

Why Death Matters: Understanding Gameworld Experience

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Abstract

This article presents a study of the staging and implementation of death and the death penalty in a number of popular MMOGs and relates it to players general experience of gameworlds. Game mechanics, writings and stories by designers and players, and the results of an online survey are analysed and discussed. The study shows that the death penalty is implemented much in the same way across worlds; that death can be both trivial and non-trivial, part of the grind of everyday life, or essential in the creation of heroes, depending on context. In whatever function death may serves, it is argued that death plays an important part in the shaping and emergence of the social culture of a world, and in the individual players experience of life within it.

Keywords: Gameworlds, gameworld, MMOGs, experience, experience design, death, death penalty, players, stories, game design.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, a certain "experience" turn has taken place in many of the disciplines which study digital artifacts, systems and worlds. Whether it be within the field of philosophy [Jay05], human-computer interaction and user-experience design (for instance [BOMW04, MW04]), arts and culture [oC05] or game studies [EM05], the concept of experience is increasingly being debated and probed in a variety of empirical studies. Likewise, in the physical realm the focus on not only functional or aesthetic design, but also on emotional and emphatic design signify an increased interest and awareness of the need not only to design systems or objects that function well, but to design for certain types of experiences. From a commercial perspective, the interest is easily explained: if one knew exactly which "experiential" buttons to push and what precisely to do to provoke positive and interesting experiences, one would be sitting on a veritable goldmine. From an academic perspective, the "experience movement" indicate a desire to move beyond what one might call a first generation of research into digital media objects and technologies, a movement towards understanding more closely how experiences with technology are now an integral part of the experience of everyday life. How can one combine functional qualities with aesthetic and emotional qualities of interactive experiences? How is the complex interplay between peoples personal repertoire of experiences, context (physical and social) and actual design to be understood? Within game studies, the experience turn is manifest in the interest in now understanding computer game players experiences as growing from an interplay between various forms of im-

mersion, genres and general gameplay expectations. Though experience is not easily defined because it is inherently subjective, many writers seem to agree that within the digital realm experience grows out of the interplay between the qualities and characteristics of the digital object (in a broad sense) at hand, previous similar experiences and the social and cultural setting within which the individual user moves. It is only by exploring the relation between all these aspects of experience, that we can begin to understand what make digital experiences in their many forms truly unique and engaging.

This article tries to further describe and understand the experience of living and gaming within the boundaries of an entire digital universe or world. In order to comprehend this form of experience, the study described involves several of the aspects of understanding experience, previously mentioned: it deals with aspects of design, of gameplay, of aesthetics, as well as with the social and cultural framing of the player that takes place within a given gameworld. However, the study takes its point of departure in an analysis of the framing of a particular gameworld experience. It is well known, that to create a successful gaming environment, designers need to find the right balance between challenges and rewards. In a multi-player game environment, a closer look at how a specific game element is implemented and balanced, experienced and perhaps later related to other players as mediated experience (“stories”) can tell us much about how a game system and the culture surrounding this game system influences player engagement. The element that has been chosen as the subject of this study is avatar “death, an element of gameworld design at the heart of the discussion of rewards and challenges, and an element which is often devoted much attention by players in their discussion and stories about the worlds, they play. The article thus presents the results of a preliminary study, which examined how low-level death was implemented in a number of popular massively multiplayer online worlds: *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online*, *Lineage II*, *City of Heroes*, *Eve Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Anarchy Online*. It then relates the game mechanics of death to designers and players discussions of, and stories about, death penalty and death experiences in the select worlds, including results of an online survey conducted by the author. In order to more closely explain the relation between death culture inside and outside MMOGs in general, relevant literature on the

sociology of death and death cultures have been consulted in order to gain an insight into the relation between death, sociality and culture in cultural systems at large.

2 Why Worlds Matter

The explosive growth in Massively Multiplayer Worlds from 2001 and onwards (see for instance <http://www.mmogchart.com>), demonstrate that there appear to be a huge market for networked entertainment universes where players can come together to play and socialise. One of the currently most popular worlds, *World of Warcraft*, by January 2007 had more than 8 million subscribers worldwide [Ent07].

