entertainment purposes explores the diverse ways in which mortality is incorporated [Fig. 5.3].

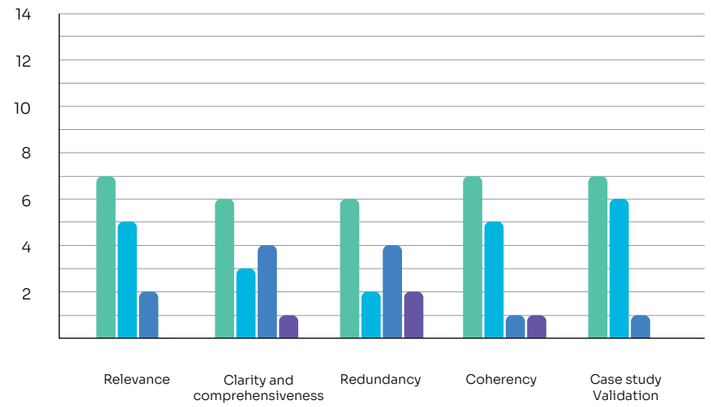


Fig. 5.3
Death as narrative’s sub categories validation results.

From the findings, particularly gleaned from responses to open-ended questions formatted as short paragraphs, a discernible need emerges for a more specific subdivision between what can be unequivocally categorized as Games for Social Change (G4SC) and those designed with entertainment purposes in mind. The term “Games for Social Change” itself has

been identified as potentially meriting reconsideration. This recognition emanates from the insight gathered during the survey, suggesting a potential evolution in language or conceptual framing to better frame the diverse ways in which video games engage with societal issues.

Transitioning to the second segment of the section, focus shifts towards the dimensions within the subcategory of death modes framed explicitly as entertainment [Fig. 5.4].

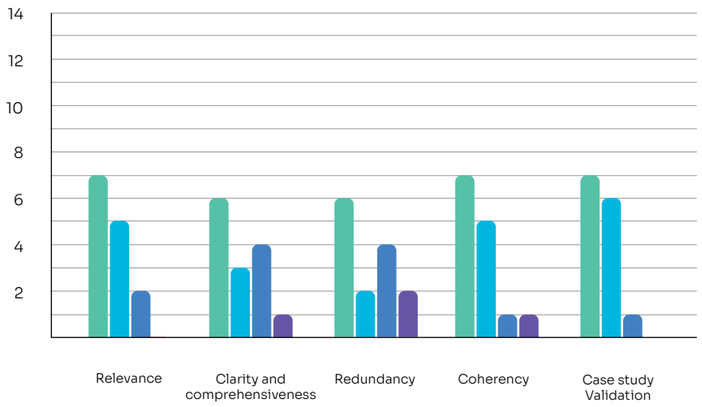


Fig. 5.4
Entertainment purpose's dimensions validation categories.

The demarcation between the two overarching dimensions appears to exhibit a degree of clarity, albeit the subcategories within each dimension present challenges in their delineation. It is evident from the gathered insights that the distinction between what qualifies as Games for Social Change (G4SC) and entertainment purposes remains ambiguous. This observation prompts a critical reevaluation of the initial taxonomy segment, specifically dedicated to death as a fundamental element of narrative construction. Within this preliminary exploration, aimed at elucidating the role of death in shaping narratives, it is evident that modifications are requisite to refine the taxonomy. Notably, the distinct inclusion of a category specifically dedicated to Games for Social Change has generated ambiguity among respondents. Participants consistently pointed out the inherent overlap between G4SC and other categories, prompting the need for a more defined approach that acknowledges the intricate interplay between the societal impact and entertainment facets of video games.

The challenges in demarcating G4SC from entertainment purposes signal the necessity for a recalibration of the taxonomy, possibly through a reexamination of terminologies or a restructuring of categories. This iterative refinement process aligns with the researcher's commitment to responsiveness and adaptability in light of participant feedback.

5.2.1.3 // Death as ludic

This constitutes the most extensive analysis, as it also represents the most comprehensive section of the taxonomy. The structure of this section parallels the preceding one: respondents were prompted to evaluate the initial tier of the taxonomy before going deeply into each subcategory and any accompanying dimensions or sub-dimensions.

The initial part devoted to the validation of subcategories received positive feedback. The division is clear and not redundant. However, a singular concern arose regarding the distinction between avatar's death and player's death, a distinction not applied in other categories. Some participants found the rationale behind this choice unclear [Fig. 5.5].

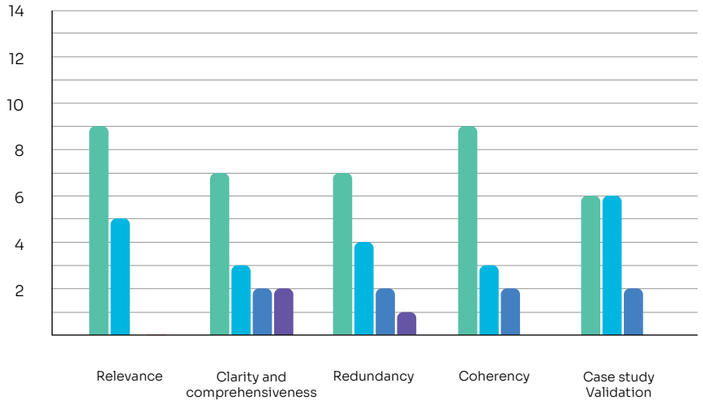


Fig. 5.5
Death as Mechanic sub-categories validation results.

The rationale stems from the significant variation in the death mechanic when experienced directly by the player through a controlled avatar versus a scenario where the player must control and avoid multiple entities without immersing themselves in a specific one, as seen in games like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000).

While this division is evident in death mechanics, applying it to narrative death, prevalent in games with limited mechanics, poses challenges. For instance, in Gris, death is present in the narrative but does not directly impact the player or any non-player characters. A similar challenge arises in the third category, where games exhibit a substantial narrative and mechanical component, necessitating death to function almost simultaneously for players and avatars.

The dimensions of the player's death appear lucid, devoid of notable uncertainties or perplexities [Fig. 5.6].

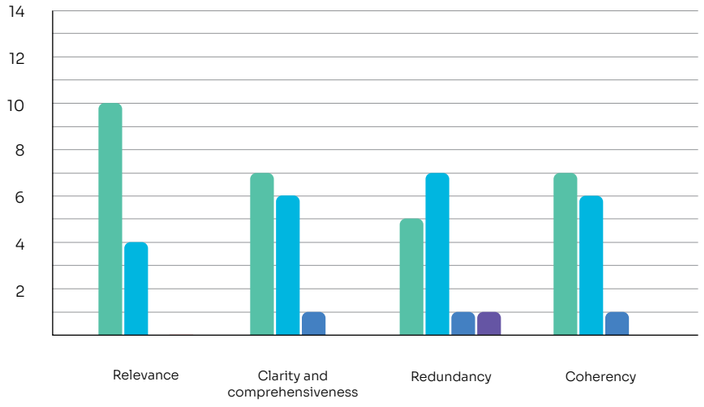


Fig. 5.6
Player's death's dimensions validation results.

The same reasoning applies to the sub-dimensions of the play-die-restart structure, with not any particular critical point to underline [Fig. 5.7].

Here are faced those games were every time the player dies, it can eventually come back from death thanks to checkpoints or saved data. For example, the already mentioned *Pac-man* is related to this category.

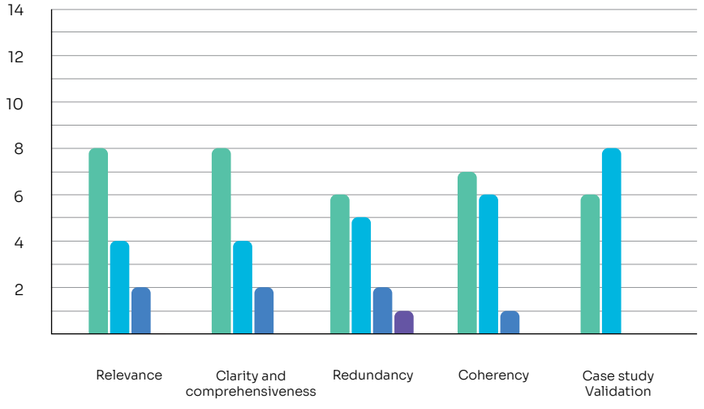


Fig. 5.7
Play-Die-Restart's sub-dimensions validation results.

Some doubts have arisen regarding the sub-dimensions of the Permadeath mode. Although the distinction between Roguelites and Roguelikes is clear, it has been pointed out several times (as we will see in the interviews) that the Ironman rule is not a death mode inherent in the natural structure of the game; rather, it is something created by the player (a self-imposed challenge). This raises some concerns about the overall coherence of the taxonomy, as death modes not inherent to the game itself have not been considered until now [Fig. 5.8].

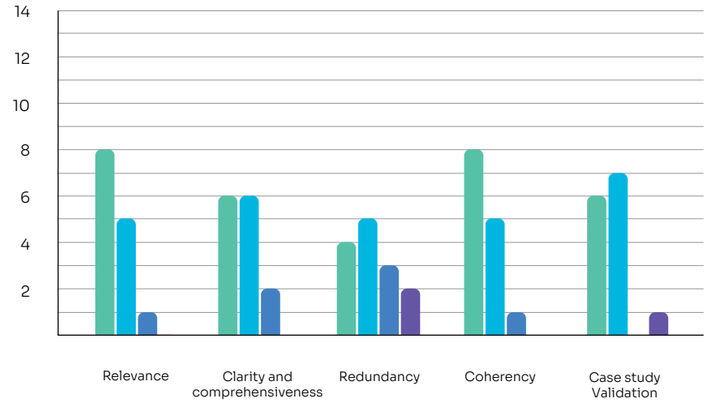


Fig. 5.8
Permdeath's Sub-Dimensions validation results.

The next section of the survey addresses, for the first time, player-induced death modes. It begins with killing NPCs, divided into the single-player and PVE dimensions. As seen from the results, redundancy is a weak point in this section, as the subdivision does not seem necessary for the majority of experts. In fact, the two dimensions are very similar to each other and do not present significant differences as represented. The confusion arises because the PVE category refers to those games where you kill NPCs with other players rather than alone [Fig. 5.9].

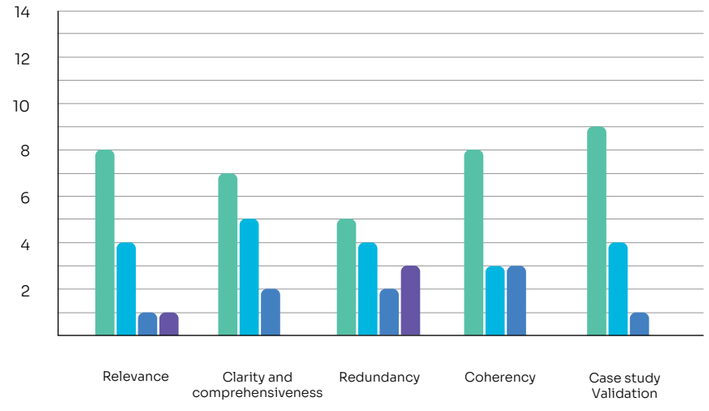


Fig. 5.9
Killing NPCs' Dimensions validation results.

The sub-dimensions concerning linear progression and consequences also raise some doubts. They appear interchangeable for various reasons, exhibiting redundancy. This differentiation seems unnecessary, since it focuses excessively into specific aspects that are not necessary for the final goal of the research. There might be opportunities for further exploration and refinement in future research on this topic [5.10].

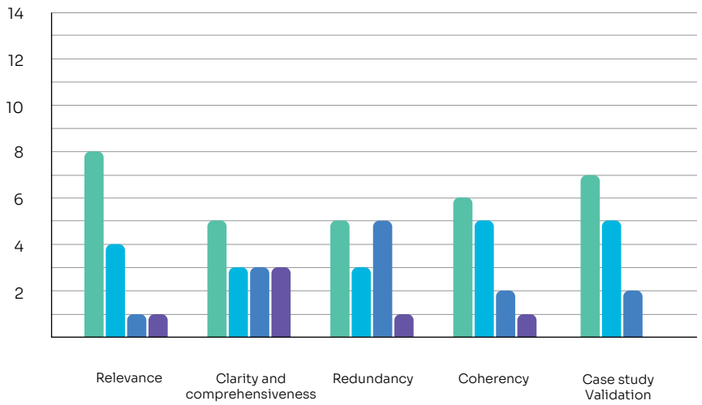


Fig. 5.10
Single Player's Sub-Dimensions validation results.

The section dedicated to death modes where the player kills other players is lucid and exhibits coherence. The taxonomy effectively captures the nuances within this category, providing clarity and a well-organized structure [Fig. 5.11].

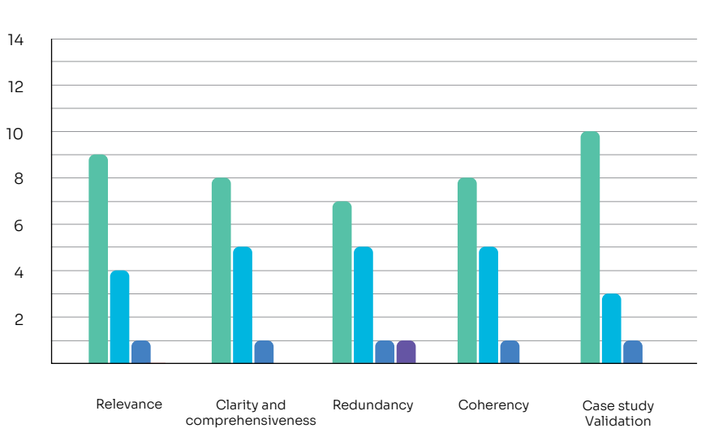


Fig. 5.11
Killing other players' Dimensions validation results.

The dimensions of intra-mechanic and extra-mechanic have garnered positive feedback, along with their respective sub-dimensions within the extra-mechanic realm. Undoubtedly, this section stands out as the most in-depth, given the wealth of material available in academic literature. [Fig. 5.12]. As discussed in the chapter 7, this kind of in-depth analysis can be eventually adopted for each sub-dimensions for a future updated research on the subject, in order to have a taxonomy as complete as possible. The next chapter, is focused on the last category of the taxonomy: Death that co-exist on both ludic and narrative planes simultaneously .

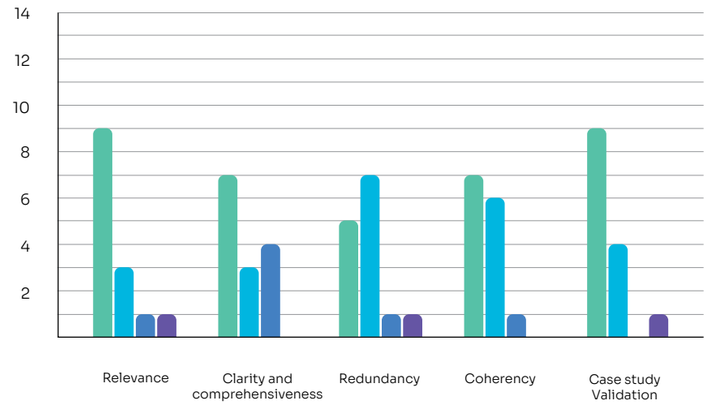


Fig. 5.12
Extra mechanic's Sub-Dimensions validation results.

5.2.1.4 // Death as both ludic and narrative

In this conclusive section of the taxonomy, the focus shifts towards death modes that concurrently exist within the narrative and ludic dimensions of video games. While the validation phase of this segment did not provide as many intuitions as the previous sections, it nonetheless provided valuable points of discussion and potential refinements for the emerging taxonomy. As we go deeper into the initial segment dedicated to subcategories, it is imperative to analyze the outcomes in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the encounter between narrative and ludic elements in video game death modes [Fig. 5.13].

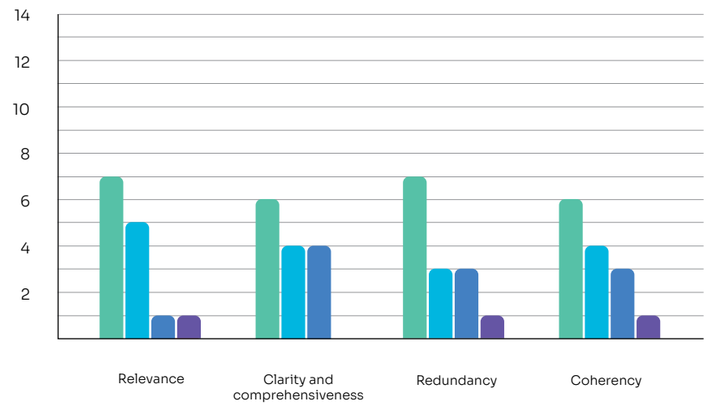


Fig. 5.13
Death as narrative and mechanic's Sub-Categories validation results.

Similarly, the aforementioned considerations apply to the other dimensions, which appear to exhibit coherence and a robust structure. The death modes embedded with narrative elements have demonstrated significant

relevance, and the scores across other validation criteria have also been noteworthy. This reaffirms their importance within the taxonomy and aligns with the overarching objectives of the research [Fig. 5.14].

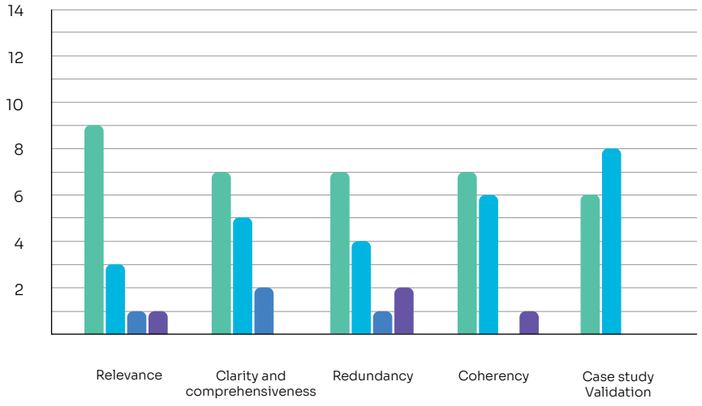


Fig. 5.14
Death Embedded in the Narrative's Dimensions validation results.

The dimension concerning "Morality in player's actions" has revealed slight uncertainties regarding the comprehension of the distinctions between the two death modes. This observation suggests the necessity for further clarification or potentially refining the definitions to increase the clarity of these concepts in the taxonomy. Addressing these details is critical for ensuring a comprehensive and unambiguous classification of death modes within the proposed framework [Fig. 5.15].

