

## Playing Dead: Learning-through-Dying and Undeath as Mediation in Computer Games

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The computer gaming medium is constructed around a currency of lives, which can be earned and lost in the process of the completion of the game through the avoidance of losing. In the moments before the screen flashes “game over,” we enter a symbolic state “between two deaths,” which Slavoj Žižek describes as the gap “between the death in which I lose one of my lives and the ultimate death in which I lose the game itself.”<sup>1</sup> This fantasy structure in which the player can survive multiple deaths, so long as the final death is averted, is centered on the desire to complete the game. Jacques Lacan tells us that “man’s desire is the desire of the Other,”<sup>2</sup> and in the case of computer games it is the computer itself that takes on the role of “big other”<sup>3</sup> by imposing its own desires as our own and by dictating the objectives and tasks that must be completed in order to win the game. This big other is the imaginary construct of an external power whose desires we presuppose and take for our own in an attempt to please this authoritative or paternal being, person or institution. Thus, for Lacan, our own desire becomes what we think the other wants us to desire. Through establishing a series of tasks to complete under the threat of losing, or “dying,” the computer game medium becomes a big other by enforcing rules that structure players’ desires and predetermine our possible modes of living and dying in digital space.

Throughout computer game history there has been a tendency among players to disrupt this other that controls the mediation of the gaming experience. Cheats, mods, piracy, and hacking have all offered critical interventions in the medium at the level of computer code and have demonstrated players' need to extend their negotiation of the big other's system of rules. Within the game itself, the framing of winning and losing as living and dying contributes to the continued development of a player: he or she learns from mistakes, tests alternative modes of play, or plays directly with death as a critical or entertaining rupture to the flow of the medium. A number of games, however, inscribe a challenge to the structures of the computer-other's desire *directly into the construction of the medium itself* by disrupting the relation of the player between two deaths. This disruption exposes a state of undeath through which a player can achieve critical distance from traditional paradigms that uphold the winning-losing dualism. Žižek's cultural psychoanalysis of undeath in the digital realm, along with the Gilles Deleuze's notion of "becoming," provide instructive analytical frames for two such games—Tale of Tales's *The Path* (2009) and Playdead's *Limbo* (2010)—that subvert the gaming medium and open a critical potential for "playing dead."

Žižek describes the living dead as a monstrous "Thing" that is excluded from the symbolic world of the living.<sup>4</sup> If to be dead is to be the same person without life, to be undead is to be life without the same person; that is, a decentered (or desubstantialised) subject. This decentered subject is freed from symbolic ties in its death within the symbolic world, yet has not achieved actual death, and thus exists in a limbo state between two deaths. In the computer gaming medium, we can therefore view the immortal and indestructible core of the subject as that which persists outside of our mortal selves in the digital realm as the kernel of desire that is unleashed and persists on the other side of the screen. By engaging with digital media we enter a space between two deaths that allows us to step outside of human mortality and into a realm of flexible immortality beyond our normal self. The suspension of disbelief that takes place when entering the fantasy of the game world can be seen as temporarily killing our human self so as to enable our consciousness (one's sense of one's own life) to participate in a new symbolic order based on computer code

and the rules of the game. In this purely formal symbolic death we are able to approach the “paradox of a fantasmatic element, which the more [the fantasy] is annihilated in reality, the stronger it returns in its spectral presence,”<sup>5</sup> allowing us to strip ourselves of content and expose in our fundamental fantasy the kernel of our monstrous desires of the undead digital self.

The staging of this state between two deaths, between physical and digital life, can enable the cyber-subject to “traverse the fantasy;” that is, to “externalize/stage his or her fundamental fantasy, and thus gain a minimum of distance towards it.”<sup>6</sup> When this desire of the undead digital self is articulated in the medium itself—the computer-defined compulsion to risk our lives to complete the game within set rules and objectives—the traversal of fantasy is a traversal of gaming structure itself. Tale of Tales’s *The Path* aims towards such a critique of the medium via traversal by disrupting the understood rules of play. According to conventional logic of the game’s objectives and tasks, the player controls one of six sisters—expressions of the red riding hood trope extrapolated through various stages of childhood and adolescence—and navigates a path to her grandmother’s house. Upon completion of this task, however, the player is informed that she has lost the game. This is because the makers have created a scenario whereby “the only way to win is to break the rules and die.”<sup>7</sup> Only upon leaving the game’s eponymous path does the true mode of play begin—a free exploration of the woods meant to draw the young girls further and further from their destination, from civilization, and from safety.