Whereas several researchers and designers have studied and written about these worlds as primarily gaming environments (see for instance [Bar03, MP03]), or cultural worlds [Yee01, Tay06, Cas05], I conceive of them in a broader sense as huge online entertainment worlds, an interactive 21st century version of the immersive fictional universes known from novels, films and table-top roleplaying games [Kla07]. Some online worlds focus on gaming (such as the MMOGs), others are social learning worlds (such as MOOs) or general entertainment worlds (such as There.com). However, as elsewhere argued, they are all defined by being “persistent online representations, which contains the possibility of synchronous interaction between users and between user and world within the framework of a space designed as a navigable universe” [Kla03], i.e. they are shared, interactive and explorable universes. To fully understand these worlds in their complexity, we need to study the combination of a navigational fictional setting, a given world system and its design, the possibilities of performance and interaction within it, and the social interaction in and about the world, which forms the players experience of a particular world. It is the sum of all these elements which inform the experience of what this author has coined the “worldness” of a particular world [Kla07] that is, the overall experience of what a world “is like”, and of what it is to be in the world. Though the focus in this article is mainly on the study of the element of “death, the overall goal is still to explore one of the factors that contribute to the experience of worldness. Like in any other study of factors that help create a sustainable experience of worldness, it should touch on aspects of both design, player performance and social interaction. People play gameworlds for a

variety of reasons, and gaming itself is only part of what makes life in such worlds entertaining and engaging. As this article will argue, it has indeed been a fruitful endeavour to explore “death, in the attempt to increase our understanding of what helps define the gameworld and “worldness experience.

3 Studying Gameworld Death

Since, within the humanities, no tested methodologies yet exist for the study of particular gameworld features, an integral part of this project has been to try several ways of collecting relevant data, in order to combine them in a fruitful manner. To understand the mechanics of death in the selected worlds, the basis for the study has been the authors first hand experience of immediate low-level death in all of the selected worlds. In addition, both *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* have furthermore been played for a longer period of time. Where information has been sparse regarding the worlds less familiar to the author, own experiences have been supplemented by short interviews with high-level and long-time players, either in-game or by mail, about death and death implementation penalties in earlier versions of the worlds and in the high-level play. To understand the underlying rationale of the gameworlds death mechanics and their players responses to them, the factual game studies have furthermore been combined with an analysis of existing texts on death in online gameworlds and in game design; such as designer discussions in salient works on games, official game FAQs of the worlds in question, as well as online discussions between players, and between players and designers.

3.1 The www.death-stories.org survey

In order to understand more precisely which avatar death experiences, players remember and tell stories about, and how and when they tell them, player-stories made available in public accessible forums and machinima (player-made films) have been studied. These stories have been supplemented with invited stories and player experience data, as they have become available in a still ongoing survey, which the author hosts at the website <http://www.death-stories.org>. This survey will continue throughout 2007. On the website, players are asked to tell or retell their own stories about character death in the select worlds. In the introduction to the survey, it is emphasised that all forms of

stories about death, of the everyday type as well as the unusual, are welcome. In the survey, players are asked to (1) provide basic demographic data, (2) a story of a “death experience” in a MMOG, (3) general opinions on death in game worlds, and (4) a few questions about the players experience in general.