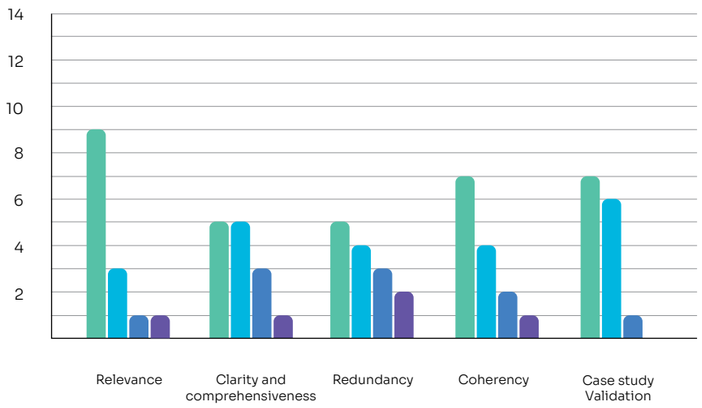


Fig. 5.15
Morality in player's actions' Dimensions validation results.

The aspect of "Accumulation of deeds" echoes the observations made in the initial segment of the subcategories section: the structure exhibits solidity and lacks substantial lacunae. This consistency signifies a robust foundation in the taxonomy, indicating coherence and comprehensiveness in the delineation of death modes. Nevertheless, continuous scrutiny and refinement may be necessary to guarantee an exhaustive representation within this specific dimension [Fig. 5.16].

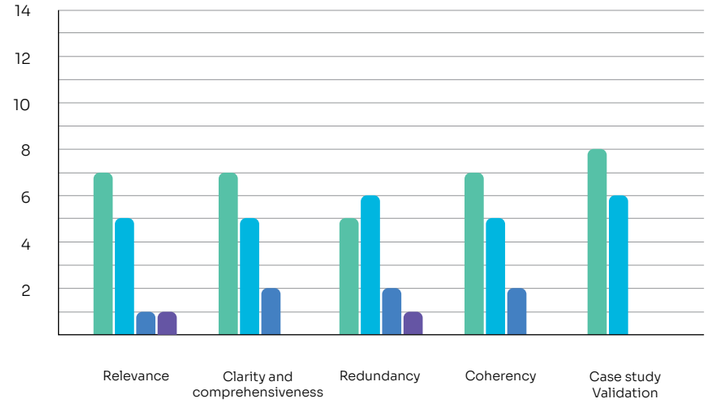


Fig. 5.16
Accumulation of deeds' Sub-Dimensions validation results.

Additionally, respondents have brought attention to the need for clearer differentiation of the category itself from others, suggesting that various alternatives could be explored to address this concern. The latter section of the survey allowed participants to offer their contact details for possible updates on the taxonomy or to facilitate in-depth interviews focusing on the taxonomy. In the following paragraph, we will explore the results of these interviews, outlining significant points and insights gleaned from the participants in more detail. The raw dataset of the survey, is available in the annexes (chapter 8.3).

5.2.2 // In-depth interviews results

The interviews provided various findings, congruent with the survey results. Moreover, they have been very useful in providing additional clarity on certain feedback articulated in the questionnaire, as almost all interview participants had previously completed the survey. Regarding the narrative dimension of death, several observations were highlighted. Firstly, as observed in the survey by Expert 1, the distinction between G4SC and entertainment purposes is a bit tricky. Many death modes can comfortably fall within this subcategory as well as their own, resulting in several instances of overlapping.

Furthermore, as underlined by Expert 2, it appears that there is a missing section dedicated to games where death plays a role in the narrative but is not as impactful as in other case studies. Examples include graphic adventures like *Full Throttle* (Lucasarts, 1995). Concerning the ludic aspect of death, certain issues within specific sub-dimensions have been highlighted. According to Expert 2, the absence of a dedicated death mode for games where death not only results in the loss of progress but also renders further gameplay impossible, as exemplified by the game *One Chance* on newgrounds.com (Awkward Silence Games, 2010). In this game, the player, portraying a scientist developing a cure for cancer, faces extinction for all living cells, leading to the human race's demise. Upon completing the game, the player is unable to continue playing. This example could be classified among games where death plays a pivotal role in both narrative and ludic dimensions.

This observation on Permadeath serves as a significant opportunity for potential future research on the subject, as it could be explored as a distinct and expansive topic.

Issues have been noted by Expert 3 in the section addressing death caused to NPCs. Specifically, the differentiation within the single-player game dimension proved unclear to experts during both interviews and surveys, as the sub-dimensions appeared excessively similar.

Expert 4 echoed sentiments akin to those of Expert 1. Specifically, the delineation between G4SC and the other sub-dimensions was deemed somewhat incongruous with the overarching taxonomy. Consequently, there is a need to reassess the dimensions within the "death as narrative" category to address this issue effectively.

Expert 5 raised noteworthy concerns regarding two specific case studies, namely *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen, 2011) and *Returnal* (Housemarque, 2021). These cases were identified as not solely mechanical, as they also significantly contribute to the narrative aspect within the "death as mechanic" category. As a result, the focus was redirected towards case studies more aligned with the mechanical aspect of death. Following a secondary review of the literature, two additional case studies were incorporated into the taxonomy: *Spelunky* (Derek Yu, 2008) and *Into the Breach* (Subset Games, 2018), representing the Roguelike and Roguelite dimensions, respectively. Moreover, there emerged a necessity to introduce a third dimension, termed "True Permadeath", which pertains to games wherein all progress is lost upon death, akin to the classic and father of the Roguelike genre game *Rogue* (A.I. Deign, 1980).

Throughout the interview sessions, an in-depth exploration of death in both ludic and narrative dimensions transpired. A particularly intriguing aspect pertains to games where death finds narrative justification. In addressing this matter, it is pertinent to assert that the chosen case studies should be perceived not as sole examples but rather as comprehensive instances of the respective death modes. Their selection was guided by the theoretical underpinnings, scrutinizing games cited as examples for various death modes.

5.3 // Findings from the validation: an in-depth analysis of what experts pointed out

From the results derived from interviews and expert surveys, the taxonomy has undergone significant refinements. These modifications were instigated by the contributions of experts who, through their extensive research, played a pivotal role in shaping the taxonomy. The new iteration of the taxonomy has been carefully revised to underline its clarity, coherence, and utility.

The collaborative effort of experts, informed by diverse perspectives and scholarly investigations, has enriched the taxonomy's robustness. By incorporating the feedback and recommendations from these interviews and surveys, the taxonomy aligns more closely with the complexities of death modes in video games.

This collaborative process has not only fine-tuned the taxonomy but has also laid the base for future advancements in the study of death modes within video games. The ongoing engagement with experts ensures that the taxonomy remains dynamic, adapting to the evolving landscape of video game research. In comparison to the previous version, notable adjustments have been made, particularly in the section dedicated to death in the narrative dimension. The G4SC (Games for Social Change) category has been redefined as the "main theme", while the other subcategory has been designated as the "secondary theme". This alteration was prompted by challenges associated with classifying elements as either entertainment or non-entertainment, necessitating a more coherent approach.

The evolution of this taxonomy reflects a commitment to precision and adaptability, addressing inherent complexities in categorizing themes related to death in video games.

The "secondary theme" subcategory has undergone refinement and now incorporates two sub-dimensions: one that was present in the previous version, known as "derivative death", and a new addition named "Not addressed". This classification pertains to death modes within narrative-focused games where death does not play a primary role or is not of particular interest to the storyline.

In games such as *Full Throttle*, the narrative dimension is undoubtedly more profound than the gameplay mechanics; however, death assumes a role even more peripheral than in games where its significance is derivative. This categorization serves to capture the subtle variations in the narrative significance of death across different gaming experiences.

With the introduction of the "Not addressed" sub-dimension, the taxonomy acknowledges instances in narrative-driven games where death is neither a focal point nor extensively explored within the overarching story. This distinction allows for a more vertical analysis of the diverse ways in which death is integrated into the narrative fabric of video games.

The section dedicated to ludic death has undergone further updates, specifically in the Permadeath subcategory. A notable modification includes the removal of the "Ironman rule" dimension, a decision made to shift the taxonomy's focus more towards the perspective of game designers rather than players. This adjustment aims to mitigate conflicts arising from player-created rules, which, like the Ironman rule, are not inherently designed features but rather player-imposed challenges.

This decision builds the taxonomy's coherence and its emphasis on systematically categorizing death modes that are intrinsic to a game's design philosophy. It is worth noting that the removal of the Ironman rule raises interesting possibilities for future research. Exploring deaths deliberately "engineered" by players could be a compelling avenue for investigation, as outlined in Chapter 7. This potential area of inquiry could delve into the dynamics of player-created challenges and their impact on the gaming experience, giving findings into the interaction between player agency and game design.

A third category, termed "true Permadeath", has been introduced alongside Permadeath. This addition aims to delineate cases where death results not only in the loss of progress but also in a fundamental alteration of the gameplay experience. An exemplary illustration of this category is found in the game *Rogue*, where upon death, the player not only forfeits progress but also assumes control of a new character, fundamentally changing the avatar. Furthermore, the case studies for the Roguelike and Roguelite dimensions have been revised to better align with the death modes presented. For the Roguelike dimension, *Spelunky* serves as a prime example, illustrating death predominantly as a ludic element rather than a narrative one. On the other hand, *The Binding of Isaac*, although classified as a Roguelike, exhibits a narrative heavily influenced by death. In the Roguelite sub-dimension, the case study *Into the Breach* has been included, demonstrating a gameplay experience where the loss of progress is less significant compared to *Spelunky,* with some progress retained even after death (such as the possibility to choose which upgrade to keep once the player will restart the playthrough).

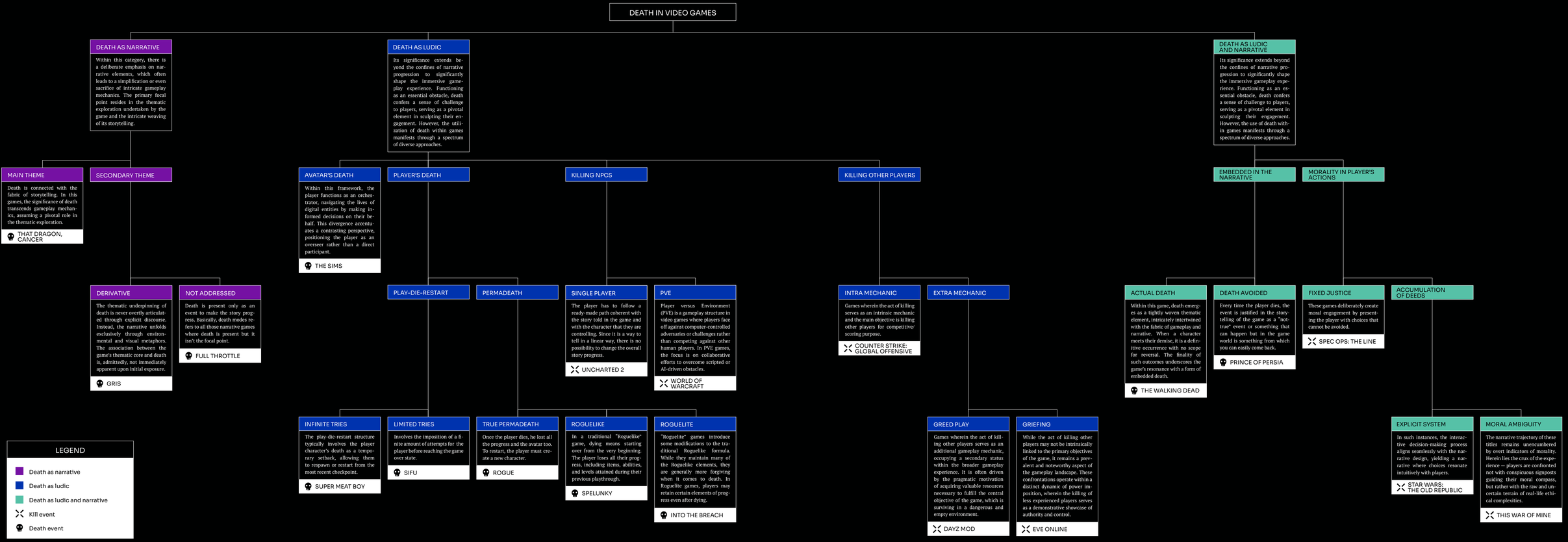
The dimension "single player" has also undergone notable adjustments within the taxonomy. Specifically, the dimensions within this subcategory have been consolidated into a single dimension. This decision stemmed from the recognition that these dimensions, namely "linear progression" and "consequences on the gameplay", exhibited minimal differences, rendering a separate classification unnecessary. The amalgamation of these dimensions into a unified category increases the taxonomy's clarity and simplifies the classification of death modes, eliminating unnecessary nuances. This change streamlines the taxonomy, ensuring that the distinctions between various dimensions remain meaningful and pertinent to the general framework. The adjustments made to the "single player" subcategory enrich the taxonomy's coherence by streamlining closely related dimensions. This refinement ensures that the taxonomy remains a robust tool for researchers and game designers alike, offering a more concise and effective means of categorizing death modes within the game studies landscape.

The section devoted to death within the ludic and narrative realms remains unaltered from its original iteration, as neither the interviews nor the survey revealed substantial inaccuracies. Undoubtedly, as we will explore in the conclusions, the insights garnered from this study could lay the foundation for future research in this domain. These potential avenues of exploration have the capacity to enrich the existing taxonomy by introducing novel categories or refining existing ones based on further empirical investigations.

It becomes evident that the collaborative efforts of experts, empirical data, and theoretical foundations have shaped a robust and adaptable framework. The conclusions drawn from this study not only affirm the taxonomy's current state but also point towards promising directions for future research, cementing its relevance within the dynamic landscape of video game studies.

5.4 // A death in video games taxonomy

Here is the revised version of the taxonomy, incorporating feedback and adjustments addressed in the previous chapters. While the overall structure remains consistent, subtle changes have been made in the sub-dimensions to define a better clarity. The taxonomy now presents a more direct and refined framework for comprehending the diverse death modes in video games. Also, as it can be noticed in the next two pages, some case studies have been updated too, in the categories death as narrative and death as ludic.


DEATH IN VIDEO GAMES
DEATH AS NARRATIVE
Within this category, there is a deliberate emphasis on narrative elements, which often leads to a simplification or even sacrifice of intricate gameplay mechanics. The primary focal point resides in the thematic exploration undertaken by the game and the intricate weaving of its storytelling.
DEATH AS LUDIC
Its significance extends beyond the confines of narrative progression to significantly shape the immersive gameplay experience. Functioning as an essential obstacle, death confers a sense of challenge to players, serving as a pivotal element in sculpting their engagement. However, the utilization of death within games manifests through a spectrum of diverse approaches.
DEATH AS LUDIC AND NARRATIVE
Its significance extends beyond the confines of narrative progression to significantly shape the immersive gameplay experience. Functioning as an essential obstacle, death confers a sense of challenge to players, serving as a pivotal element in sculpting their engagement. However, the use of death within games manifests through a spectrum of diverse approaches.
MAIN THEME
Death is connected with the fabric of storytelling. In this games, the significance of death transcends gameplay mechanics, assuming a pivotal role in the thematic exploration.
THAT DRAGON, CANCER
SECONDARY THEME
AVATAR'S DEATH
Within this framework, the player functions as an orchestrator, navigating the lives of digital entities by making informed decisions on their behalf. This divergence accentuates a contrasting perspective, positioning the player as an overseer rather than a direct participant.
THE SIMS
PLAYER'S DEATH
KILLING NPCS
KILLING OTHER PLAYERS
EMBEDDED IN THE NARRATIVE
MORALITY IN PLAYER'S ACTIONS
DERIVATIVE
The thematic underpinning of death is never overtly articulated through explicit discourse. Instead, the narrative unfolds exclusively through environmental and visual metaphors. The association between the game's thematic core and death is, admittedly, not immediately apparent upon initial exposure.
GRIS
NOT ADDRESSED
Death is present only as an event to make the story progress. Basically, death modes refers to all those narrative games where death is present but it isn't the focal point.
FULL THROTTLE
PLAY-DIE-RESTART
PERMADEATH
SINGLE PLAYER
The player has to follow a ready-made path coherent with the story told in the game and with the character that they are controlling. Since it is a way to tell in a linear way, there is no possibility to change the overall story progress.
UNCHARTED 2
PVE
Player versus Environment (PvE) is a gameplay structure in video games where players face off against computer-controlled adversaries or challenges rather than competing against other human players. In PVE games, the focus is on collaborative efforts to overcome scripted or AI-driven obstacles.
WORLD OF WARCRAFT
INTRA MECHANIC
Games wherein the act of killing serves as an intrinsic mechanic and the main objective is killing other players for competitive/scoring purpose.
COUNTER STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE
EXTRA MECHANIC
ACTUAL DEATH
Within this game, death emerges as a tightly woven thematic element, intricately intertwined with the fabric of gameplay and narrative. When a character meets their demise, it is a definitive occurrence with no scope for reversal. The finality of such outcomes underscores the game's resonance with a form of embedded death.
THE WALKING DEAD
DEATH AVOIDED
Every time the player dies, the event is justified in the storytelling of the game as a "not-true" event or something that can happen but in the game world is something from which you can easily come back.
PRINCE OF PERSIA
FIXED JUSTICE
These games deliberately create moral engagement by presenting the player with choices that cannot be avoided.
SPEC OPS: THE LINE
ACCUMULATION OF DEEDS
INFINITE TRIES
The play-die-restart structure typically involves the player character's death as a temporary setback, allowing them to respawn or restart from the most recent checkpoint.
SUPER MEAT BOY
LIMITED TRIES
Involves the imposition of a finite amount of attempts for the player before reaching the game over state.
SIFU
TRUE PERMADEATH
Once the player dies, he lost all the progress and the avatar too. To restart, the player must create a new character.
ROGUE
ROGUELIKE
In a traditional "Roguelike" game, dying means starting over from the very beginning. The player loses all their progress, including items, abilities, and levels attained during their previous playthrough.
SPELUNKY
ROGUELITE
"Roguelite" games introduce some modifications to the traditional Roguelike formula. While they maintain many of the Roguelike elements, they are generally more forgiving when it comes to death. In Roguelite games, players may retain certain elements of progress even after dying.
INTO THE BREACH
GREED PLAY
Games wherein the act of killing other players serves as an additional gameplay mechanic, occupying a secondary status within the broader gameplay experience. It is often driven by the pragmatic motivation of acquiring valuable resources necessary to fulfill the central objective of the game, which is surviving in a dangerous and empty environment.
DAYZ MOD
GRIEFING
While the act of killing other players may not be intrinsically linked to the primary objectives of the game, it remains a prevalent and noteworthy aspect of the gameplay landscape. These confrontations operate within a distinct dynamic of power imposition, wherein the killing of less experienced players serves as a demonstrative showcase of authority and control.
EVE ONLINE
EXPLICIT SYSTEM
In such instances, the interactive decision-making process aligns seamlessly with the narrative design, yielding a narrative where choices resonate intuitively with players.
STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
MORAL AMBIGUITY
The narrative trajectory of these titles remains unencumbered by overt indicators of morality. Herein lies the crux of the experience — players are confronted not with conspicuous signposts guiding their moral compass, but rather with the raw and uncertain terrain of real-life ethical complexities.
THIS WAR OF MINE
LEGEND
Death as narrative
Death as ludic
Death as ludic and narrative
Kill event
Death event

In the following sections, the updated taxonomy is presented, divided into three chapters each focusing on one of the three main categories: Death as narrative, Death as ludic, and Death as both ludic and narrative.