*Tale of Tale's The Path*

A staging of Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" is at work here, in that the player is invited to adopt an extra-human set of desires as part of a continual yet unachievable process of becoming-other. By entering into the space of the gap between human and other, the player finds in the woods a "reality specific to becoming,"<sup>8</sup> in which she is simultaneously consumed by the desire of the individual sister and by the desire of the game's elusive structures of play. This becoming-other draws the player into a purposefully antagonistic relation with the medium in highlighting the structures of desire surrounding both the player and character. The becoming-animal is here figured in the wolf of the little red riding hood tale, from the literal beast faced by the youngest sister to a range of desires faced by the older sisters that includes the violence of a disturbed friend and the corruption of older men. As the girls perpetually move towards becoming the object of desire and the danger such objectification entails, so too is the player caught in a state of becoming-death, for her play has unseen and lethal consequences. After achieving a brief and incomplete encounter with the beast in the woods, when the sisters finally reach their grandmother's house in what stands as the completion of the game, we find that, instead of the safety of an

overbearing relative and the constricting enforcement of the gaming medium, a scene of horror awaits us. The girls are brutally murdered in a flashing series of expressionistic stills that break and deform the young protagonists' bodies, covering them in blood and revealing the inaccessibility of our desires. These animals, in the fusion of the girls and the beasts they desire, never "become": they are never mastered, our desires never achieved. So too is the player at the mercy of the game, for the actions of play have drawn us into complicity with these horrific acts. What started as a game eventually reveals the traumatic role of death in both the fictional lives of the sisters and the mediation of our play by the twisted rules of the game.

Amidst this trauma, a space in which playing with death emerges and has the potential to stage a critical discussion of how such play, and our interaction with the digital realm in general, is mediated. Deleuze reveals the positive, affirmatory, and even productive role of death, which "is present in the living in the form of a subjective and differentiated [sic] experience."<sup>9</sup> The death drive entails an act of becoming within the symbolic structures of subjectivity and operates as the always-unattainable drive that exists beneath the masks of humanity. Within the playful interaction of users with computer games, this relation of difference to the symbolic self can be overcome by introducing new subjective attitudes towards death. We are confronted with a paradox in computer games: it is our frail, mortal, physical bodies that endure beyond our symbolic death while our spectral, seemingly immortal, digital embodiment dies over and over again. Games such as Tale of Tales's *The Path* respond to this paradoxical undead by raising questions about where the human subject is situated between the staging and disruption of what Žižek describes as two "existential attitudes"<sup>10</sup> of (physical-mortal) life and (digital-symbolic) death. By entering into our role of becoming-death, bringing about the horrific and gory demise of six young girls, we cast light on the relation of death to the structures of desire that mediate our experience of game-play. It is instructive that, while following the path keeps all six characters available within the game, each death removes the playability of one girl. The importance of the new experience of death is brought to light, for each new mode of

dying inserts a singular rupture in the gaming medium whereby the game is completed through symbolic failure.

The role of failure is expanded in the game *Limbo*, developed by the aptly named Playdead. The creative employment of death as part of the gaming experience is clear here, from the names of the game and the company that created it to the dark monochrome world in which the action takes place. Just as *The Path* is “the exact opposite of a survival horror game in the sense that the goal of the game is the opposite of survival,”<sup>11</sup> so too is death an integral part of *Limbo*. However, whereas death acts as a mode of desire in *The Path*, embodied as a series of horrific and singular events, in *Limbo* the role of death is upheld as a becoming. The nature of death as a process and part of life is made clear, both by the tagline of the game —“unsure of his sister’s fate, a boy enters limbo”—and by the approach to play emphasised by the designers of the game, who refer to solving puzzles as a “learning by dying game.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout the game, the character of the brother exists in a state between two deaths, and the player explores the dangerous environment and its sinister inhabitants via the character’s successive deaths. The undead nature of the character here is not an expression of “evental horror” – what we might expect as a singular moment or sudden shift into horror, such as an act of murder or complete transformation into a hideous beast – but a genuine becoming without end. Indeed, there is no sense of cathartic release, for dying does not in itself herald the completion of the game. This is exemplified in the game’s final scene when the boy rediscovers his sister, after which the game simply loops back to an even more decayed image of the initial landscape. While the existence of an ending supports the gaming structure of desire, with the sister representing the structure of fantasy that forces the player to complete the game, there is little sense of achievement at the game’s conclusion. The ending does nothing to clarify the nature of this limbo or reveal any possible escape, and the entire game remains inconclusive as to whether the boy, his sister, or both are dead.