The survey has been advertised generally by the author, on the Warcry Player Network in April-May 2006 and on World of Warcraft public forums in November 2006. By February 2007, 41 players had submitted data to the survey, 34 males and 8 females. 22 of these respondents are between 21 and 30 years-old, the rest is distributed fairly evenly between ages 10-50. Geographically most of the respondents originate in the United States (26), 3 in United Kingdom, 2 in Denmark, 2 in Australia, 2 in the Netherlands. Anguilla, China, Greece, Canada, Norway and Sweden is represented with one respondent per country. *World of Warcraft* is the most popular world played in (29 respondents), but *City of Heroes* (5), *Lineage II* (6), *Star Wars Galaxies* (5), *Dark Ages of Camelot* (6), *Asheron's Call* (3), *EverQuest* (2), *Eve Online* (2), *Ultima Online* (2), *Guildwars* (2), *Planetside* (2), *Final Fantasy* (2), *Runescape* (1) and *Lineage* (1) has also been played by respondents. Notably, many players of the “old worlds (launched before 2005) have played several worlds. Many *World of Warcraft* (henceforth WoW) players have only played WoW. The death experience stories related take place primarily in WoW (28), *City of Heroes* (4), *Linage II* (3), *Star Wars Galaxies* (2), *Asheron's Call* (1), *Dark Age of Camelot* (1), *EverQuest* (1) and *Final Fantasy 11* (1). There is thus a substantial number of responses and stories which relates to WoW and it is possible that the fact that this is the world with which most players are familiar might have influenced some of the general answers. However, due to the marked difference in number of subscribers to WoW and to the other worlds, statistically it is to be expected that WoW would be the world the majority of players refer to. However, in total, the players represent experiences from almost all current popular MMOGs and several of the participating respondents appear to be hard-core gamers that have brought a broad perspective on the experience of death to the survey.

When referred to in this article, submissions are listed by the number (S1, S2, etc), they are given by the survey system, followed by gender mark and age group, in order to maintain the anonymity of the informants.

4 Why Death Matters

Many players engage themselves in MMOG game-worlds for a long time, and they invest many hours in the development and advancement of their avatars. Therefore, recurring events such as the “death” of the avatars are, as argued, a fruitful starting point for a closer study of one of the elements that clearly informs the overall world experience. It is however, important to understand that when avatar death in gameworlds is discussed, it is obviously not a matter of death in the literal sense. There are obviously significant differences between the experience of dying in the offline physical world, and the experience of dying in an online simulated world, which needs to be made clear.

The most important difference is, that in the offline or “real” world, death is the ultimate end to our actions and corporeal existence that cannot be repeated. In online worlds, characters often die repeatedly, but the physical body of the player is never affected. Thus, in online worlds dying is an activity similar to a number of other repeatable activities that occur as part of the *everyday life* in the gameworld.

Offline, as humans, we are careful with what we do with our bodies, because once our bodily life terminates, it will never return. Death “in the real world” thus because of its irrevocable finality is an experience, which is in the literature and writing on death (notably [KR69]) often connected with grief, crisis, anger and the experience of “coping”. “Dying” however, in an online world, is a risk-free endeavour, and therefore subject to various forms of player testing. The experience and exploration of death and “dying” in gameworlds can therefore, as this article indicates, be associated with a completely different repertoire of emotions: it can be playful and explorative, repetitive, glorious or amusing, or considered merely an unfortunate nuisance which obstructs the flow of playing the world as a game.

Another significant difference is that whereas death and the experience of dying have become an highly individualised and private event in the Western World (see for instance [Ari74, Kea89, Mel93]), death in online worlds as the article will demonstrate often appear to be and remains a highly social experience.

Finally, however, if one regards death not as a factual event, but as a phenomena which serves both symbolic and cultural functions, the difference between the function of death in offline and online communities might not be as large as one might expect. An

online world is also a particular cultural and social system and just as rituals and cultures of death in the offline world enforces specific social behaviours, the way death is staged and implemented in a given world will inform the players experience of its social culture. This hypothesis is inspired by death sociologist Michael C. Kearl, who in his introduction to his seminal book on death cultures *Endings a Sociology of Death and Dying* points to the

“power of death to either galvanize or corrode social systems and to either stimulate or neutralize the social participation of their members” ([Kea89]: p. 9),

Kearl in his work emphasises how discourses on and practices of death can be a defining characteristic of a culture and its social system. This is exemplified by for instance the huge cultural differences in public displays of corpses and of grieving practices. If Kearl's thesis, that in a given culture the function of death is also to help form social systems, is applicable on online worlds, analysing the staging of “death is indeed not just a question of understanding game mechanics, but it can teach us how death can function a pivotal element in the social and visual experience design of the worlds.