5.4.1 // Death as narrative

This category concerns a selection of games in which the thematic role of death supersedes its conventional representation as a gameplay mechanic. Within these games, there is a deliberate emphasis on narrative elements, which often leads to a simplification or even sacrifice of gameplay mechanics. The primary focal point resides in the thematic exploration undertaken by the game and the weaving of its storytelling. In this context, it becomes apparent that the conventional manner of perishing during gameplay is conspicuously absent.

Rather, the representation and experience of death within these games assume a decidedly narrative dimension. The design of these titles precludes the possibility of the player-character's demise through traditional in-game means. Instead, the game's narrative unfolds in a manner that leverages death as an instrument for thematic advancement, relying on its symbolic implications to underscore and accentuate the broader conceptual underpinnings of the narrative. This conscious subversion of traditional gameplay mechanics in favor of a narrative-driven exploration of mortality serves to engender a distinctive and intellectually engaging experience for players within this category of games.

The list of the death modes on the narrative category is the following:

- Main theme
- Secondary aspect // Derivative
- Secondary aspect // Not Addressed

DEATH AS MAIN THEME Death is harnessed to foster societal awareness regarding pertinent topics, be it mortality itself or other significant themes pertinent to the prevailing social fabric. Games which attempt to fulfill this purpose can be aptly classified as games for social change. The example of *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous games, 2016), previously discussed, fittingly aligns with this category. Within this framework, death is strategically incorporated as a narrative lever to tackle socially relevant issues, by focusing more on the storytelling rather than the gameplay.

The deployment of death as a purely narrative aspect within games is discernible, primarily manifesting as an element in which either the player or the avatar assumes the role of the victim [Fig. 5.17].

Fig. 5.17
That Dragon, Cancer (Numinous games, 2016). The game's narrative is all focused on the theme of loss, and the story is full of powerful images like this one.

DEATH AS SECONDARY ASPECT // DERIVATIVE Death may assume a secondary role within the context of the game's objectives, yet it can simultaneously play a significant role in shaping the narrative.

An illustrative instance of a game in which death occupies a fundamental role in narrative construction is the game *Gris* (Nomada studio, 2018). It employs a visual storytelling approach that seamlessly integrates gameplay and environmental components to convey a poignant journey of acceptance amid loss. In *Gris*, the narrative's scaffolding is carefully interwoven with the concept of death, rendering it an indispensable narrative pivot. The game's thematic landscape revolves around the titular character's quest for acceptance and resilience in the face of profound grief. Every visual and interactive facet of the gameplay environment is meticulously designed to symbolize distinct stages of the protagonist's journey toward embracing loss [Fig. 5.18].

In *Gris*, the thematic underpinning of death is never overtly articulated through explicit discourse. Instead, the narrative unfolds exclusively through environmental and visual metaphors. The association between the game's thematic core and death is, admittedly, not immediately apparent upon initial exposure and this divergent approach to death as a narrative element between the two games underlines the multifaceted nature of its integration within artistic gameplay experiences. *That dragon, Cancer* adopts a forthright strategy, utilizing death as a focal point, while *Gris* employs a more subtle, metaphorical approach, challenging players to discern the thematic threads woven within its visually evocative presentation. Despite these divergent approaches, both games exemplify how death can serve as an artistic and narrative catalyst, imbuing gameplay with deeper layers of meaning and emotive resonance.

Fig. 5.18
Gris (Nomada studio, 2018) is full of metaphorical imagery, many focusing on the theme of pain that pervades the protagonist .

DEATH AS SECONDARY ASPECT // NOT ADDRESSED In games where death assumes a secondary role, consideration must be given to narrative-focused games where death does not serve as the primary focal point. This category concerns games in which death exists within the narrative but is not explored as the central theme. A notable example of this category is found in the "Graphic Adventure" genre. An illustrative instance is the game *Full Throttle* (LucasArts, 1995), characterized by a strong narrative emphasis with limited player-environment interactions. In this game, death is incorporated into the narrative as a tool rather than being intended to prompt player contemplation on the theme of death. Specifically, the protagonist struggles with resolving a murder case, with the primary objective being the advancement of the storyline rather than a deliberate exploration of the concept of death [Fig. 5.19].

Fig. 5.19
Screenshots from Full Throttle (LucasArts, 1995). Even if death is present in some crucial parts of the game, the goal is more to tell a thriller story rather than one focused exclusively on the theme of death

5.4.2 // Death as ludic

Death constitutes a recurrent facet of players' interactive encounters within the gaming environment, invariably making its presence felt in various gaming contexts. As previously explained, its significance extends beyond the confines of narrative progression to significantly shape the immersive gameplay experience. Functioning as an essential obstacle, death confers a sense of challenge to players, serving as a pivotal element in sculpting their engagement. However, the use of death within games manifests through a spectrum of diverse approaches. A fundamental differentiation rests in discerning games wherein players directly confront mortality via the mediation of an avatar, one that embodies their virtual representation. Conversely, other instances entail players assuming an external agency that presides over multiple avatars or operating within a broader scope, disengaging from the focal point of individual character control and so changing the perspective on death events.

The list of the death modes on the ludic category is the following:

- Avatar's death
- Player's death // Play-die-restart // infinite tries
- Player's death // Play-die-restart // limited tries
- Player's death // Permadeath // True Permadeath
- Player's death // Permadeath // Roguelike
- Player's death // Permadeath // Roguelite
- Killing NPCs // PVE
- Killing NPCs // Single player
- Killing other players // Intra mechanic
- Killing other players // Extra mechanic // Greed play
- Killing other players // Extra mechanic // Griefing

AVATAR'S DEATH Discussing games that embrace the player as an external orchestrator of events, one noteworthy example is *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000). In this context, the encounter with mortality takes on a particular role, diverging from the direct engagement observed in games where the player embodies an avatar. The Sims can be classified as a life simulator, a virtual realm wherein players oversee the minutiae of everyday existence, governing the trajectories of one or multiple characters. This simulation concerns a gamut of activities ranging from culinary pursuits to household chores, hobbies, and athletic engagements. In the pursuit of reality, The Sims introduces the inevitability of death within its immersive framework. The player navigates diverse avenues of mortality contingent on the game iteration, including natural demises and even the peril of drowning, among other conceivable fates. The dynamics of the game manifest in an intriguing encounter between the player's omnipotence in shaping the lives of their virtual charges and the inexorable specter of mortality that punctuates their trajectories. In sum, the game not only exemplifies the incorporation of death within a simulation but also accentuates the indirect and variegated nature of player-avatar engagement in this distinct gaming category.

This category finds its prevalence more prominently within genres not traditionally associated with conventional gameplay dynamics. It is notably discernible in simulator or management games, where the player's role assumes that of an external agent entrusted with the responsibility of guiding the fortunes of in-game characters. This structural configuration is characterized by a distinct dissociation from the avatar-controlled engagement often encountered in mainstream genres. Indeed, the archetype of games falling under this category tends to eschew the conventional gameplay paradigms in favor of a more detached vantage point. Within this framework, the player functions as an orchestrator, navigating the lives of digital entities by making informed decisions on their behalf. It is noteworthy that this particular genre orientation, often characterized by simulation or management mechanics, is less commonplace in traditional gaming contexts. Rather, it aligns more seamlessly with titles wherein the overarching objective revolves around strategic decision-making, life simulation, or the orchestration of complex systems. In contrast, the abundance of games in which the player themselves confronts death demonstrates the prevalence of the more traditional model, wherein the avatar's experiences serve as primary conduit for engagement [Fig. 5.20].

Fig. 5.20
A Sim trapped in a pool without the possibility to quit it: one of the most common death in The Sims (Maxis, 2000).

PLAYER'S DEATH // PLAY-DIE-RESTART // INFINITE TRIES The facet of gaming wherein players confront death directly stands as a notably pervasive and cherished category within the gaming landscape. The prevalence of this mechanic is indeed noteworthy, as it finds its incorporation within a wide spectrum of gaming experiences, spanning across a multitude of genres and it points out the intrinsic value and versatile utility that the concept of death as a mechanic holds in gaming. This rich category naturally subdivides into two primary sub-categories, which distinctly frame the mechanics governing player engagement with death: the conventional "play-die-restart" structure and the more demanding "Permadeath" framework. Within the infinite tries sub-category (a form of play-die-restart mechanic), exemplified vividly by games like *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010), the encounter revolves around an iterative pattern of gameplay, where player-avatar demise is followed by swift respawns, encouraging persistent engagement and mastery. In this particular instance, the game's notoriety as an immensely challenging platformer has contributed to its stature as one of the most successful and widely appreciated titles in the gaming sphere. A hallmark of *Super Meat Boy* is its artful calibration of difficulty. The design of the levels, complemented by the provision of infinite attempts and the brevity of individual challenges, collaborates to imbue the player with a sense of continuous progression. While the game demands tenacity and perseverance, the incorporation of these design elements alleviates excessive frustration, ensuring that the player's engagement remains deeply engrossing and meaningful. This subtle equilibrium between challenge and accessibility elevates the experience beyond mere exasperation, fostering a dynamic whereby player interactions with death provides their sense of accomplishment and progression [Fig. 5.21].

Fig. 5.21
Screenshots from Super Meat Boy (Team Meat, 2010). The levels are dense of traps and hazards, that can kill you with one shot. Despite that, it is one of the most popular platform ever made.

Fig. 5.22
Death screen from SIFU (Sloclap, 2022). Once you passed +70, it is instant game over and you will need to repeat a large portion of the game.

PLAYER'S DEATH // PLAY-DIE-RESTART // LIMITED TRIES A distinctive trait of earlier games, notably exemplified by the renowned title *Pac-Man*, involves the imposition of a finite allocation of attempts for players. This game mechanic, while evoking a sense of challenge and urgency, was also strategically implemented as a means to incentive players to invest monetary resources. The contextual backdrop of *Pac-Man* as a classic arcade game positioned players to expend credits for continuation upon exhausting their lives. Although rooted in economic motivation, this concept of limited tries has transcended the arcade era and found potential utility in contemporary game design, extending its function beyond monetization. An illustrative contemporary example of this mechanic is evident in the game *SIFU* (Sloclap, 2022). Notably distinct from *Super Meat Boy*, *SIFU* introduces an innovative approach to the play-die-restart framework. In this game, players encounter frequent instances of avatar demise, akin to its aforementioned counterpart. However, the salient difference lies in the progression mechanism upon death: as the player succumbs repeatedly, the avatar advances in age, culminating in eventual incapacitation because too old to proceed. This design intricacy introduces a dynamic wherein the player's engagement becomes not just a tentative of mastering the challenges but also a strategic management of the avatar's vitality [Fig. 5.22].

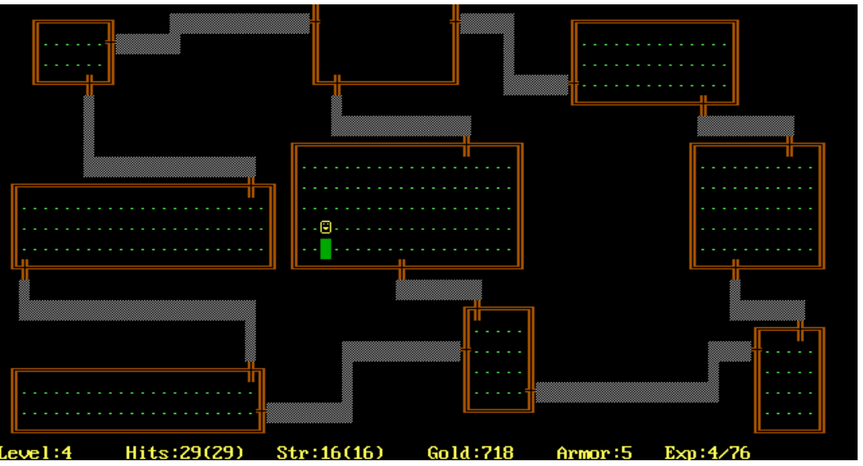


Fig. 5.23
Screenshot from the game Rogue (A.I. Design, 1980). The entire map is always viewable, entirely made in ASCII art.

PLAYER'S DEATH // PERMADEATH // TRUE PERMADEATH Another significant category related to player-confronted death pertains to games characterized by a stringent mechanic wherein the player is afforded only a single attempt. In this construct, failure results in irrevocable defeat, precluding any possibility of restarting. Once the player dies, there is no possibility of resurrection: all progress is lost permanently. Typically, players are required to restart from the true beginning of the game, often with a completely new avatar. Despite the seemingly punitive nature of this mechanic, it is currently quite popular as it imbues dying with profound significance.

Today, numerous examples of games with this structural mechanic abound. However, the true precursor of this game mechanic is *Rogue* (A.I. Design, 1980), which, as the name suggests, is closely associated with the sub-genre of "Roguelikes". In *Rogue,* players navigate a game world depicted on a square grid represented in ASCII, engaging in turn-based combat with monsters and other creatures as they endeavor to traverse the dungeon and complete the game. Throughout their exploration, players may discover treasures that enhance their character's attack or defense, thereby increasing their chances of success. Nevertheless, in the event of player death, all progress is permanently lost, necessitating the creation of a new character to continue playing. Furthermore, each playthrough of *Rogue* offers a unique experience, as dungeon levels, monster encounters, and treasures are procedurally generated [Fig. 5.23].

Rogue holds significant historical importance in the realm of video games and game design, so much so that it spawned two very popular distinct sub-genres: Roguelikes and Roguelites, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

PLAYER'S DEATH // PERMADEATH // ROGUELIKE These are those games that have a similar game mechanic to the previously mentioned Rogue, where the player loses every single progression once he dies, but at the beginning of a new game there can be some changes in the game structure and it can continue to use the same character.

Currently, numerous Roguelike games are available in the market, each offering unique mechanics and gameplay experiences. One notable example is the platform game *Spelunky* (Derek Yu, 2008), which has gained widespread popularity. It is renowned for its challenging gameplay, where hazards and enemies pose significant threats to the player's survival. According to Derek Yu, the creator of *Spelunky*, the game's punishing nature compels players to think critically about their actions and strategize to stay alive (*The Making of Spelunky - Documentary*, 2021). Death is an integral part of the Spelunky experience, often resulting from encounters with enemies and environmental hazards. Environmental elements such as disappearing platforms add to the challenge, requiring players to remain vigilant. Additionally, players have the ability to alter the game world by destroying environmental objects using bombs and guns. However, carelessness in handling explosives can lead to significant damage to the player's avatar.

Despite its frustrating aspects, *Spelunky* remains highly addictive due to its procedurally generated game world, which provides a fresh experience with each playthrough. Unlike *Rogue*, *Spelunky* does not feature true Permadeath; although progress is lost upon death, players can continue using the same character in subsequent attempts [Fig. 5.24].

Fig. 5.24
Death screen from Spelunky (Derek Yu, 2008). Death so much present as a mechanic that, every time you die, you have a summary of what killed you and how.

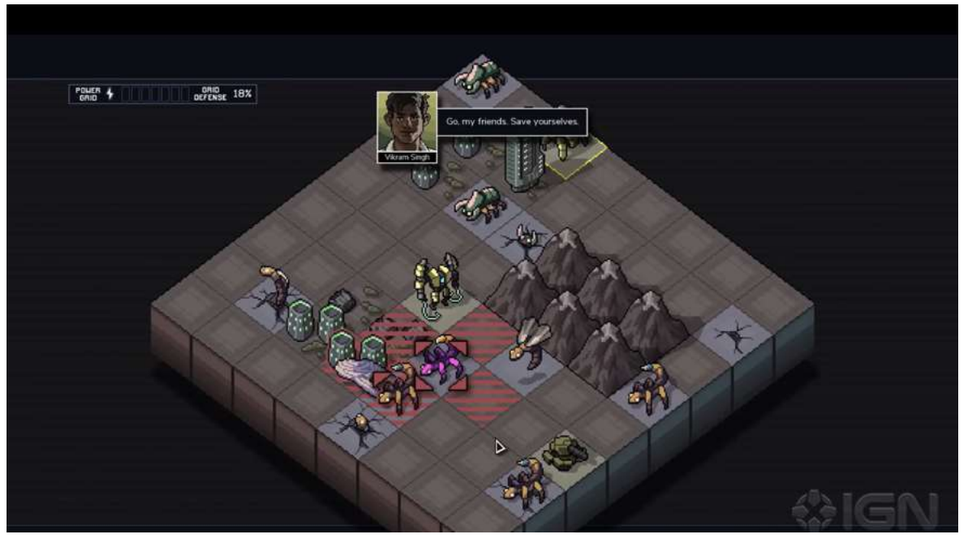


Fig. 5.25
Death screen from Into the Breach (Subset games, 2018). A short animation of the aliens invading the game field is triggered and a message from the HQ will tell you to "save yourselves". After that, you need to decide which pilot should survive for the next play and restart.

PLAYER'S DEATH // PERMADEATH // ROGUELITE Indeed, as previously discussed, certain games deviate from the traditional concept of Permadeath by implementing mechanisms that allow players to retain a portion of their progress despite experiencing defeat, and a perfect example of this is. *Into the Breach* (Subset games, 2018). In this turn-based combat strategy game, players undertake the task of defending planet Earth against an alien invasion. Utilizing soldiers piloting giant mechs equipped with various weapons, armor, and equipment, players engage in battles against the alien forces. The game is structured into distinct areas, each composed of levels referred to as "maps". The primary objective on each map is to safeguard civilian structures that contribute to the power grid supporting the mechs, although additional objectives may be introduced. At the commencement of each new game, players have the option to select the starting area on the globe, with each area featuring unique elements such as specific enemies and environmental hazards. Similar to other Roguelite games, difficulty is a prominent feature, and player deaths are commonplace. Furthermore, the procedural generation of areas ensures variation in maps with each playthrough. However, unlike some counterparts, there is no complete loss of progress upon death. Players have the opportunity to choose which pilot to save upon demise, thereby forming a new team with the preserved soldier upon restarting. Additionally, certain upgrades persist across subsequent matches [Fig. 5.25].

KILLING NPCS // SINGLE PLAYER Within the discourse surrounding death as a game mechanic, the inevitability of engaging with the act of killing demands our attention. The pervasive presence of death in games transcends its role as a mere obstacle, evolving into a multifaceted tool to surmount challenges and propel narratives. This examination delineates two primary categories: the elimination of non-playable characters (NPCs) and the termination of fellow players, encompassing both multiplayer and single-player realms. The capacity to eliminate NPCs is proof of the very fabric of gaming experiences, permeating a diverse array of titles spanning both multiplayer and solitary contexts. Singularly focusing on the domain of single-player engagements, *Uncharted 2* (Naughty Dog, 2009) stands as an emblematic illustration. In this acclaimed franchise, the mechanics of killing NPCs emerge as a linchpin strategy, pivotal for the creation of challenges and the maintenance of player engagement with the unfolding action [Fig. 5.26]. There is no intent into creating moral ambiguity or a deep narrative, the aim is to give players an engaging experience though adrenaline action.