The process of learning by dying necessitates that the undead state be sustained if players are to remain in a realm of playing dead. Remaining in this realm provides players an opportunity to escape the gaming medium and infinitely postpone its generically objective-based end. Whether as a

penalty for losing, or through turning off the game upon completion, the gaming paradigm enforces the inexorability of death. However, even if it were possible to maintain a state of play between two deaths, this would not be without its own trauma. In *Limbo* we are never able to be released fully from mortality, and if the looped world could somehow remain open to continual play, we would still be caught in a situation where “immortality, not death, becomes the ultimate horror.”<sup>13</sup> Mortality defines humanity; several writings explicate death’s integral role in our psychological construction, from those of Sigmund Freud onwards. Even Deleuze’s removal of destructive connotations in his elevation of death as a transcendental creative force beyond mere psychology<sup>14</sup> does not ignore its necessitation of finality. The digital game medium, being a product of humanity and staging its desires, must insist on a structure of fantasy in which even the unattainable becomes an achievable goal. What games such as *Limbo* create, then, is a space in which we can step outside of the familiar modes of playing not only computer games but also our roles within humanity. These games frame the impossible situation of undeath as a simultaneous boon, in which we can truly learn from our mistakes and increase our experiences in repeated life, and a threat, in which we cannot escape the torment of perpetual immortality even as we are driven towards death and finality. By inscribing play within such an impossible situation, these games provide an opportunity for us to critically assess our relation to modes of living in general and perhaps gain a critical distance toward the desires that enforce a game-like structure to our existence.

Playing dead in computer games allows the player to enter an alternative symbolic space in which the desires and horrors of fantasy can be staged. Far from simply enacting the player’s darker internal drives, a critical reading and playing of games such as *The Path* and *Limbo* allow the staging of fantasy to encompass the role of death in and of the medium itself. The perpetual process of becoming in games whose own structures of desire avoid conventional objectives and the familiar currency of humanity allow the player to embrace the imposed desires of the undead computer-other; the unattainability of both success and death’s finality results in a disruption of the symbolic space of the game’s coded rules.

The frustration and potential horror of death's repetition in digital space, and our complicity in sustaining the undead characters representing us in such spaces, forces a rupture in our own process of desire as manifested via our open consumption of computer games. This rupture of desire and disruption of consumption highlights the need for a traversal of the structures of desire imposed on us by digital media. The question Žižek poses, "Is it possible to traverse the fantasy in cyberspace?"<sup>15</sup> thus makes a slightly erroneous assumption, namely that digital media are mere tools in which to stage a psychological procedure with the aim of providing a "cure" for the physical human. Digital media increasingly permeate our lives and culture, and the role cyberspace plays in the construction of the fantasies of contemporary subjects must be taken into account. Yet perhaps the question we should ask is, rather: Is it possible to traverse the fantasy *of* cyberspace? Given the gaming medium's capacity to both enforce structures of fantasy and desire as well as to also stage their traversal, we must embrace a state of play that sustains our digital undeath while simultaneously rethink our attitudes toward available modes of life and death. Once we enter into the staging of undeath in the digital realm, what monster do we become, and are we able to return unscathed to the physical realm of the "living"?

## Notes

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso 2008), 150.
- 2 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: The Hogarth Press 1977), 38.
- 3 Žižek explains the big Other, the structure of desire supporting the symbolic order, as "fragile, insubstantial, properly *virtual*, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*." Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta), 10.



- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum 2006), 157.
- 5 Ibid., 236.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, "Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace," in *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell 1999), 122.
- 7 Mark Newheiser, "Michaël Samyn, Auriea Harvey: Tale of Tales—Interview," accessed 26 November 2013; [www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/473/](http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/473/)
- 8 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum 2004), 262.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum 2004), 112.
- 10 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso 2009), 169.
- 11 Michaël Harvey and Auriea Samyn, in Newheiser, "Tale of Tales—Interview."
- 12 Jeppe Carlsen, in Brandon Sheffield "GDC Europe: *Limbo's* Carlsen on Making Players Your Worst Enemy and Your Best Friend," accessed 26 November 2013; [www.gamasutra.com/view/news/120739/](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/120739/).
- 13 Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 354.
- 14 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 19.

15 Slavoj Žižek, "Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace,"  
102.

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