4.1 The function of gameworld death

Whereas “permadeath”, the permanent destruction of an avatar the first time it dies, is certainly an option and a possibility also in gameworlds, popular MMOGs rarely use it and “death” is, in fact, in most worlds simply a temporary punishment of ones avatar, which results in the removal from the battlefield (fighting ground) on which the character most likely dies. This happens at the point in time when the character runs out of “health points” (the quantitative measurement of life force). “Death”, therefore, as previously mentioned, happens to many players most of the time and is a punishment for not watching out for their avatars or playing imprudently. Thus, the infliction of death can be seen as way to teach players to simply play the “game”(world) better. In addition to the geographical displacement in case of a “death”, “dying” is often punished by, for instance, inflicting damage on the avatars equipment, or by withdrawing a number of the avatars so-called “experience points”. The intended frustration of dying is furthered by the players experience of wasted time in general, as the player

in many worlds has to spend valuable time reclaiming the body of the dead character in order to continue playing. From these punishment strategies the concept of “death penalty” has arisen, a hot topic in many of the debates about the gameworlds, which players engage in, both inside and outside the world. Thus, if one takes a closer look at the many discussions about death experiences taking place, it is clear that “death”, is not always a trivial matter, despite its frequent occurrence. Studying the various “texts” on death and the data from the death-stories survey, it appears that players definitely do not agree on whether death is trivial or not. When survey respondents have been asked about their opinion on the function of death, most of them explicitly or implicitly point out that it is a question of when and where one dies whether it is considered trivial or not. It seems, that the experience of death as being either trivial or non-trivial depend on the context, in which a particular death takes place, such as for instance group play (death as part of a joint battle) versus solo play (death as, for instance, the result of explorative mistakes). As one player notes:

“Generally I believe it [death] bothers players a lot more than they let on.” [S15, F, 46-50]

5 Levels of Death

The concept of “death” holds many meanings in online worlds and occur on many levels. To conduct an in-depth study of death in online worlds, it is therefore necessary to outline the difference between these forms “Death” as a noun can in fact connote several form of death experiences:

- Avatar death as in-game mechanics (death as concrete event in-world)
- Avatar death as narrativised event in the life of an avatar (death as *interpreted* event)
- Death as an symbolic event visualised in a variety of forms (death as culture)
- The Death of a player (event out-of-world)

This article deals with the three first forms of death. Though the death of players have been reported to have resulted in also in-game events (such as wakes), they are fortunately rare occurrences, the impact of which mainly takes place offline. The type of death

dealt with here is death, as it is experienced *within* the online world, albeit on different *levels of experience*: as concrete immediate experience, that is death in battle or by natural causes (such as drowning or falling from a cliff); death as the subject of players “post-facto” storytelling about interaction with the world and with other characters and players; and finally death as a form of visual and cultural symbolism which is to be *interpreted by* and make *an indirect impression* on players¹.

6 Designers and Players on Death

Before death as concrete event is implemented as part of a world system and game mechanics, designers have to make some important decisions regarding both the short-term and long-term effects of death. They face the challenge of providing a form of death penalty which on one hand has to be severe enough that it results in a certain excitement, forcing players take it seriously and to play strategically to avoid it. On the other hand, they must not make it so harsh that players are scared away from the game at an early point in the game. As Rollings and Adams point out in their popular book on game design, “death” is essentially a game balance problem:

“As with other games, avatar death must be accompanied by a disincentive of some kind, or players wont care if they die. The trick is to find a disincentive that is appropriately proportional to the likelihood of their dying to put it in simpler terms, its a balance problem.” ([RA03]: p. 525)

That designers are not always sure how players will respond to the concrete death penalty implemented to obtain this balance can be deducted from the statements in the official online FAQs of the gameworlds. They can quite often be read as implicit justifications of the choices made by the designers and producers regarding the severity (or lack of it) of the death penalty, such as is the case with *Dark Age of Camelot* FAQ:

“There is simply no excitement in adventuring through a world where loss of life is meaningless - a game with no or little penalty for death will soon