Fig. 5.26
Screenshots from Uncharted 2 (Naughty Dog, 2009). Killing NPCs is one of the most common thing you will do in the game, since it is focused on delivering an experience strongly focused on action.

Fig. 5.27
Screenshots from World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004). The HUD is extremely dense, and focused on showing you where are the players that are riding with you.

KILLING NPCS // PVE In the field of multiplayer gaming, the engagement with non-playable characters (NPCs) culminates in the Player Versus Environment (PVE) paradigm. In this expansive arena, the famous *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) emerges as an exemplar, resonating not only as a cherished entity in gaming but also as a must in game studies discourse. This iconic MMORPG, renowned for its immersive realms and extensive player interactions, underscores the significance of collaborative efforts against environmental challenges. The *World of Warcraft* experience is emblematic of the PVE concept, wherein players forge alliances and consort with fellow avatars to surmount formidable adversaries and challenging boss encounters: the players and their virtual embodiments burgeons into a profound relationship. This enduring bond necessitates temporal investment and nurturing in a manner akin to the gradual maturation of a symbiotic relationship. A hallmark feature within *World of Warcraft* lies in the complex web of social interactions that coalesce around the collective effort to traverse the obstacles. The construct of "Raids" encapsulates this phenomenon, signifying more than mere collaboration. Instead, it engenders a requirement for the establishment of robust social networks among players. These networks function as conduits of strategic coordination, bolstered by mutual understanding and synchronized actions (Banks, 2015; Williams et al., 2014) [Fig. 5.27].

Fig. 5.28
A Deathmatch session from Counter-strike: Global Offensive (Valve, 2012). There is no explicit story, the only objective we have is to kill the opponent team.

KILLING OTHER PLAYERS // INTRA MECHANIC Within the landscape of online gaming, the capacity to engage in lethal encounters transcends the boundaries of NPCs, extending to fellow players themselves. This phenomenon can be elucidated by discerning two overarching categories: games wherein the act of killing serves as an intrinsic mechanic (intra-mechanic), constituting the primary objective, and games wherein killing assumes a supplementary role (extra-mechanic), coexisting alongside other primary objectives (Smith, 2004).

A paradigmatic example of the former category is found in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012). Within the precincts of this title, the act of killing becomes a pivotal constituent of the gameplay's core mechanics. The Deathmatch mode encapsulates this ethos, where players are tasked with eliminating adversaries to secure victory within rounds. The triumphant team is the first to accrue five rounds, exemplifying the centrality of lethal engagements in determining success. Significantly, the discourse around kills in such environments manifests a duality. The perspective of individuals, whether positioned as victims or perpetrators, bestows distinct connotations upon the act of killing. This reflective interplay of attitudes augments the socio-cultural fabric of online gaming, unveiling the psychological dynamics embedded within the virtual arena.

In the scholarly investigation titled "A Conversation Analysis Perspective on Kills and Deaths in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive Video Gameplay," (Rusk and Ståhl, 2020) the researcher focuses on the interactions inherent in K (kills) and D (deaths) events within the context of the game. The analysis concerns textual exchanges within the in-game chat, offering a window into the communicative intricacies underpinning players' experiences. Of particular note is the divergence in the self-topicaliza-

tion of K events in comparison to D events. The distinction arises from the multifaceted nature of accomplishing kills within the game. Unlike deaths, which may befall players due to various factors, achieving kills necessitates the adroit utilization of strategic maneuvers and elaborate ploys. Consequently, the prevalence of K events in chat exchanges reflects a distinctive celebratory sentiment, emblematic of the efforts invested by players in their pursuit of victory [Fig. 5.28].

KILLING OTHER PLAYERS // EXTRA MECHANIC // GREED PLAY AND GRIEFING *DayZ* (Bohemia interactive, 2013) and *EVE Online* (CCP games, 2003) can be appropriately categorized as games wherein the act of killing other players serves as an additional gameplay mechanic, occupying a secondary status within the broader gameplay experience. Nevertheless, these two games exhibit contrasting approaches to the incorporation of player-versus-player interactions. While *DayZ* engages with the death of another player in a manner that bears a semblance of tragic consequence, it is often driven by the pragmatic motivation of acquiring resources necessary to fulfill the central objective of the game, which is survival in a perilous environment. Within this context, player killings assume a degree of emotional gravitas, aligned with the exigencies of resource acquisition that directly shapes the core gameplay narrative. On the other hand, *EVE Online* differentiates itself in its treatment of player-versus-player engagements. While the act of killing other players may not be intrinsically linked to the primary objectives of the game, it remains a prevalent and noteworthy aspect of the gameplay landscape. These confrontations operate within a distinct dynamic of power imposition, wherein the killing of less experienced players serves as a demonstrative showcase of authority and control. This phenomenon, referred to as griefing, involves the deliberate initiation of conflict for the sheer enjoyment derived from asserting dominance and relishing the perceived potency it affords. This paradigm highlights the divergent motivations and consequences of player-versus-player interactions across different gaming environments, underscoring the interaction between gameplay mechanics and player behavior. The next paragraph will show games where the concept of death assumes a multifaceted role, acting as both a narrative device and a fundamental gameplay element, further enhancing our comprehension of the relationship between game mechanics and thematic narratives [Fig. 5.29-30].

Fig. 5.29-30
Screenshots from DayZ (Bohemia interactive, 2013) and EVE online (CCP games, 2003). In both games, fights against other players are not mandatory, but needed if you want to survive.

5.4.3 // Death as both ludic and narrative

It refers to a category of video games in which the concept of death plays a dual role. It serves not only as a fundamental gameplay mechanism but it also goes into the thematic and narrative elements of the game. In such games, the player's interactions with the death mechanics are not purely functional; they also carry significant narrative weight. The act of dying, or even the presence of mortality within the game world, serves as a storytelling device that provides to the game's overarching themes. This duality offers a unique and multi-dimensional player experience, where the mechanics of death and the narrative around it are interdependent, providing a rich and immersive gameplay encounter.

The list of the death modes on both ludic and narrative category is the following below:

- Death embedded in the narrative // Actual death
- Death embedded in the narrative // Death avoided
- Morality in player's actions // Fixed justice
- Morality in player's actions // Accumulation of deeds // Moral ambiguity
- Morality in player's actions // Accumulation of deeds // Explicit system

DEATH EMBEDDED IN THE NARRATIVE // ACTUAL DEATH

The Walking Dead (Telltale games, 2012) is a notable game that situates players within a narrative framework where they assume control over an avatar endowed with a confined repertoire of potential interactions. At times, players are entrusted with overseeing the actions of various other characters. In this construct, the focal point resides on decision-making, wherein the consequences of choices exert a profound influence over the trajectory of the story, as well as the survival prospects of the characters involved. Within this game, death emerges as a tightly woven thematic element, intertwined with the fabric of gameplay and narrative. When a character meets their demise, it is a definitive occurrence with no scope for reversal. The finality of such outcomes stresses the game's resonance with a form of embedded Permadeath. Restoration of the lost character necessitates a complete return to the game's inception. This confluence of permanent death mechanics and the narrative's unfolding reinforces the immersive nature of the gameplay experience and attests to the fusion of narrative and game mechanics as a narrative device [Fig. 5.31].

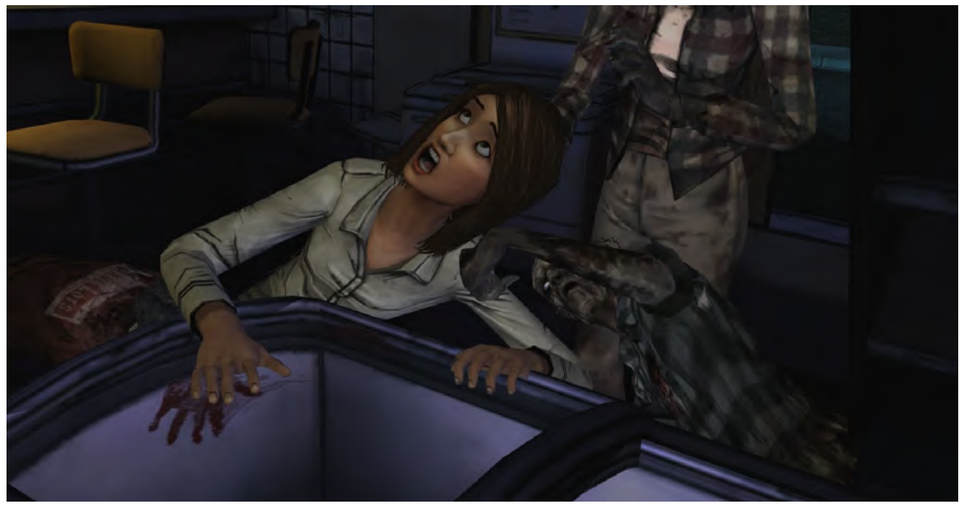
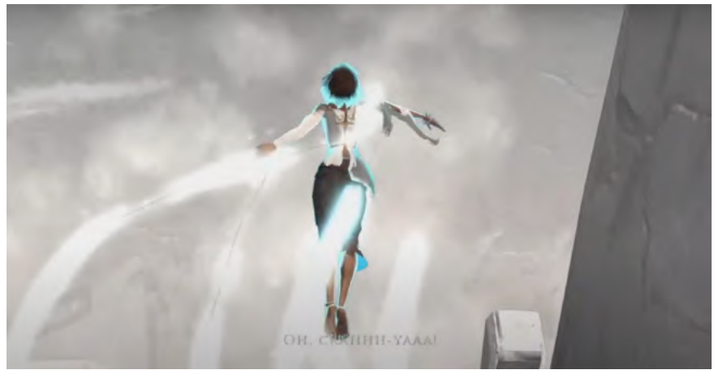


Fig. 5.31
The Walking Dead (Telltale games, 2012). It is very easy to die for all the characters, and once they die, they can't come back.

DEATH EMBEDDED IN THE NARRATIVE // DEATH AVOIDED

Prince of Persia (Ubisoft, 2008) stands as a thought-provoking example of the encounter embedded in death within the narrative and its strategic avoidance. Prince of Persia is an action-adventure video game that follows the journey of a young stranger with no name, who lost his donkey in the desert and, since it was carrying lots of gold and money, wants to find it. During his travel, he meets a mysterious girl called Elika, who was the princess of a reign now destroyed by an evil creature.

The stranger proposes assistance her in defeating the creature, contingent upon the protagonist aiding in the search for the lost donkey. Elika is portrayed as a character possessing supernatural abilities akin to those of a "witch". These powers enable her to assist the stranger in various situations, such as reaching distant platforms or enhancing attacks against adversaries. However, her most crucial role is that of protector: Elika intervenes whenever the player approaches a potential "game over" scenario, preventing such outcomes by, for example, placing the player on the nearest platform in case they fall or shielding them from potentially mortal enemy attacks. Nevertheless, should this intervention occur during a battle sequence, the enemy's health is restored, necessitating the repetition of the entire encounter. This mechanic finds narrative justification through discussions within the storyline regarding Elika's powers and capabilities. As a result, the game adroitly accommodates the dual existence of death as both an experiential occurrence within the interactive gameplay and a key element in the narrative storytelling. These dimensions delineate a narrative strategy that bypasses the conventional constraints of player death while leveraging its significance within the narrative. This intriguing approach corresponds with the identified concepts of "death avoided" and "death embedded" within the broader discourse of "death narratives," as elucidated by the scholarly research in this field (Bosman, 2008) [Fig. 5.32].



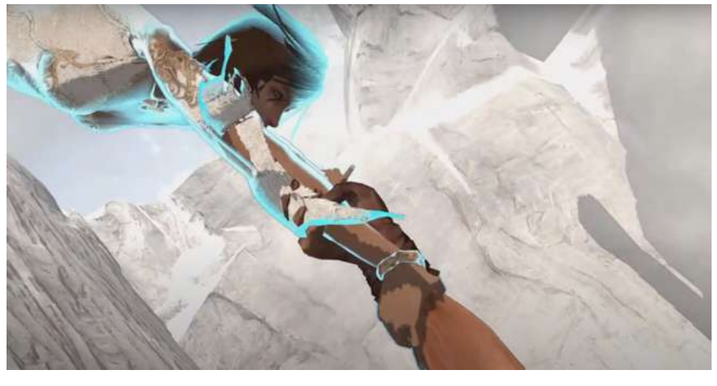


Fig. 5.32
A "game over" scene from Prince of Persia (Ubisoft, 2008). Every time we fall, Elika will save us by teleporting the player on the closest platform.

Fig. 5.33
An iconic scene from Spec Ops: the Line (Yager, 2012). The player has to face the consequences of their actions, even the most terrifying ones.

MORALITY IN PLAYER'S ACTIONS // FIXED JUSTICE Undoubtedly, in video games, the multifaceted role of death finds its counterpart in the complex and varied ways in which killing is portrayed. As previously elucidated, the theme of killing within the gaming medium has persistently remained a contentious subject, spanning across the entirety of its history and still generating fervent discussions to this day. However, it is intriguing to consider that within the confines of this virtual domain, the act of killing can assume a paradoxical stance — one that serves as a conduit for exploring facets of human morality and individual responsibility. Within the scholarly discourse surrounding this thematic terrain, a dichotomy emerges, encompassing two discernible scenarios: fixed justice and the accumulation of deeds (Švelch, 2010). The first one signifies instances where the narrative and gameplay converge to present a preordained sequence of events, to the illustrative case of *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager, 2012) as previously delineated. In such games, the act of killing becomes a conduit for the exploration of complex moral dilemmas and psychological dissonance. These instances reflect a pivotal juncture wherein game developers deftly manipulate the player's engagement, guiding them towards profound contemplation of their actions and their implications within the game's narrative framework. Consequently, killing in these scenarios transcends mere mechanical interactions to metamorphose into an allegorical tool for questioning deeper ethical quandaries [Fig. 5.33].

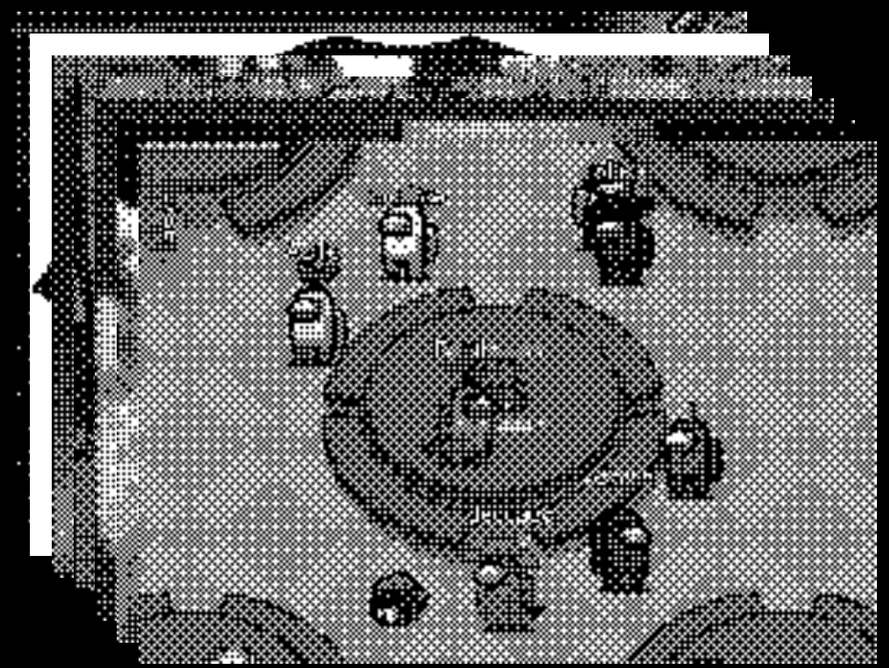
Fig. 5.34
Every time you have to take a decision, in Star Wars: the Old Republic (Bioware, 2011), the UI will show you the possible consequences, between light side (blue icon) and dark side (red icon).

MORALITY IN PLAYER'S ACTIONS // ACCUMULATION OF DEEDS // EXPLICIT SYSTEM AND MORAL AMBIGUITY Within the panorama of gaming, a discernible dichotomy surfaces, distinguishing between games where choices regarding killing are intuitive (Explicit system) and those where they are ambiguous (Moral ambiguity). As previously delineated, examples such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware, 2011) embodies the first category, wherein the course of action to be pursued appears evident due to the lucidity of the ensuing consequences. In such instances, the interactive decision-making process aligns seamlessly with the narrative design, yielding a narrative where choices resonate intuitively with players [Fig. 5.34]. However, the spectrum of gaming also accommodates titles of a more complex nature, epitomized by the likes of *This War of Mine* (11Bit studio, 2014). These games present a range of ethical dilemmas, wherein the consequences of one's actions are shrouded in ambiguity. Unlike the "karma meter" systems that typify more straightforward decision-making paradigms, the narrative trajectory of these titles remains unencumbered by overt indicators of morality.

Herein lies the crux of the experience — players are confronted not with conspicuous signposts guiding their moral compass, but rather with the raw and uncertain terrain of real-life ethical complexities. In such a context, choosing a course of action becomes an exercise in grappling with one's own values and priorities, free from the confines of conventional judgment mechanisms. In essence, the dual trajectory of gaming choices showcases intuitive decisions with palpable consequences and the ethical opacity that shows the multifaceted nature of human decision-making. The latter instances reflect a profound commitment to the realism of moral conundrums, acknowledging that within the moral ambiguity of reality, no karma meter can predict the outcomes of one's actions (Formosa et al., 2022) [Fig. 5.35].

Fig. 5.35
This war of mine (11Bit studio, 2014) doesn't have any karma meter: the consequences of the actions are unknown, there is no good or bad side.

06 // Discussion



6.1 // Analyzing research insights

The discourse surrounding the concept of death in video games has been notably fragmented, characterized by diverse and often parallel discussions within the literature. This fragmentation indicates a current limit which leads to the lack of unified understanding or approach towards categorizing and analyzing how death is represented and functions across various gaming experiences. Recognizing this gap, the current study aims to offer a more systematic and comprehensive exploration of death within video games, constructing a cohesive framework that can encapsulate the principal modes of death encountered in this medium.

To achieve this, the study adopted a research methodology that integrates an extensive review of existing literature with case study analyses, integrated with original insights garnered from the survey and the in-depth interviews with experts.

These diverse sources of information and perspectives enable the development of a nuanced taxonomy that delineates death in video games from three distinct but interconnected angles: thematic, ludic, and a hybrid of the two. This taxonomy not only presents the roles that death can play in video games—from driving narrative progression to shaping gameplay dynamics—but also facilitates a deeper understanding of how these roles interact and intersect.

By categorizing the modes of death within video games according to the context in which they occur and their impact on either the narrative or gameplay (or both), this study provides a valuable tool for distinguishing between different approaches to incorporating death in video games. This classification points out the multifaceted ways in which death influences the player's experience, whether by advancing the story, altering gameplay mechanics, or enriching the overall immersive quality of the game.

The significance of this research extends beyond academic discourse, offering practical implications for both game scholars and designers. For scholars, the taxonomy provides more structured analysis of death within video games, enabling a clearer understanding of its various manifestations and implications. This, in turn, supports a more sophisticated critique and analysis of video games as a complex form of cultural expression. For game designers, the insights provided by this study and its taxonomy offer a foundation for possible creative exploration, guiding them in conceiving and implementing death in games in ways that are innovative, meaningful, and consistent with both gameplay mechanics and narrative elements. Therefore, by highlighting the diverse possibilities for integrating death into video games, the study encourages designers to consider alternative or more complex approaches, thereby enriching the gaming landscape with experiences that could become more articulated and even engaging.

Overall, the research aims to make a valuable contribution to game studies, particularly by exploring potential opportunities for game designers through the categorization of death modes in games and, at the same time, by giving scholars and game studies' experts a rigorous collection of the main contributions made on the subject. The foundational step in this attempt involves a thorough examination of the theoretical background to comprehend the existing knowledge on the subject, identify any contributions made, and highlight knowledge gaps within the field. This initial research phase is dedicated to consolidating various analyses in the field of game studies that focus on the same subject. Through this preliminary investigation, it became evident that there is a lack of recent studies that comprehensively categorize all possible death modes.

From a first general analysis on how games use death as a tool to provide challenges and overcome obstacles (Jaakko, 2012; Juul, 2013, 2005; Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2002), the analysis of the literature then moved on identifying those specific death modes already explored by experts. Death assumes a significant role in shaping narrative elements within games, often delving into themes of grief and loss by prioritizing narrative development over mechanical intricacies (Mariani, 2016; Meakin, 2021; Sandra and Mutiaz, 2022; Schott, 2017). On the ludic plane, death manifests in diverse iterations. Players commonly encounter a play-die-restart mechanic, yet the proliferation of Roguelite and Roguelike games underscores the demand for challenging gameplay experiences. The implementation of killing mechanics is widespread, with instances where players must eliminate enemy NPCs to progress or engage in multiplayer interactions aimed at achieving higher scores. Furthermore, certain online games feature killing as a secondary mechanic, providing players with opportunities to assert dominance over others (Carter et al., 2013a; Copcic et al., 2013; Cuerdo and Melcer, 2020; Leino, 2012; Mariani & Gandolfi, 2016; Paul, 2011; Rubin and Camm, 2013; Wright et al., 2002).

There exists a category of games wherein both ludic and narrative dimensions of death converge. Many titles seamlessly integrate ludic death into narrative contexts, justifying irreversible events within the game world. Moral dilemmas are often crafted through player actions, with modern games employing fixed justice systems to instill a sense of accountability. Additionally, games may present players with moral quandaries, allowing them to dictate the trajectory of the narrative through their choices, thereby altering the overarching storyline (Bosman, 2018; de Smale et al., 2019; Mortensen, 2015; Mortensen et al., 2015; West, 2020).

Different insights had emerged in the academic literature, including the preference in narrative games to depict player or NPC deaths not caused by the player, the established presence of death as a game mechanic (both inflicted and experienced), and the increasing equivalence of death in recent games on both ludic and narrative levels simultaneously. Additionally, a comprehensive list of video games frequently cited in various texts, along with the context/death mode in which they were presented, was compiled. This aspect was subsequently explored more thoroughly in the development of the theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework played a pivotal role in refining the research focus. Initially, references were systematically categorized to delineate the specific areas of interest and to identify works addressing similar themes. This approach allowed for the identification of recurrent themes and the associated video games, contributing to the understanding of the subject matter.

Moreover, the process of categorizing references provided insights into the broader landscape of game studies and helped in establishing connections between different strands of research. This complete mapping of literature not only facilitated the identification of overarching patterns but also laid the basics for a more detailed exploration of specific themes with death in video games.

The next step involved the careful selection of case studies, a pivotal component in the development of the taxonomy. The synergy between the theoretical background and the theoretical framework, informed by these chosen case studies, played a role in shaping and defining the components of the taxonomy.

Subsequently, the validation of the taxonomy emerged as a necessary step to define the alignment of the developed framework with the perspectives of the authors whose works constituted the foundation of the taxonomy. This validation process involved reaching out to experts whose writings were frequently cited in the research. In certain instances, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to go into detail on their findings. The validation, conducted through a survey and interviews, aimed to gather feedback and ensure the taxonomy resonated with the experts' understanding of the subject matter. The outcomes revealed a generally positive reception of the taxonomy among experts, accompanied by some valuable corrections. The primary areas of focus for these corrections pertained to the categories within death as narrative, where overlaps were identified. Also, there were simplifications and consolidations, particularly in the death as ludic category, to define clarity and conciseness.

Specifically, notable interest and inquiries were directed towards certain aspects of the taxonomy:

- Death as Narrative Sub-categories: These elicited considerable doubts, particularly regarding the classification of games as either Games for Social Change (G4SC) or Entertainment Purpose.
- Permadeath: As one of the most discussed death modes in game studies, Permadeath sparked debates, especially concerning the distinction between Roguelite and Roguelike. This highlights the potential for further exploration and examination of this theme.
- Single Player Dimension: Synthesis of the death mode within the single-player dimension was performed, addressing overlaps among sub-dimensions.
- Death on both Narrative and Ludic Planes: While comprehensive, there was acknowledgment of the increasing difficulty in distinct categorization from other groups. Nevertheless, this separation was deemed necessary to delineate a distinct area for case studies where narrative and ludic aspects are closely intertwined.

As evident in the survey results section, the experts' opinions align with each other. Consequently, the taxonomy has been refined by providing more detailed explanations for certain categorizations and simplifying sections that ventured into broader research areas beyond the primary scope of this thesis.

These contributions constitute a significant update, not only for my research but also, and above all, for the field of game studies. Having received direct feedback from those who conducted studies on the subject adds further value to the final taxonomy, making it a potentially excellent starting point for future in-depth research. These areas can undoubtedly serve as opportunities for further exploration in future research, and some of them can be: the possibility to "merge" the case studies in multiple death modes, enriching the analysis of each death mod by adding eventual new sub-dimensions, and analyzing those death modes that are not planned by game designers and instead adopted by players to create new experiences from scratch.

As we will explore in the conclusions, potential limitations in the research are not overlooked. However, this work lays the foundation for further development of the theme of death modes in video games.

07

// Conclusion

7.1 // Limits of the research

It is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that emerged during the course of this research. Primarily, the theoretical background was constrained to studies conducted before 2024, as this thesis was crafted between mid-2023 and early 2024. Future research developments could regard the refinement and supplementation of the taxonomy and the broader exploration of the theme of death in video games. With the advent of new games in the market, novel mechanics are being explored, consequently introducing fresh approaches to depicting death within gameplay experiences. Notably, emerging technologies are also contributing to this evolving paradigm: Virtual Reality (VR) and mixed reality, in particular, are facilitating the exploration of innovative mechanics, given their relatively recent introduction and designers are still in the process of discerning how to craft compelling experiences within these platforms. Additionally, the exponential growth of metaverses in recent years cannot be overlooked. Drawing elements from both contemporary video games and social networks, the hybrid nature of metaverses presents novel opportunities for game designers.

It must be noted that not every existing paper was thoroughly examined. Although there is a paucity of recent taxonomies on death modes in video games, there exists a considerable body of literature addressing the broader theme of death, which may delve into specific death modes.

This research specifically concentrates on death modes conceived by game designers and explicitly integrated into the game. Notably, death modes generated by player choices, commonly known as “death as choice” (such as the Ironman rule), are not incorporated into the final taxonomy. Including these player-imposed death modes would necessitate a separate comprehensive investigation. An eventual extension to the taxonomy could consider incorporating this specific type of death mode, providing a more comprehensive exploration of all potential death modes in video games.

The temporal constraints of this study extend beyond the selection of references; they also impact the choice of case studies. The cases selected are confined to a specific time frame, implying that any subsequent case studies emerging after this period will not be incorporated into this research. While this study may not encompass future noteworthy case studies, it is essential to acknowledge that upcoming games could introduce novel perspectives on death, influencing game design strategies. Also, these evolving strategies may alter our understanding of death in video games and, consequently, reshape the taxonomy’s structure. Future developments in game design strategies for handling death may introduce new death modes, necessitating further exploration in future new research on the subject. The selection of case studies was significantly shaped by existing scholarly literature, with considerations given to factors such as popularity and units sold, as elucidated in Chapter 3. While these criteria provided a robust foundation for case study selection, a direction for potential future research could come from incorporating the gamers’ perspective on the research subject: certain video games, deemed essential by players due to their distinctive death modes, may not align with the conventional popularity metrics often emphasized in game studies. Therefore, exploring the intersection between popular perceptions among gamers and scholarly discourse could give intuitions and potentially inform an update to this research.

Furthermore, regarding the overall taxonomy, there is potential for the enrichment of each death mode. For instance, the exploration of killing other players as an extra mechanic benefited from the wealth of existing research on the subject, making it relatively straightforward. However, certain aspects of the taxonomy may not be as thoroughly developed. This presents an opportunity to eventually analyze each death mode and its sub-dimensions. Enhancing the granularity of the taxonomy could provide a more defined understanding of specific death modes, making the categorization more comprehensive.

Also, there is room for considering connections between different death modes, even if they are located within distinct main categories. It is conceivable that a single case study could embody multiple death modes simultaneously and an updated taxonomy that accommodates such intricacies would be a strong foundation for future exploration.

Transitioning from the research phase to the validation process, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the participation of experts in the survey was limited due to constraints such as time availability and busy schedules. This factor inevitably impacted the diversity and number of perspectives included in the validation process. Also, the geographical coverage of the survey was confined primarily to the “Western” world. As a consequence, the taxonomy reflects a viewpoint predominantly shaped by Western studies and philosophical perspectives. There exists a notable absence of contributions from experts in the Eastern world. A potential avenue for future research could involve expanding the survey to encompass a more diverse range of perspectives and cultural contexts.

7.2 // Final Considerations

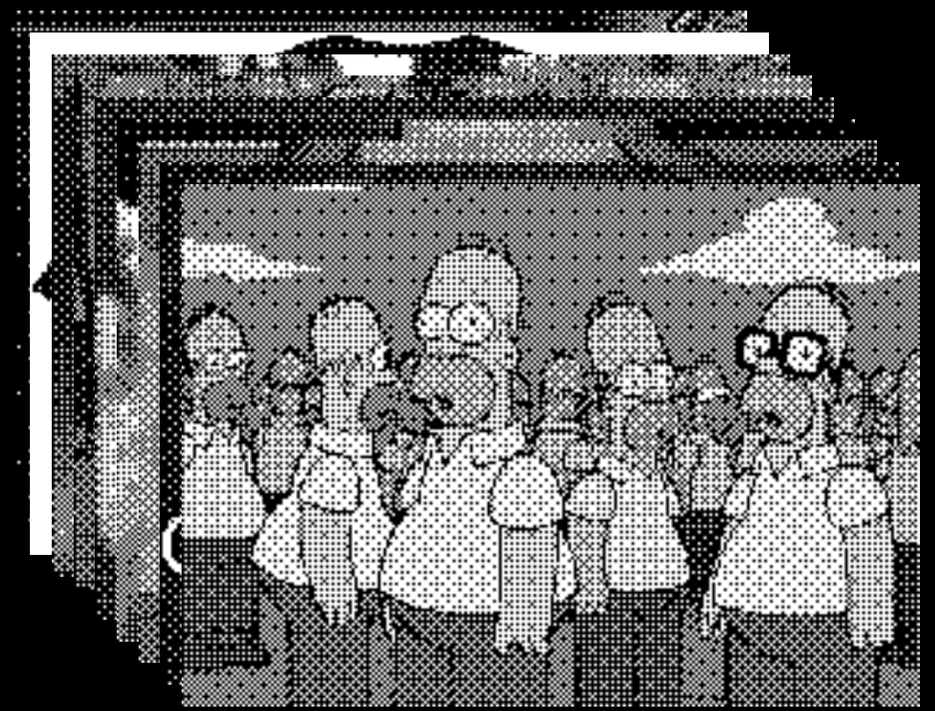
The analysis addresses a prevailing trend, where the exploration of death predominantly transcends a singular narrative element and manifests as a symbiotic interaction between narrative and gameplay mechanics. Contrary to the exclusive adoption of death as a narrative element, games frequently choose for its integration within the mechanics, thereby crafting a more immersive and dynamic experience for players. A deficiency emerges when examining games that solely utilize death as a narrative focal point devoid of gameplay implications. This phenomenon points to an industry predilection for the amalgamation of storytelling and interactivity, wherein death assumes a multifaceted role beyond mere storytelling, significantly influencing gameplay dynamics. This dual integration, encompassing narrative depth and mechanical significance, resonates with players on multiple levels, establishing a more resonant connection between their avatars' fate and the course of their interactions within the game world.

At the same time, the overarching pattern of coupling narrative and mechanics is mirrored in the portrayal of killing as well. In the vast majority of cases, killing becomes more than an isolated narrative concept, invariably weaving into the fabric of gameplay mechanics. This merge heightens player engagement by guaranteeing a tangible impact on their in-game choices, strategy formation, and experience. A parallel to the case of death, this fusion further solidifies the alignment between the player's narrative agency and the responsive nature of the game world.

In sum, the preliminary examination of the chosen case studies illuminates a discernible inclination within the gaming landscape to integrate death and killing within both narrative and ludic frameworks. This creative approach elicits profound implications for gameplay dynamics, player immersion, and the harmonization of storytelling with interactive engagement. Notably, it is the harmonious blend of these elements that appears to underpin the most resonant and captivating gaming experiences, fostering a profound synergy between player agency, narrative resonance, and the intrinsic allure of interactivity.

In conclusion, the research contributes significantly on various fronts. Primarily, it aims to enrich the field of game studies, particularly the sector focused on exploring the theme of death in video games. The absence of an existing taxonomy on this subject underscores the importance of this research within the academic domain. Also, the final output holds considerable value for game designers: although the research does not face aspects like level design or technical development, offering a comprehensive compilation of potential death modes serves as an important resource. Game designers can use this taxonomy to ascertain whether a particular death mode has been previously implemented and inspiration for portraying death in a video game. Understanding the relationship between specific death modes and case studies can inform the creative process and help to the overall conceptualization of death in gaming narratives, providing new horizons for designing.

08 // Annexes



8.1 // Initial Taxonomy

CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY	DIMENSION	SUB-DIMENSION	EVENT	DESCRIPTOR	CASE STUDY
Death as NARRATIVE THEME	G4SC			Death	These games aim to deeply engage players with social issues, fostering empathy and understanding for the challenges experienced by individuals or communities.	*That Dragon, Cancer*. The game tries to rise awareness on the theme of cancer, and what it means to lose someone affected by this terrible disease
	Entertainment purpose	Main theme		Death	In these games, death plays a role beyond gameplay mechanics, contributing significantly to thematic exploration within the narrative.	*To The Moon*. Death has a central role in the game since the narrative is explicitly focused on the last days of life of a human life.
		Secondary/ derivative theme		Death	The association between the game's thematic core and death is not immediately apparent upon initial exposure.	*Gris*. Death's thematic significance isn't directly communicated through explicit dialogue or narration. Rather, the narrative progressively reveals itself solely through environmental clues and visual symbolism.
Death as MECHANIC	Avatar's death/NPC			Death	In this context, the player acts as an orchestrator, guiding the lives of digital entities from a position of oversight rather than direct participation.	The Sims. Like other management/ simulation games, the player's role assumes that of an external agent entrusted with the responsibility of guiding the fortunes of in-game characters.
	Player's death	Play-die-restart	Infinite tries	Death	It involves the player character's death as a temporary setback, allowing them to respawn from a checkpoint.	Super Meat Boy. It is a platform game very challenging and it is very easy to die, but the respawn system is extremely quick
						and thought to give the player a very small loss of progress.
					Limited tries	Death	Involves the imposition of a finite allocation of attempts for players.	SIFU. Extremely difficult game where you can restart almost immediately once you die but, every time you die, you become a little bit older. The player can respawn until they reach 70 years and if they die, they have to restart from the beginning
				Permadeath	Rogue like	Death	In a traditional "Roguelike" game, dying means starting over from the very beginning. The player loses all their progress.	The Binding of Isaac. In this game, every time you die you will need to restart the entire game from the beginning, and you will lose all your equipment and power-ups collected during the playing time.
					Rogue lite	Death	A bit different from the traditional Roguelike formula. In Roguelite games, players may retain certain elements of progress even after dying.	Returnal. You will need to restart a great portion of the game once you die but you will be able to skip some areas already explored, you can store some upgrades and the story will be able to proceed
					Ironman rule	Death	In some cases, the players themselves decide to add a challenge to the game by imposing a Permadeath mode even if it is not present in the game.	Minecraft. Before the Hardcore mode was introduced, players tried to play the game with an imaginary Permadeath mode. This trend became so popular that the

						developers eventually added the Hardcore mode.
	kills to NPCs	PVE		Kill	Player versus Environment (PVE) is a gameplay structure in video games where players face off against computer-controlled adversaries or challenges rather than competing against other human players.	World of Warcraft. One of the most famous MMORPGs ever made is probably the most effective example of a PVE structure. In the game, players can collaborate in order to kill tough enemies controlled by AI.
		Single player	Linear progression	Kill	The player has to follow a ready-made path coherent with the story told in the game and with the character that they are controlling.	Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. As many other Action-Adventure games there is a linear progression, where killing NPCs it's nothing more than a mechanic to overcome obstacles.
			Consequences on the gameplay	Kill	The act of killing an NPC may not have a direct impact on the main storyline, but it can affect the player's experience and progression within the game.	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. Killing NPCs can influence the progression of the game, since killing an NPC can give us experience points to alterate the statistics of our avatar.
	Kills to Players	intra mechanic		Kill	Games wherein the act of killing serves as an intrinsic mechanic and the main objective is killing other players for competitive purpose.	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. It is a competitive online shooter, PVP where your main objective is to kill the opponent team.
		extra mechanic	Greed play	Kill	Games wherein the act of killing	*DayZ mod*. To survive, the player will

					other players serves as an additional gameplay mechanic, occupying a secondary status within the broader gameplay experience.	need some time to steal the resources of another player, and many times this means to kill that player.
Death as both NARRATIVE THEME AND MECHANIC	Death embedded in the narrative	Embedding: actual death		Death	Character death in the game is irreversible and final, emphasizing the game's connection to an embedded form of Permadeath.	The Walking Dead. The consequences of player choices profoundly shape the narrative and the survival prospects of characters. Death is portrayed as a permanent, irreversible element deeply woven into both the gameplay and narrative.
		Embedding: death avoided		Death	In the game, each player's death is contextualized as a non-authentic event within the game's narrative, allowing for a quick and easy return to the game world.	Prince of Persia (2008). Upon player defeat, the co-protagonist Elika will rescue you at last time, giving you basically infinite chance. However, if this happens during a fight, the entire life of the enemy will be restored and the player will need to restart the battle.
	morality in player's actions	fixed justice		Kill	These games deliberately create moral engagement by presenting the player with choices that cannot be avoided.	Spec Ops: The Line. The player's morality is constantly challenged through a single-player story mode where the story is shaped to be linear.
		accumulation of deeds	Moral ambiguity	Kill	Players navigate real-life ethical complexities without clear moral signposts, engaging with the	This War of Mine. In the game, making morally right choices is challenging as it aims for a realistic

					raw and uncertain terrain of moral decision-making.	representation of war from a civilian perspective. For instance, actions like stealing resources may aid survival but come at the cost of condemning other civilians.
			Explicit system	Kill	Interactive decision-making aligns seamlessly with narrative design, creating a story where choices resonate intuitively with players.	Star Wars: The Old Republic. The game emphasizes providing players with diverse gameplay experiences based on their choices, such as distinct power-ups for different paths, rather than emphasizing moral ambiguity.