¹Ralph Koster coins the term “post-facto” storytelling in an interview on players narrative experiences of online worlds in [10]

be fully explored, and become boring.”
[<http://www.darkageofcamelot.com/faq>]

Likewise, in some of the books dealing with online world design, designers will spend a few or several paragraphs arguing for the need of a death penalty in some form. In *Designing Virtual Worlds*, Richard Bartle, in a discussion of the death penalty, basically argues that ultimately players do not know what will provide a good game experience for them. From the designers perspective, death is definitely part of the “good” game experience:

“some of the more primitive and tedious aspects of the real world that players dont want to experience act, unfortunately, to set up some of the more advanced and enjoyable aspects that they do want to experience.”
([Bar03], pp.386)

Seen from the other side of the fence, players might grudgingly accept death, but are certainly not always happy about it: In a discussion of the death penalty in *World of Warcraft*, the player ChrisyTina expresses her frustration at what she sees as an unnecessary impediment of her gaming experience:

“While I have respect for the risk vs reward concept in a game like this, I also want for there to be as little dissatisfaction from my gaming experience as possible. The more and more I play MMOs, the more and more I don’t understand why I *need* to suffer such penalties and restrictions where the result is nothing but lost time and ultimately being frustrated. It is just a game after all.” [<http://wowvault.ign.com/View.php?view=Totw.Detail&id=22>]

It is most likely people like ChrisyTina, designers are afraid to scare away, though it should be noted, that her viewpoint is not representative of all players, as she clearly sees the world from the perspective of a *gamer*. In the death-stories survey, a player points out, that though death can sometimes be annoying, it is part of the game:

“Dieing [sic] is a natural part of almost every game and most people take it in stride [], I cannot think of any other suitable punishment [of unsuccessful play].” [S21, M, 16-20]

That gameworld designers do, in fact, pay a lot of attention to their players opinion on the death penalty, is revealed by a closer study of the historic development and adjustment of the death penalty in several online worlds which show, that over the time, the death penalty is normally made less harsh. This was the case in *Ultima Online* in which avatars in the beginning risked being looted of their items, if they did not get back to their corpse quickly enough [cf. personal correspondence with player]. Item stealing was later made almost impossible. When *Dark Age of Camelot* launched, it was still possible to loose so many experience points when dying, that players lost a level [cf. personal correspondence with player]. This was however quickly changed, and to the author’s, none of the commercially successful MMOGs today has a death penalty so harsh that players can loose a level if they die. Instead, one can observe an increasing tendency to apply what could be coined “the newbie fix”, the introduction of a difference in punishment of death, depending on the level the player has. In many worlds, until levels 6-10, players will hardly experience any penalty when they die, but after this point, “dying” becomes a more serious matter. For instance, in *EverQuest*, even if at the outset all levels were equal, the designers quite soon made it so, that until level 10, the player would not have to retrieve its corpse upon dying. In an 2004 article in *New York Times*, the author notes that “makers of games like *EverQuest*, *Star Wars Galaxies* and the coming *Middle-Earth Online* [] have chosen softer death penalties to avoid scaring off less experienced players” [Gla04], so “newbie friendliness” also in terms of the severity of the death penalty seems to be increasing as competition between worlds increase. In this context, it should be noted that the part of the popularity of *World of Warcraft* is, by some, contributed to the very “soft” death penalty, the designers have chosen to implement (there is for instance no experience point loss at all when an avatar dies in this world). Finally, some of the player responses to the deathstories survey as well as forum player discussions of the newer worlds, seem to indicate that dying can, in worlds with a soft death penalty, also come to function as a very efficient solo-game strategy. Dying can therefore simply become an “exploit” used to ones advantage, such as when one dies consciously to get quicker back to a city in *Star Wars Galaxies*. Used this way, death is suddenly no longer a penalty or a cause for excitement, but a helping hand and a strategic game choice. Could and should designers have

foreseen that?

7 The Staging of Death

Once designers have decided on the repercussions of death, they must decide how to “stage” the actual experience of death. This authors firsthand studies of the select worlds show, that depending on the genre of the world death seems to be implemented in very similar ways. The proto-typical death experience will therefore play out as follows: When a player fights a mob (a computer-controlled monster) or another player, and their health points reach 0, they will “die”, often letting out a little shriek to denote the actual act of dying. In general, it appears that death (apart from that of *Eve Online*) is designed as a very corporeal experience, since as a rule an avatar’s death always includes this scene in which the body “drops dead”, much in the way people are used to see “death” for instance on film. This indicates that designers are perhaps also drawing on cultural conventions from the real world in the depiction of death. Grounding the staging of death in a corporeal experience may help inform the emotional identification with an imagined “real” death experience. This can be perhaps also be surmised from the fact that many players have confessed to me that the emotional impact of a death experience is much stronger, when they experience a natural (recognisable?) form of death, such as drowning or falling from a height.

Once dead, the body of the avatar will shortly be displaced on screen lying lifeless on the ground, before the avatar is “displaced” (sometimes this requires an affirmative click by the player) and moved to a nearby safe area (typically a city, a graveyard near the city, or a shrine). Back in the safe area, players can start playing again (in worlds of the science-fiction genre), or (in worlds of the medieval fantasy genre) they have to run back to retrieve their corpse by standing close to it and clicking on it, which in some cases also includes retrieving their equipment (in *Anarchy Online*, the player do not have to find her corpse, but she does however have to go to a reclaim terminal). In some of the science-fiction worlds, avatars may respawn in a building, such as a “cloning facility” (*Star Wars Galaxies*) or hospital (*City of Heroes*) and have to make their way out of the building. *Eve Online* is exceptional in this context, because the player does not have a corporeal avatar, but only a spaceship and a person icon. “Death” in this world therefore means that the escape pod from



Figure 1: An early death in *Star Wars Galaxies* which shows the staged dead body of the avatar in close-up. The avatar will shortly be transported to a clone facility.

one’s spaceship explodes and the player has to start reequipping their spaceship in their home-dock.

The return to life will typically result in either item damage or experience point loss, or a temporary “resurrection sickness”. In *World of Warcraft*, the player suffers no repercussions if she runs back to her corpse and reclaim it, but if she chooses to resurrect at the respawn point through the aid of a spirit healer, the avatar will suffer both resurrection sickness and item damage. It should be noted, that in those worlds where player versus player combat is possible, the death penalty dealt when the player is killed by another player is often less severe than the general death penalty. This is likely the result of the wish not to scare players off from going into combat with each other.

7.1 Marking death

It is thought-provoking to observe, that at least in fantasy worlds, the fact that “a death” has taken place is made visible, not only to the player herself (who will see her dead body once approaching it again), but also to other players. In *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest*, the corpses of other players avatars are visible to the player, and in *Dark Age of Camelot*, from level 6 and upwards, the site of an avatars death will be marked by a gravestone, visible to everyone, until the avatar has reclaimed her “life” at the stone. In *World of Warcraft*, corpses of avatars will initially be visible as normal bodies, but they will quickly decompose into skeletons and bones. These corpses will, in their various



Figure 2: Graveyards or gravestones are an integral part of the geography of several fantasy worlds. In *World of Warcraft* the avatar respawns in a graveyard, often designed with a gothic flavour. These graveyards and gravestones are visible and visitable also when avatars are alive.

stages of decomposition, constantly remind a player, that other players also die and will die, it is therefore an integral part of the experience of these worlds, that the player is constantly reminded of the fact that death is possible and happens to everybody. The visibility of corpses can partly be contributed to the game mechanics (healer characters need to see a corpse of a fellow player if they are supposed to resurrect it). However, any player who has made her way through a world strewn with corpses would agree that these corpses, which often belong to players one has no relation to, also serve the purpose of conveying the concept and existence of “mortality”, as a means to perhaps consistently remind players of the dangers, they might encounter. One might even come across dead NPCs, such as the corpses hanging from the gallows at Dalaran in *World of Warcraft*. They have no function from a game perspective, but help enforce the existence of “death” as part of the narrative atmosphere of the world.