8.2 // Expert validation survey

INTRO

Hi!
I'm Matteo Repetto, a communication design student who is currently working on a research thesis for the Master's Degree at Politecnico di Milano, School of Design. The thesis revolves around death in video games, and how and/or in which modality it can be present, as both a death caused by the player (kill) and something the player is a victim of (death).

I would like to ask you to fill in this survey which will take roughly 15 minutes.

INFORMATION SHEET

Objective of the study. The purpose of the study is to develop a taxonomy of various death modes in video games. The taxonomy identifies the primary categories of death. Each primary category can have different sub-categories, dimensions, and sub-dimensions, each representing a specific death or kill event.

Data collection purpose. This survey is designed for the purpose of validating the structure and content of the aforementioned taxonomy. The personal data collected, which includes age, gender, and country of origin, will be used to analyze the survey's distribution and representativeness across different demographics and to examine preferences associated with specific demographic groups. Please note that this research is open to adults only. The collected data will only be accessible to the researcher and the thesis project supervisor for analysis purposes and will be retained for five years after the study's conclusion. All data collected will be treated anonymously to ensure that no individual can be identified. Therefore, once your validation is submitted, it will not be possible to remove your anonymised data from the dataset.

Purpose of Data Processing. The fully anonymised data will be processed for the purpose of scientific dissemination, which is part of the thesis project. The data will be processed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The provided data will be used exclusively for research activities and will be presented in aggregate form to communicate and disseminate the research results.

DATA PROCESSORS

Researcher: Matteo Repetto, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, matteo.repetto@mail.polimi.it
Supervisor Researcher: PhD, Ilaria Mariani, Researcher, Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano, ilaria1.mariani@polimi.it

Click here to save this information sheet as PDF.

CONSENT FORM

By agreeing, you consent to the processing of your data according to the information sheet above.

- I Agree: Proceed with the survey
- I don't agree: Exit the survey

VALIDATION CRITERIA

The following are the criteria through which you are asked to validate the different components of the taxonomy. These components are described after an illustrative image of the taxonomy part they refer to.

The validation criteria are the same throughout the entire survey

1. *Relevance*: The categories are relevant and necessary for the taxonomy.
2. *Clarity and comprehensiveness*: The categories are clearly explained and comprehensible.
3. *Redundancy*: The categories are peculiar and not repetitive with each other.

4. *Coherency*: The contents are coherent with the main Category.
5. *Case study validation*: The Case Study is coherent with the death mode presented (the single case study is an emblematic case and not the only one associated, but is included for illustrative purposes).

SURVEY OVERVIEW

Q. NO	LABEL	QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
Personal data. The data collected in this section will be useful to gain insight on the demographic.			
Q 01	Age	How old are you?	Short-answer text
Q 02	Gender	To which gender identity do you most identify?	Multiple choice: ▪ Male ▪ Female ▪ Non-Binary ▪ Prefer not to answer ▪ Other
Q 03	Country	What country are you from?	List of Countries
Taxonomy, first part: Main categories. In this first part, the three main categories into which the taxonomy is divided will be presented: ▪ Death as a narrative element, ▪ Death as a mechanical element, ▪ Death as both a narrative and mechanical element. For each category, possible sub-categories and sub-dimensions will be explored in the following sections.			
Q 04	Main categories	Death as Narrative: Games where there is a strong emphasis on the narrative, and death is present as a central theme in the overall experience and it is an opportunity for thematic exploration. Death as Mechanic: Games where death has a central role for the mechanics/gameplay experience. Rather than presenting a thematic exploration on the theme, death here is a pure mechanic that can be used to challenge the player or as a tool for the player itself to overcome obstacles. Death as Narrative and Mechanic: Games where the player's	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency
		interactions with the death mechanics are not purely functional; they also carry significant narrative weight. The act of dying, or even the presence of mortality within the game world, serves as a storytelling device that contributes to the game's overarching themes.	
Q 05	Additional feedback	If you happen to have any discrepancies between the contents or disagree with the taxonomy presented, please post your opinions here:	Long-answer text
Death as Narrative element. Here are all those games where there is a strong emphasis on the narrative, and death is present as a central theme in the overall experience and it is an opportunity for thematic exploration. Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the Death as Narrative Sub-Categories and Dimensions presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. Link to validation criteria Preview Death as Narrative can be split in two sub-categories: [Image of the death as narrative overview]			
Q 06	Death as Narrative's sub-categories	G4SC (Sub-Category/Death event) = These games aim to deeply engage players with social issues, fostering empathy and understanding for the challenges experienced by individuals or communities. CASE STUDY = That Dragon, Cancer. The game tries to rise awareness on the theme of cancer, and what it means to lose someone affected by this terrible disease. Entertainment purpose (Sub-Category) = Games in which death serves a narrative purpose, intending to entertain the player rather than addressing specific social issues.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 07	Entertainment purpose's dimensions	Main theme (Dimension/Death event) = In these games, death plays a crucial role beyond gameplay mechanics, contributing significantly to thematic exploration within the narrative. CASE STUDY = To The Moon. Death has a central role in the game since the narrative is explicitly focused on the last days of life of a human life.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation

		Derivative (Dimension/Death event) = The association between the game's thematic core and death is not immediately apparent upon initial exposure. CASE STUDY = Gris. Death's thematic significance isn't directly communicated through explicit dialogue or narration. Rather, the narrative progressively reveals itself solely through environmental clues and visual symbolism.	
Q 08	Additional feedback	If you happen to have any discrepancies between the contents or disagree with the taxonomy presented, please post your opinions here:	Long-answer text
Death as Mechanic. Games where death has a central role in the mechanics/gameplay experience. Rather than presenting a thematic exploration on the theme, death here is a pure mechanic that can be used to challenge the player or as a tool for the player itself to overcome obstacles. Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the Death as Mechanic Sub-Categories, Dimensions and Sub-Dimension presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. Link to validation criteria Preview Death as Narrative can be split in two sub-categories: [Image of the death as mechanic overview]			
Q 09	Death as Mechanic sub-categories	G4SC (Sub-Category/Death event) = These games aim to deeply engage players with social issues, fostering empathy and understanding for the challenges experienced by individuals or communities. CASE STUDY = That Dragon, Cancer. The game tries to rise awareness on the theme of cancer, and what it means to lose someone affected by this terrible disease. Entertainment purpose (Sub-Category) = Games in which death serves a narrative purpose, intending to entertain the player rather than addressing specific social issues.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 10	Player's death's dimensions	Play-Die-Restart (Dimension) = Every time the player's avatar dies, it will restart with a small or almost totally absent loss of progress. Permadeath (Dimension) = Death is permanent and every time the avatar dies, it will need to restart with a significant loss of progress.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency
Q 11	Play-Die-Restart's sub-dimensions	Infinite tries (Sub-Dimension/Death event) = It involves the player character's death as a temporary setback, allowing them to respawn or restart from a recent checkpoint. CASE STUDY = Super Meat Boy. It is a platform game very challenging and it is very easy to die, but the respawn system is extremely quick and thought to give the player a very small loss of progress. Limited tries (Sub-Dimension/Death event) = Involves the imposition of a finite allocation of attempts for players. CASE STUDY = SIFU. Extremely difficult game where you can restart almost immediately once you die but, every time you die, you become a little bit older. The player can respawn until they reach 70 years and if they die, they have to restart from the beginning	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 12	Permadeath's Sub-Dimensions	Roguelike (Sub-Dimension/Death event) = In a traditional "Roguelike" game, dying means starting over from the very beginning. The player loses all their progress. CASE STUDY = The Binding of Isaac. In this game, every time you die you will need to restart the entire game from the beginning, and you will lose all your equipment and power-ups collected during the playing time. Roguelite (Sub-Dimension/Death event) = A bit different from the traditional Roguelike formula. In Roguelite games, players may retain certain elements of progress even after dying. CASE STUDY = Returnal. You will need to restart a great portion of the game once you die but you will be able to skip some areas already explored, you can store some upgrades and the story will be able to proceed.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation

		Ironman rule (Sub-Dimension/Death event) = In some cases, the players themselves decide to add a challenge to the game by imposing a Perma-death mode even if it is not present in the game. CASE STUDY = Mine-craft. Before the Hardcore mode was introduced, players tried to play the game with an imaginary Permadeath mode. This trend became so popular that the developers eventually added the Hardcore mode.	
Q 13	Play-Die-Restart's sub-dimensions	PVE (Dimension/Kill event) = Player versus Environment (PVE) is a gameplay structure in video games where players face off against com-puter-controlled adversaries or chal-lenges rather than competing against other human players. CASE STUDY = World of Warcraft. One of the most famous MMORPGs ever made is probably the most effective example of a PVE structure. In the game, play-ers can collaborate in order to kill tough enemies controlled by AI. Single Player (Dimension) = Those games without an online component/ multiplayer, where a player can inter-act only with NPCs.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the tax-onomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 14	Single Player's Sub-Dimensions	Linear Progression (Sub-Dimension/ Kill Event) = The player has to follow a ready-made path coherent with the story told in the game and with the character that they are controlling. CASE STUDY = Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. As many other Action-Ad-venture games there is a linear progression, where killing NPCs it's nothing more than a mechanic to overcome obstacles. Consequences in the gameplay (Sub-Dimension/Kill Event) = The act of killing an NPC may not have a direct impact on the main sto-ryline, but it can affect the player's experience and progression within the game. CASE STUDY = The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. Killing NPCs can influence the progression of the game, since killing an NPC can give	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the tax-onomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation

		us experience points to alternate the statistics of our avatar.	
Q 15	Killing other play-ers' Dimensions	Intra mechanic (Dimension/Kill event) = Games wherein the act of killing serves as an intrinsic mechan-ic and the main objective is killing other players for competitive pur-pose. CASE STUDY = Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. It is a competitive online shooter, PVP where your main objective is to kill the opponent team	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the tax-onomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 16	Extra mechanic's Sub-Dimensions	Greed play (Sub-Dimensions) = Games wherein the act of killing other players serves as an additional gameplay mechanic, occupying a secondary status within the broader gameplay experience. CASE STUDY = DayZ mod. To survive, the player will need some time to steal the resources of another player, and many times this means to kill that player. Griefing (Sub-Dimensions) = These confrontations operate within a dis-tinct dynamic of power imposition, wherein the killing of less experi-enced players serves as a demon-strative showcase of authority and control. CASE STUDY = EVE online. In this MMORPG, it is encouraged by the developers themselves to be aggressive towards other players, in order to control the game universe.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the tax-onomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 17	Additional feedback	If you happen to have any discrepan-cies between the contents or disagree with the taxonomy presented, please post your opinions here:	Long-answer text

Death as Narrative and Mechanic.
Here are included all those games where the player's interactions with the death mechanics are not purely functional; they also carry significant narrative weight. The act of dying, or even the presence of mortality within the game world, serves as a storytelling device that contributes to the game's overarching themes. Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the Death as Narrative and Mechanic Sub-Categories, Dimensions and Sub-Dimen-sion presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree.

Link to validation criteria

Preview
Death as Narrative can be split in two sub-categories:
[Image of the death as narrative and mechanic overview]

Q 18	Death as narrative and mechanic's Sub-Categories	Death embedded narratively (Sub-Category) = Avatar's death is recognized by the game world when it happens and it is justified on the narrative plane.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 19	Death Embedded in the Narrative's Dimensions	Actual death (Dimension/Death event) = Character death in the game is irreversible and final, emphasizing the game's connection to an embedded form of Permadeath. CASE STUDY = The Walking Dead. The consequences of player choices profoundly shape the narrative and the survival prospects of characters. Death is portrayed as an irreversible element intricately woven into both the gameplay and narrative. Death avoided (Dimension/Death event) = In the game, each player's death is contextualized as a non-authentic event within the game's narrative, allowing for a quick and easy return to the game world. CASE STUDY = Prince of Persia (2008) Upon player defeat, the co-protagonist Elika will rescue you at last time, giving you basically infinite chance. However, if this happens during a fight, the entire life of the enemy will be restored and the player will need to restart the battle.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 20	Extra mechanic's Sub-Dimensions	Fixed justice (Dimension/Kill event) = These games deliberately create moral engagement by presenting the player with choices that cannot be avoided. CASE STUDY = Spec Ops: The Line. The player's morality is constantly challenged through a single-player story mode where the story is shaped to be linear. Accumulation of deeds (Dimension) = The narrative structure of the game can change depending on the choice the player takes.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 21	Accumulation of deeds' Sub-Dimensions	Moral ambiguity (Sub-Dimension/Kill event) = Players navigate real-life ethical complexities without clear moral signposts, engaging with the raw and uncertain terrain of moral decision-making. CASE STUDY = This War of Mine. In the game, making morally right choices is challenging as it aims for a realistic representation of war from a dramatic civilian perspective. Explicit System (Sub-Dimension/Kill event) = Interactive decision-making aligns seamlessly with narrative design, creating a story where choices resonate intuitively with players. CASE STUDY = Star Wars: The Old Republic. The game emphasizes providing players with diverse gameplay experiences based on their choices, such as distinct power-ups for different paths, rather than emphasizing moral ambiguity.	Rate your level of agreement with the proposed statements regarding the taxonomy categories presented below on a 4-point scale from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (4). ▪ Relevance ▪ Clarity and comprehensiveness ▪ Redundancy ▪ Coherency ▪ Case study validation
Q 22	Additional feedback	If you happen to have any discrepancies between the contents or disagree with the taxonomy presented, please post your opinions here:	Long-answer text
One last thing!			
Q 23	Contacts	You can leave here a contact if you want to be updated on the research	Short-answer text

8.3 // Dataset validation survey

The raw data of the survey's with the responses (Google spreadsheet) is available at the following link: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1C5oV-Satmmn65KvHzX0poFeqzn-NhH6rG_3UPairvE8w/edit?usp=sharing.

8.4 // Case studies analyzed

In the next pages, the full list of case studies analyzed is shown. In this list are included also those cases studies that have been scrapped or replaced in the post-validated Taxonomy.

TO THE MOON
Freebird Games, 2011

Genre Classification // Adventure
Availability and release // Windows - November 1, 2011
Popularity and recognition // *To the Moon* garnered predominantly positive reviews, as indicated by Metacritic. It achieved noteworthy commercial success too, with estimated sales ranging from 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 units.
Death mode // Death as narrative > Entertainment purpose > Main theme
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // Within the narrative, death goes beyond being a mere gameplay mechanic and becomes a central element in thematic exploration. Dr. Eva Rosalene and Dr. Neil Watts, who specialize in fulfilling the final wishes of dying patients by manipulating their memories, are tasked with granting the wish of Johnny Wyles. Johnny, an elderly man nearing the end of his life, harbors a profound yet enigmatic desire to journey to the moon. However, the origins of this wish remain concealed from Johnny himself.
Defining death mode // Death takes on a central thematic role, explicitly woven into the narrative as it revolves around the last days of a human life. This deliberate and explicit treatment of death highlights its profound significance within the storyline.
Influence on game design // It had a notable influence on the field of game design by showcasing the potential for narrative-driven and emotionally impactful storytelling within the medium of video games. Its success demonstrated that games could effectively tackle mature and emotionally complex themes, such as death and regret, and engage players on a deep emotional level. Moreover, popularized the use of retro-inspired pixel art aesthetics to convey emotionally charged narratives: this technique can help game designers to focus on the narrative on the game without having to sacrifice the aesthetic of the game (pixel art is easy to do and also to implement in the game engine, since its low amount of memory requested).
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // It doesn't primarily address a specific ethical issue. Instead, it's a narrative-driven game that focuses on emotional and philosophical themes, such as love, regret, and the human desire to fulfill one's dreams.
References // Baloni, 2018, Mortensen et al., 2015.

FULL THROTTLE
LucasArts, 1995

Genre Classification // Graphic adventure
Availability and release // Mac OS, Windows, Playstation 4, Playstation Vita, OS X, iOS, Linux, Xbox One - May, 1995
Popularity and recognition // It is one of the most popular graphic adventure ever made, selling more than 100 000 copies during the first week of release and currently has sold more than 1 million copies. Also critics recognized the title with many prizes and high marks.
Death mode // Death as narrative > Death as secondary theme > Not addressed
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // The protagonist struggles with resolving a murder case, with the primary objective being the advancement of the storyline rather than a deliberate exploration of the concept of death.
Defining death mode // Death is incorporated into the narrative as a tool rather than being intended to prompt player contemplation on the theme of death. This category concerns games in which death exists within the narrative but is not explored as the central theme.
Influence on game design // Building upon the innovations pioneered in LucasArts' earlier graphic adventure, *Sam & Max Hit the Road* (1993), which notably introduced a novel inventory and interaction framework as an evolution from preceding titles, *Full Throttle* further iterated upon these advancements. Notably, in *Full Throttle*, the refinement of gameplay mechanics established in *Sam & Max Hit the Road* is evident. Objects or characters with which the protagonist, Ben, can engage are delineated by a distinctive visual cue—a red square encircling the cursor's crosshairs upon placement over the object.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Baloni, 2018, Mortensen et al., 2015.

THAT DRAGON, CANCER
Numinous Games, 2016

Genre Classification // Adventure game, Art game

Availability and release // World-wide available, published on Steam - 2016

Popularity and recognition // Despite a not-so-high amount of sales, the game gets resonance thanks to YouTube and YouTubers famous worldwide like *Pewdiepie* and *Jackspetiseeye*. Also, it received critical acclaim and won numerous awards for its storytelling, design, and emotional impact. These accolades helped raise its profile within the gaming industry.

Death mode // Death as narrative > Main theme

Death/Kill event // Death

Death presence in the game // This poignant game, based on a true story, delves into a family's heart-wrenching journey through the loss of their young child to cancer. Unlike traditional games, *That Dragon, Cancer* doesn't adhere to conventional gaming structures with clear win states. Instead, it immerses players in the raw emotions of the parents, providing a firsthand experience of their struggles and attempts to cope with an unimaginable tragedy.

Defining death mode // In this context, death strategically serves as a narrative device to highlight pertinent social issues. In essence, it is employed not only as a storytelling device but also as a thematic element, often casting either the player or the in-game character as the victim. Subsequent sections will delve further into how death, encompassing both mortality and gameplay mechanics, is intricately woven into the fabric of video game design.

Influence on game design // It tackles the topic of cancer in a deeply personal way, opening up discussions about the potential for games to address health issues and provide support to individuals facing health challenges. As a game officially recognized as a "Game for social change" it raises awareness on a controversial and tough topic without being superficial or cloying and many people learned about G4SC thanks to this title.

Social dynamics // No social interaction.

Ethical aspects // *That Dragon, Cancer* addresses specific ethical issues related to terminal illness, particularly childhood cancer. It raises questions about the ethics of medical decision-making, the emotional toll of care giving, and the broader societal conversation about end-of-life care, suffering, and hope.

References // Schott, 2017; Mortensen et al., 2015; Bosman, 2018.

GRIS
Nomada studio, 2018

Genre Classification // Platform-adventure

Availability and release // Nintendo Switch, Windows - August 21, 2019

Popularity and recognition // At launch, *Gris* had garnered sales reaching 300,000 copies across the globe. By April 2020, it had transcended expectations, achieving sales that exceeded a remarkable milestone of one million units.

Death mode // Death as narrative > Secondary theme > Derivative

Death/Kill event // Death

Death presence in the game // *Gris* is an exemplary game that tactfully explores the theme of death while maintaining an engaging gameplay experience. This 2D platformer invites players to navigate an emotionally charged journey centered on accepting grief and mortality. The game focuses representation of the five stages of grief, a concept originally delineated by Kübler-Ross in 1969. Through its environmental design and gameplay mechanisms, *Gris* adeptly portrays these stages. The game ingeniously employs colors and shapes within its environment to mirror the various phases of grief. Players are gradually introduced to new gameplay mechanics that align with each stage.

Defining death mode // Death's thematic significance isn't directly communicated through explicit dialogue or narration. Rather, the narrative progressively reveals itself solely through environmental cues and visual symbolism. The connection between the game's thematic essence and the concept of death may not be immediately obvious upon initial engagement. This unconventional method of incorporating death as a narrative element highlights the nuanced and multifaceted ways in which it can be woven into artistic gameplay experiences.

Influence on game design // The game's use of environmental design and visual metaphors to convey its narrative without explicit dialogue or text was groundbreaking. It influenced a shift towards more subtle and immersive storytelling techniques in game design, where players are encouraged to interpret and engage with the game world on a deeper level. Furthermore, it demonstrated that video games could serve as powerful tools for conveying complex emotional narratives. It showcased how game mechanics, visuals, and music could work together to create a deeply emotional and evocative experience.

Social dynamics // No social interaction.

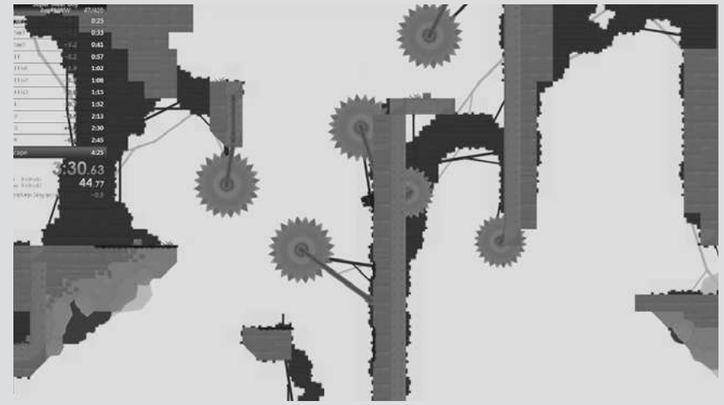
Ethical aspects // While the play doesn't directly tackle ethical dilemmas, it offers a poignant exploration of personal growth, healing and the human experience of facing adversity through its artistry and emotional narrative.

References // Ni and Intan, 2022, Beaumont, 2020.

THE SIMS
Maxis, 2000

Genre Classification // Life simulation, Social simulation
Availability and release // First release (Windows) - February 4, 2000
Popularity and recognition // The Sims is one of the most successful and best-selling video game series in the history of the gaming industry. The franchise has achieved remarkable commercial success, with sales nearing an impressive milestone of 200 million copies worldwide.
Death mode // Death as ludic> Avatar's death
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // The Sims is a life simulation game where players intricately manage everyday lives, including the inescapable concept of death. This encompasses various aspects of mortality, from natural deaths to the potential peril of drowning, among other conceivable fates.
Defining death mode // The Sims can be classified as simulators, so they are not traditionally tied to traditional game dynamics. As with other role-playing/theoretical games, the role of the player involves an external agent tasked with guiding the fate of the game's characters.
Influence on game design // The game introduced social dynamics and relationships as core gameplay elements. This idea of managing social interactions became influential in various game genres, including social simulation and dating sim games. *The Sims* has become a cultural phenomenon, with its recognizable language ("Simlish") and iconic characters. It has contributed to the mainstream acceptance of video games as a form of entertainment.
Social dynamics // Limited social interaction. Users can share their creations online, but there is not a direct interaction with other users in the game.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Bakioglu, 2009, Abruzzese, 2019.

SUPER MEAT BOY
Team Meat, 2010



Genre Classification // Platform
Availability and release // Xbox 360 - October 20, 2010
Popularity and recognition // The game's availability on Steam and Xbox 360 collectively accounted for over 600,000 copies sold by April 2011, with a substantial 400,000 of these sales attributed to the Steam platform. The game's popularity continued to increase, reaching a remarkable milestone on January 3, 2012, achieving sales exceeding 1,000,000 copies.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Play-die-restart
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // Super Meat Boy is an extremely difficult platform game, where dying is very easy. The levels are short but completely full of traps and lethal weapons that can kill you with just one shot. However, this high level of challenge was one of the main reasons for the huge success of this game, both commercially and critically speaking.
Defining death mode // In *Super Meat Boy*, gameplay follows an iterative pattern. Player-avatar demise leads to quick respawns, promoting persistent engagement and mastery. This game's notoriety as a challenging platformer contributes to its success in the gaming sphere. A hallmark of *Super Meat Boy* is its artful calibration of difficulty. Intricately designed levels, infinite attempts, and brief challenges create a sense of continuous challenge for players.
Influence on game design // The game's meticulously designed levels, known for their high difficulty and precise platforming challenges, set a benchmark for level design in platformers. Game designers began to pay more attention to creating finely tuned, challenging, and rewarding levels. Morevoer, The game's meticulously designed levels, known for their high difficulty and precise platforming challenges, set a benchmark for level design in platformers. Game designers began to pay more attention to creating finely tuned, challenging, and rewarding levels.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Abruzzese, 2019, Melcer and Cuerdo, 2020, Melnic and Melnic, 2018.

SIFU
Sloclap, 2022

Genre Classification // Beat ‘em up
Availability and release // PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Windows - February 8, 2022
Popularity and recognition // *Sifu* made an astonishing debut in the gaming market, exceeding the 500,000 copies sold mark within a mere 48 hours of its release. This rapid success was a testament to the game’s immediate popularity and appeal to players. As the months passed, *Sifu* continued to capture the attention of gamers, achieving a significant milestone by selling over 1 million copies by March 2022.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player’s death > Limited tries
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // It is an action-packed martial arts game where players assume the role of a young Kung-Fu disciple seeking vengeance for their family’s murder. Notably, the game features a distinct death and respawn system. Instead of encountering a traditional game over the screen, the protagonist undergoes rapid aging upon defeat, seamlessly weaving this mechanic into the narrative.
Defining death mode // This unique approach aims to foster a sense of growth and adaptability in players. Each defeat becomes an opportunity to learn and refine strategies. However, a careful balance must be struck, as excessive deaths can result in a permanent game over once the character reaches the age of 70.
Influence on game design // *Sifu* sold a high amount of copies, and this is not so usual for a hard video game, especially in modern times. For sure, the game reached a high success thanks to its gameplay, which mixes element from old beat ‘em up games with stunning visual and modern gameplay mechanics (like the already mentioned limited-tries structure depending on the age of the character).
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Kayleigh, 2023, Papousek, 2022.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH
Nicalis, 2014

Genre Classification // Roguelike
Availability and release // Linux, Windows, OS X - November 4, 2014
Popularity and recognition // As of July 2015, the combined sales of *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* and its predecessor surpassed a milestone, with this impressive sales figure of five million units sold highlighted the game’s immense popularity and popularity within the gaming community.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player’s death > Permadeath > Roguelike
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // *In The Binding of Isaac*, players embark on the harrowing journey of a young boy, Isaac, seeking refuge in his basement from his religiously fervent mother. Within the procedurally generated levels of the basement, players encounter a relentless array of monsters, traps, and challenges. This game adheres closely to the roguelike genre, embracing the core tenet of permadeath. This means that players must confront the harsh repercussions of failure: the loss of all progress made during the current gaming session.
Defining death mode // This approach aligns with the core essence of roguelike games, highlighting the cyclical gameplay where player expertise is honed through repeated attempts. Each endeavor contributes to the gradual accumulation of insights, strategies, and familiarity with the game’s intricacies. It effectively nurtures the dynamic and emergent gameplay intrinsic to roguelike encounters. The combination of permadeath and procedurally generated content guarantees unique playthroughs, enhancing replay value and demanding adaptability from players, no matter if causal or not.
Influence on game design // *The Binding of Isaac* played a chief role in popularizing the evil-like sub genre. This introduced many players to the idea of Permadeath, the organization of stages, and the concept that each game is precise. This effect may be visible in the fascinating characters and awful acting that followed. It also fostered a lively modding community. This suggests the value of allowing gamers to evolve and extend the content of the sport. It recommended other builders to assist modding, which may make a recreation’s lifespan and engagement.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // The game deals ethically with the issue of religious indoctrination and how this can negatively affect the most farcical people. However, this is not so central to the gameplay and remains more on the narrative/lore level.
References // Kayleigh, 2023, West, 2020, Copcic et al., 2013.

SPELUNKY
Derek Yu, 2008

Genre Classification // Roguelike
Availability and release // Windows - December 21, 2008
Popularity and recognition // The game was prised by both public and critic. At its launch, it sold more than 60 000 units, and in 2016 it reached the milestone of 1 million copies sold. Also, it collected a large amount of extremely positive reviews from the press and several awards.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Permadeath > Roguelike
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // In *Spelunky* you control an adventurer, with a very simple objective: collecting ancient treasures. However, the path to the glory is filled with evil creatures and traps, that can kill you with few shots. Dying is extremely common, and the game doesn't want to be an easy experience for everyone.
Defining death mode // The death mode is analogue to the one presented in *The Binding of Isaac*. Each effort contributes to the gradual accumulation of insights, strategies, and familiarity with the game's intricacies. It effectively nurtures the dynamic and emergent gameplay intrinsic to roguelike encounters. The combination of permadeath and procedurally generated content guarantees unique playthroughs, enhancing replay value and demanding adaptability from players, no matter if causal or not.
Influence on game design // Primarily characterized as a dungeon crawl, the game incorporates facets of the roguelike genre, such as procedurally generated levels, the absence of save points, a high frequency of player demise, and emphasis on discovery mechanics. It also integrates elements from the 2D platformer genre, facilitating real-time engagements with adversaries. Derek Yu, the game's creator, acknowledges the influence of the Super Mario series on *Spelunky*, particularly in terms of its tactile sensation and physics.
Social dynamics // No social interactions.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Partleton, 2023, West, 2020, Copcic et al., 2013.

RETURNAL
Housemarque, 2021

Genre Classification // Roguelite
Availability and release // PlayStation 5 - April 30, 2021
Popularity and recognition // *Returnal* received widespread acclaim and recognition within the gaming industry, earning numerous prestigious year-end awards. Notably, it was honored with the title of Best Game at the 18th British Academy Games Awards, a significant accolade that underscored the game's exceptional quality and contribution to the gaming medium. Moreover, *Returnal* achieved substantial commercial success, with sales figures reaching 560,000 units by July 2021.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Permadeath > Roguelite
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // The game centers on Selene, a space explorer stranded on the alien planet Atropos. She's caught in a time loop, reliving her crash landing and encountering hostile creatures. The narrative explores her quest to uncover Atropos' mysteries and escape the time loop, that happens every time she dies.
Defining death mode // *Returnal* innovatively incorporates elements of roguelike gameplay while offering a unique twist on permadeath, allowing players to retain some progress upon defeat, a departure from the traditional permadeath concept. In fact, every time the player dies, the game doesn't really start from the beginning: instead, it is necessary to die sometimes in order to proceed in the story. Moreover, some upgrades are maintained for the entire game.
Influence on game design // It had received critical acclaim for its innovative gameplay and narrative design. It was praised for its approach to roguelike mechanics and the integration of a time-loop narrative. But most importantly, it's a AAA game with a mechanic that usually is used only by indie games, since many casual players tend to stay away from games that are "too hard".
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Hanussek, 2022, Kayleigh, 2023, Geller, 2022.

INTO THE BREACH
Subset games, 2018

Genre Classification // Strategic, Roguelite
Availability and release // Windows - February 27, 2018
Popularity and recognition // It considered one of the greatest indie game ever made, praised by the critics for its engaging gameplay and appealing Roguelite mechanics. On Metacritic, it reached an average score of 90/100 and won many awards in the 2018.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Permadeath > Roguelite
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // Once the game over screen appears, a short cut-scene of the aliens invading Earth is triggered and the player is asked to restart a great portion of the game, by "going back in time" before the defeat against the enemies. The player can decide which pilot will follow them in the new time line and the game will restart from the beginning, without losing the upgrades.
Defining death mode // The death mode is analogue to the one presented in *Returnal*. While it maintain many of the Roguelike elements, it is a mechanic generally more forgiving when it comes to death. In Roguelite games, players may retain certain elements of progress even after dying, like upgrades and/or collectibles.
Influence on game design // Rather then presenting something totally new, *Into the Breach* smartly mixes Rogulite formula with more traditional strategy games. The game is structured into a series of islands, each comprising multiple scenarios corresponding to distinct island sectors. While the islands remain consistent across gameplay sessions, the scenarios are procedurally generated. Upon finishing the initial island, players are empowered to select the subsequent islands in the sequence to defend.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Hanussek, 2022, Partleton, 2023, Geller, 2022.

MINECRAFT
Mojang studio, 2011

Genre Classification // Sandbox
Availability and release // Windows, macOS, Linux - November 18, 2011
Popularity and recognition // In May 2020, *Minecraft* achieved a milestone by surpassing 200 million copies sold across various platforms. Also, the game reached an impressive player base, boasting over 126 million monthly active players at that time. The growth of *Minecraft*'s player community showed no signs of slowing down. By April 2021, the number of active monthly users had further surged to an astounding 140 million.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Permadeath > Ironman rule
Death/Kill event // Death
Death presence in the game // *Minecraft* presents a procedurally generated sandbox world where players navigate and shape the environment at their discretion. In this expansive canvas, death manifests as an intrinsic facet, subtly interwoven into the overarching gameplay experience. Within the gameplay mechanics, death in *Minecraft* is an omnipresent risk, engendered by a multitude of potential threats. From hostile creatures such as zombies, skeletons, and creepers to environmental hazards like lava, falling, and drowning, players are perpetually confronted with mortality. This underscores the intrinsic tension, as players must strategize and apply their creativity to stave off the ever-looming specter of demise.
Defining death mode // The subsequent incorporation of Hardcore Mode by Minecraft's developers underscores their receptivity to player feedback and their commitment to enhancing player experiences. In fact, this mode was introduced by player initially, as an "imposed" challenge.
Influence on game design // Its open-world sandbox format encourages players to build, experiment, and create their own narratives. This emphasis on player agency has inspired other game developers to incorporate similar creative elements into their designs. Also, fostered a robust modding community, encouraging players to create and share their own content. This emphasis on user-generated content has influenced games like *Roblox*, where players can design their own games within the platform.
Social dynamics // Users can have different kinds of interactions with other players: they can play together and share the materials useful to proceed in the adventure, they can share their creations online with others and use different kinds of mods made by the community in order to change the base gameplay.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Beale et al., 2016, Keogh, 2013.

ROGUE

A.I. Design, 1980

Genre Classification // Roguelike

Availability and release // Amiga - 1980

Popularity and recognition // It is considered one of the most important games ever made, since it is what created the genre we know today as "Roguelike". Moreover, it was prised by critics when it came out, and won different prizes. In 2009, *Rogue* was named #6 on the "Ten Greatest PC Games Ever" list by PC World.

Death mode // Death as ludic > Player's death > Permadeath > True permadeath

Death/Kill event // Death

Death presence in the game // In this game, when the player dies, the avatar is lost and so the entire progress within the game and the only way to play again is restarting and creating a new avatar. It is an approach different to other Roguelikes where, even if you have to restart from the beginning, at least you can continue playing with the same character (see for example *Spelunky*).

Defining death mode // Once the player dies, the loss if progress is total and the only way to restart is to refresh completely the saved data. Moreover, as previously quoted, the player must restart with a totally new avatar, since the previous one died.

Influence on game design // As said previously, *Rogue* influenced the entire market of gaming. It was not just a very good game when it came out, it also defined a totally new genre that now is very popular among gamers. It demonstrated that a challenging and extremely difficult experience can be actually engaging for players, giving meaning to each single action that is made in the game, since a single wrong decision ca ruin the entire run.

Social dynamics // No social interactions.

Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.

References // Parletlon, 2023; Garda, 2013.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard, 2004

Genre Classification // MMORPG

Availability and release // Windows - November 23, 2004

Popularity and recognition // On January 22, 2008, It reached a historic milestone by amassing more than 10 million subscribers worldwide. *World of Warcraft* continued to maintain a substantial player base, with over 10 million active subscribers as of November 2014. On January 28, 2014, Blizzard announced that a staggering 100 million accounts had been created for *World of Warcraft*.

Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing NPCs > PVE

Death/Kill event // Kill

Death presence in the game // The essence of the *World of Warcraft* experience epitomizes the concept of Player vs. Environment (PVE). In this realm, players must form alliances and unite with fellow avatars to overcome formidable adversaries and killing challenging bosses. This cooperative gameplay dynamic has become a hallmark of the *World of Warcraft* universe, fostering camaraderie and shared triumphs among its vast player base.

Defining death mode // The phenomenon of killing NPCs with other players is epitomized by the concept of "Raids", which extends beyond simple collaboration. Raids necessitate the creation of robust social networks among players. These networks serve as channels for strategic coordination, underpinned by mutual understanding and synchronized actions. In essence, *World of Warcraft*'s Raids foster a sense of community and interdependence among its players, elevating the game beyond mere individual achievements.

Influence on game design // WOW highlighted the importance of community and interpersonal interaction in online gaming. The game's guilds, team dynamics, and large raids demonstrated the value of cooperative play. Later, many online games incorporate similar social elements. Additionally, the model of releasing expansions to extend the life of the game and introduce new features has been widely adopted. Releasing downloadable content (DLC) or expansions to keep players engaged has become a common practice in the gaming industry.

Social dynamics // Many possible ways to interact with other users. You can fight against them for example, or share tools/equipment. WOW became famous thanks to the PVE componenet, focal point of the gameplay experience. In fact, trying to finish the game alone is very difficult and so players are motivated to meet other players in order to collaborate and beat together the main bosses.

Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.

References // Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008, Banks, 2015, Williams et al., 2014, Linderoth, 2012.

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES
Naughty Dog, 2009

Genre Classification // Action-adventure, third-person shooter
Availability and release // Playstation 3 - October, 2009
Popularity and recognition // It achieved remarkable success both critically and commercially, by reaching a substantial 6.5 million copies in 2015. Beyond sales, Uncharted 2 garnered an astounding 300 industry awards, including more than 200 Game of the Year awards.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing NPCs > Single player
Death/Kill event // Kill
Death presence in the game // In *Uncharted 2*, combat and eliminating adversaries are central to the gameplay experience. Players often resort to killing as a means to overcome various obstacles and challenges encountered throughout their journey. These obstacles are primarily represented by non-playable characters (NPCs) who take on different forms, such as enemy soldiers, hostile creatures, or other antagonists.
Defining death mode // Each of these NPCs serves as a formidable barrier that the player must eliminate to progress in the game's narrative. The significance of killing as a gameplay mechanic lies in its integral role in shaping the player's interaction with the virtual world. In this acclaimed franchise, the mechanics of killing NPCs emerge as a linchpin strategy, pivotal for the creation of challenges and the maintenance of player engagement with the unfolding action.
Influence on game design // *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* had a notable influence on the field of game design. It was praised for its cinematic storytelling, which blended seamlessly with gameplay. This integration of narrative and gameplay has since become a benchmark for many action-adventure games. The game's set pieces, graphics, motion capture acting, original characters, and performances received acclaim, emphasizing the importance of high production values in modern game design.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Davidson, 2011, Glas, 2015, Mortensen et al., 2015.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION
Bethesda softworks, 2006

Genre Classification // Action role-playing
Availability and release // Windows, Xbox 360 - March, 2006
Popularity and recognition // In November 2011, it sold three million units. Critics praised the game for its progressive system of not-playable characters (NPCs) and for the game design as spectacular, immersive, and capable of providing an engaging gaming experience.
Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing NPCs > Single Player > Consequences on the gameplay
Death/Kill event // Kill
Death presence in the game // In *TES IV: Oblivion*, the act of killing an NPC may not directly alter the main storyline, yet it significantly influences the player's experience and progression. Eliminating NPCs can yield valuable experience points (XP) and rewards, crucial for character development and enhancing capabilities. This design element introduces complexity to decision-making, as players must balance the advantages of XP gain against the moral consequences of virtual life-taking.
Defining death mode // This trajectory signifies a departure from conventional resource or ammunition accumulation. It leads to transformative effects within the gameplay, impacting character development and overall game progression. *TES IV: Oblivion* serves as a prime example, where killing NPCs goes beyond resource management, resulting in dynamic shifts in character growth and gameplay dynamics.
Influence on game design // It had a notable influence on the field of game design, particularly in terms of its approach to non-player character (NPC) interactions and consequences. It introduced a dynamic system where killing NPCs could lead to significant repercussions, affecting character growth and gameplay. This innovative approach influenced subsequent games to consider the broader implications of player choices on the game world, adding depth and realism to the virtual environments and interactions.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.
References // Lankoski and Björk, 2007, Adams and Dormans, 2012, Glas, 2015.

COUNTER STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE
Valve, 2012

Genre Classification // Tactical first-person shooter

Availability and release // OS X, PlayStation 3, Windows, Xbox 360 - August 21, 2012

Popularity and recognition // CS: GO has maintained a significant and active group of players since its release. Notably, it reached a new milestone in March 2023, simultaneously reaching an all-time high of 1.4 million players.

Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing other players > Intra mechanic

Death/Kill event // Kill

Death presence in the game // *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* serves as a quintessential example within this category, where killing is fundamentally intertwined with gameplay mechanics. The Deathmatch mode underscores this by making player eliminations central to victory, with the first team to secure five rounds emerging as the winner.

Defining death mode // It emphasizes competitive gameplay rather than narrative, where the main focus lies in the competitive nature of the experience. Even if death is not a very important element for the narrative or the atmosphere of the game, it is for essential for the mechanics of the game.

Influence on game design // *Counter-Strike* played a pivotal role in popularizing esports and competitive gaming. Its success as a competitive title led to the growth of professional gaming leagues and tournaments, setting the stage for the esports industry we see today. Tactical gameplay is a main part of the experience. It encouraged players to work together as a team, plan strategies, and use real-world tactics. This influence can be seen in many modern tactical shooters and esports titles where teamwork and strategy are paramount.

Social dynamics // Social interactions are fundamental, since it is a game all focused on the multiplayer game modes. Also, *Counter-strike* became famous in the field of e-sports, and so this underlines the competitive importance of the game.

Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.

References // Rusk and Ståhl, 2020, Wright et al., 2002, Obreja, 2023.

DAYZ MOD
Bohemia Interactive, 2013

Genre Classification // Survival, First-person shooter, third-person shooter

Availability and release // Windows - February 21, 2013

Popularity and recognition // It was lauded as an incredible experience, earning the title of “Mod of the Year’’ from Edge Magazine. During peak sales periods, more than 200 copies of the game were being purchased every minute. By the end of its first week, the standalone game had achieved over 400,000 copies sold.

Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing other players > Extra mechanic > Greed play

Death/Kill event // Kill

Death presence in the game // Set in a post-apocalyptic world populated not only by zombies but also by other human players, every decision weighs heavily. The presence of permadeath means that a wrong move or unfortunate encounter can mean the end of a player’s journey. This constant risk and the possibility of constant harm leads to increased stress and lack of engagement. Players must remain vigilant at all times, assess the risks involved, and rely on other survivors to navigate this seemingly forgiving world.

Defining death mode // In *DayZ*, player killings, while carrying a sense of tragic consequence, are often driven by the practical need to acquire valuable resources essential for survival in the perilous game world. This lends emotional weight to these interactions, aligning them with the overarching gameplay narrative of survival. Within this context, player killings assume a degree of emotional gravitas, aligned with the exigencies of resource acquisition that directly contribute to the core gameplay narrative.

Influence on game design // It demonstrated the appeal of open-world survival games where players must scavenge for resources, cooperate or compete with other players, and face the permanent consequences of death. This has led to a proliferation of similar survival games and the integration of survival elements into various genres.

Social dynamics // This interaction transpires in a variety of modalities. It encompasses cooperation, where players form alliances to enhance their survival prospects, and conflict, where limited resources or territorial claims lead to Player vs. Player (PvP) encounters. Trading is another facet, involving the exchange of vital resources, contingent upon trust among participants.

Ethical aspects // Key ethical themes include survival ethics, trust and betrayal dynamics, the moral implications of killing for self-preservation, resource allocation ethics, community conduct, and the exploration of role-playing identities.

References // Carter et al., 2013, Copcic et al., 2013, Foo and Koivisto, 2004.

EVE ONLINE
CCP Games, 2003

Genre Classification // Space simulation, MMORPG

Availability and release // Windows - May 6, 2003

Popularity and recognition // In 2013, it was honored by PC Gamer, securing the #12 spots on their prestigious list of the "100 Greatest Games of All Time". The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) recognized the game's cultural significance by adding it to their permanent collection of video games in June 2013. The active players per day are almost 200 000.

Death mode // Death as ludic > Killing other players > Extra mechanic > Griefing

Death/Kill event // Kill

Death presence in the game // *EVE Online*, a science fiction MMORPG, offers a unique player-driven experience in a futuristic capitalist world. Unlike traditional sports, it encourages behavior that can be disturbing or morally wrong elsewhere.

Defining death mode // Griefing can take deceptive forms, such as luring new players into alliances and then betraying them for personal gain. These actions, encouraged by the game's mechanics, align with its competitive and cutthroat universe. Unlike in other games, griefing is not only permitted but also expected in *EVE Online*, adding a layer of complexity to its player-driven dynamics.

Influence on game design // The impact on game design lies in its unique approach to controlling player activity, and its indulgence in disturbing behaviors like grief in its universe is a prime example of how games can be a world of it is complex, influenced by players with certain actions The result is interactive as well -Provides a template and ecosystem for future MMOs and online multiplayer games to explore agency and its impact on the game's narrative.

Social dynamics // Players engage in intricate dynamics, including the formation of corporations and alliances, in-game communication tools, diplomatic negotiations, economic activities, and player-driven content creation.

Ethical aspects // *EVE Online* as a game doesn't explicitly address specific ethical issues within its narrative or mechanics. However, the player-driven dynamics and interactions in the game often raise ethical questions related to trust, deception, and the consequences of one's actions in a virtual world.

References // Kelly et al., 2014, Foo and Koivisto, 2004, Paul, 2011, Chen et al., 2009, Carter et al., 2013.

THE WALKING DEAD
Telltale games, 2012

Genre Classification // Graphic adventure, Interactive drama

Availability and release // Playstation 3, Windows - 2012

Popularity and recognition // Upon its release, the first episode of the game quickly reached the top of the charts on Xbox Live Arcade, a position it held for two weeks. As of July 28, 2014, the game had achieved a remarkable milestone, with a total of 28 million episodes sold.

Death mode // Death as ludic and narrative > Death embedded in the narrative > Actual death

Death/Kill event // Death

Death presence in the game // In narrative-focused games, players assume the role of a protagonist and guide them through a story. Direct control over the character is limited, emphasizing decision-making and the emotional weight of choices. Games like *The Walking Dead* showcase this, where player decisions shape the narrative, fostering a deep sense of personal involvement and emotional investment in the game's outcome. Death is behind every corner, and a single small mistake can save or condemned other NPCs.

Defining death mode // In some games, players are tasked with managing multiple characters, placing decision-making at the forefront. Here, the repercussions of choices significantly mold the story's direction and the characters' chances of survival. Death in these games is a permanent, irreversible event deeply integrated into both gameplay and narrative.

Influence on game design // It demonstrated that players could be emotionally invested in a game's story and characters, with their decisions shaping the narrative. This approach has since been adopted and adapted by various game developers, leading to the emergence of a sub genre known as "interactive storytelling" or "choice-based narrative games". These games prioritize player choices and emotional engagement, emphasizing the impact of decisions on the game's progression. *The Walking Dead* played a pivotal role in popularizing this narrative-focused game design.

Social dynamics // No social interaction.

Ethical aspects // The game puts players in situations where they have to make tough moral decisions that directly affect the story and character relationships. These decisions often require a choice between self-preservation and the well-being of others, raising questions about the sacrifice, trust and value of human life in extreme circumstances.

References // Pallavicini et al., 2020, Copcic et al., 2013, Bosman, 2018.

PRINCE OF PERSIA
Ubisoft, 2008

Genre Classification // Action-adventure, Platform

Availability and release // PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, Mac OS X, Java ME - 2008

Popularity and recognition // Despite the public didn't appreciate the "consumer-friendly" mechanic of death, the game reached an impressive milestone of more than 2 million copies sold, and the critic praised the game for the amazing atmosphere and storytelling. Also, it was appreciated the art direction, very particular and the animations extremely well done.

Death mode // Death as ludic and narrative > Death embedded in the narrative > Death avoided

Death/Kill event // Death

Death presence in the game // Elika, the co-protagonist that will follow us, intervenes whenever the player approaches a potential "game over" scenario, preventing such outcomes by, for example, placing the player on the nearest platform in case they fall or shielding them from potentially mortal enemy attacks. Nevertheless, should this intervention occur during a battle sequence, the enemy's health is restored, necessitating the repetition of the entire encounter.

Defining death mode // Death in *Prince of Persia* finds narrative justification through discussions within the storyline regarding Elika's powers and capabilities. As a result, the game adroitly accommodates the dual existence of death as both an experiential occurrence within the interactive gameplay and a key element in the narrative storytelling. These dimensions delineate a narrative strategy that bypasses the conventional constraints of player death while leveraging its significance within the narrative.

Influence on game design // The game is not famous for any particular influence on game design. However, it's way to deal with death within the narrative is for sure innovative: in fact, it is not so common to find games where the respawn system is not only frequent, but justified too.

Social dynamics // No social interactions.

Ethical aspects // There is no address to a specific ethical issue.

References // Bosman, 2018, Jay, 2017, Rafinski and Zielke, 2013.

SPEC OPS: THE LINE
Yager, 2012

Genre Classification // Third-person shooter

Availability and release // Windows, PS3, Xbox 360 - June 29, 2012

Popularity and recognition // Reviews of Spec Ops: The Line were overwhelmingly positive, with critics widely acclaiming several aspects of the game. The narrative, themes explored, and the thought-provoking approach to violence within the medium of video games were particularly lauded. Despite its critical success, it faced challenges in the commercial arena.

Death mode // Death as ludic and narrative > Morality in player's actions > Fixed justice

Death/Kill event // Kill

Death presence in the game // In *Spec Ops: The Line*, players step into the shoes of Captain Martin Walker, leading a squad on a rescue mission in post-apocalyptic Dubai. The game intricately weaves morally challenging scenarios and decisions into the narrative, making killing a thought-provoking experience and compelling players to grapple with the repercussions of their actions.

Defining death mode // The theme of killing in video games has been a perennial and intricate subject, spanning the medium's entire history and continuing to provoke discussions. Intriguingly, within this virtual realm, killing can assume a paradoxical role—acting as a conduit for delving into human morality and individual responsibility. The act of killing becomes a means to explore complex moral dilemmas and psychological dissonance.

Influence on game design // *Spec Ops: the Line* demonstrated that video games could tackle mature and morally complex narratives. It encouraged game developers to explore deeper and more thought-provoking themes in their stories, moving beyond simple good vs. evil narratives. While the gameplay itself was standard for the shooter genre, the realistic and gritty storytelling approach inspired a shift toward more realistic narratives in games, even in genres typically associated with fantastical elements.

Social dynamics // No social interaction.

Ethical aspects // The game explores themes related to the morality of war, the psychological toll of combat, and the consequences of soldiers' actions on both themselves and the civilian population. It forces players to confront the moral complexities of their decisions during the game, often presenting choices that challenge traditional notions of heroism in war. *Spec Ops: The Line* deliberately seeks to provoke players into questioning the ethics of their actions.

References // Keogh, 2012, Jørgensen, 2016, Björk, 2015.

THIS WAR OF MINE
11Bit studio, 2014

Genre Classification // Survival
Availability and release // Windows, OS X, Linux - November 14, 2014
Popularity and recognition // As of May 2022, *This War of Mine* had reached a noteworthy milestone by selling over 7 million copies across all available platforms. In 2020, the Polish Chancellery of the Prime Minister made the decision to include This War of Mine in the recommended reading list for Polish high schools during the academic year of 2020–2021.
Death mode // Death as ludic and narrative > Morality in player's actions > Accumulation of deeds > Moral ambiguity
Death/Kill event // Kill
Death presence in the game // In *This War of Mine*, the main goal is survival during the hardships of war, divided into day and night phases. During nighttime scavenging, players may meet other survivors and refugees, leading to moral dilemmas like killing an NPC for vital resources. These choices have lasting consequences.
Defining death mode // It falls into the closed design category, where player decisions are constrained to drive the game's main narrative. Although the overall direction remains fixed, player's choices will influence directly on who will survive, allowing for a more curated ethical experience.
This War of Mine presents players with challenging situations that reflect the harsh realities of war and survival. The game encourages players to confront ethical questions related to resource allocation, morality, and the well-being of others in dire circumstances.
Influence on game design // *This War of Mine* had a significant influence on the field of game design by demonstrating the potential for video games to tackle serious and morally complex subjects. It introduced the concept of moral choices and their consequences in a survival game, emphasizing the emotional and ethical aspects of gameplay.
Social dynamics // No social interaction.
Ethical aspects // Within this game, players must grapple with the moral complexities of resource allocation, the juxtaposition of survival and morality, the choices surrounding helping other survivors, and the profound psychological impact of their decisions. These ethical dilemmas serve as a lens through which players explore the challenges faced by civilians during times of conflict, fostering empathy and critical reflection on the moral dimensions of their in-game choices within the harsh backdrop of war.
References // de Smale et al., 2019, Flynn-Jones, 2015, Abruzzese, 2019.

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
Bioware, 2011

Genre Classification // MMORPG
Availability and release // Windows - December 20, 2011
Popularity and recognition // Critically, the game garnered generally positive reviews from gaming critics, reflecting its favorable reception within the gaming community. It achieved a notable score of 85 on Metacritic and an 84% rating on GameRankings, indicating a favorable consensus among reviewers.
Death mode // Death as ludic and narrative > Morality in player's actions > Accumulation of deeds > Explicit system
Death/Kill event // Kill
Death presence in the game // In *Star Wars: The Old Republic,* players are not only participants but also storytellers within the expansive Star Wars universe. The game empowers players to shape their characters' moral alignment through a sophisticated choice system. These choices, aligning with the light side (good) or dark side (evil), profoundly influence the narrative and character progression, granting players agency in crafting their unique Star Wars saga. This approach enhances player immersion and investment in the game's rich storytelling.
Defining death mode // Even if it so not so complex to undersand which is the best choice to take, killing or sparing a specific character will deeply change the gameplay experience. In such instances, the interactive decision-making process aligns seamlessly with the narrative design, yielding a narrative where choices resonate intuitively with players.
Influence on game design // It demonstrated that the traditional linear storytelling of MMORPGs could be enhanced by player agency and moral choice systems, enriching the player's experience and immersion in the game world. This influence is seen in subsequent MMORPGs incorporating similar choice mechanics to engage players in shaping their in-game narratives.
Social dynamics // It occurs primarily through multiplayer aspects of the game, such as group missions, player vs. player combat, and interactions within the game's various social spaces. Players can team up to tackle challenging content, engage in player-driven role-playing scenarios, or compete against each other in organized player vs. player battles.
Ethical aspects // The game prompts players to make decisions that align with either the light side (good) or the dark side (evil) of the Force. These decisions carry significant consequences for the game's narrative and the development of the player's character.
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10

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