7.2 Gameworld “death” as liminal experience?

The immediate effect of avatar death, though the experience may only last for a very brief period of time, might be likened to what Arnold Van Gennep, in his famous study of the “rites of passage” of different cultures, termed “the liminal phase”. The rite of passage

denotes a period of transition from one phase of life (or death) to another, during which

“Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magically-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds.” ([Gen69]:p.18)

That avatars, however temporary, are forced to spend a little time in-between worlds (that of the real dead and of the real living) might be the *real* death experience. During this temporary removal from the world of “the game”, the players cannot safely interact with anything or anybody in the world, for instance when they are on a corpse run during which their body and armour are substantially weakened; or during a health point or skill loss recovery phase; or in “ghost mode” (in *World of Warcraft* and in *Ultima Online* avatars become ghosts until they have retrieved their own corpse), all states when they cannot effect the world at all. From a game design perspective, this part of the death experience is not strictly necessary, but by shortly placing avatars “outside” the game itself with no possibility for powerful action within the world, players are reminded that they should be wary of death. Death matters and should matter, and if there is such a thing as symbolic death in the online worlds, that form of death is rather to be found in this temporarily experience of a liminal existence, than in the experience of “death” itself.

8 Two perspectives on death

8.1 Death as part of “the grind”

I’m writing because I am certain that this is a typical ‘death experience’ in *World of Warcraft* - 99.999% of deaths are utterly unremarkable. This death story is therefore typical. The other death stories you receive will most likely be atypical. Do not attempt to generalize from these ‘death stories’ to create any sort of academic paper. They’re edge-case nonsense that doesn’t reflect the simple fact that there’s no story here - for the typical player, it’s just a game and character death is a non-event. [S38 ,M, 26-30]

As player of an online world, one quickly gets used to death, especially in the early stages of life in the

world, during which it is natural to explore the limits of the avatar's strength and abilities - to the point where "death" becomes, as the player above claims, a "non-event", as natural almost as breathing:

"Death in DaoC [Dark Age of Camelot], like in any other MMORPG, occurs often. For some it isn't as often, but for others, it can occur more often than times you breathe while alive." [player Kilja.bL, at <http://www.wclegacy.com/section-entry.php?contentid=49>]

Death is definitely part of the daily grind of playing the world, and player lingo referring to the various aspects of the death experience help distinguish the experienced player from the newbie. As a newcomer to online worlds, it is impossible to guess what are the meaning of lingo such as the "corpse run" or "xp debt" (the setback in experience points one might experience as an effect of dying). An experienced player will use these terms as a way to signal that she is "in the know" and counts herself as part of the gameworld community.

A guild movie such as "Has anybody here seen my corpse" [2003, http://www.guildmirage.com/has_anybody.htm] about the excruciating corpse runs in *EverQuest* is a clear-cut example of this perspective, making fun of all the ordeals, *EverQuest* players have to go through on a regular basis to find their corpses, and making widely use of in-game references and lingo.

8.2 Death as "the making of a hero"

So there it is. Death. Exciting, thrilling, funny, and heroic. [S4, M, 31-35]

Death in online worlds is however, not only a trivial affair. As the avatar gains levels, and corpse runs and death penalties literally start to "cost" the player more wasted time, next to being the cause of intense frustration, dying can provide the player with an opportunity to make her avatar a "hero", at least on a short-term basis. Death can be "glorious", a way to show the dedication to the group (typically a guild or clan) to which the avatar belongs, or to demonstrate that the player is a courageous and bold player. In his book on *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, sociologist Orrin E. Klapp enumerated five different types of heroes: the winners, the splendid performers, the

heroes of social acceptability, the independent spirits and the group servants [6]. Even though this typology is several decades old, it seems applicable on virtual heroes as well. Gameworld heroes appear to often fall into either the first or last categories. They can either be cast as "winners" who, through a combination of strength and skills are able to slay dangerous mobs, or as "group servants" who are willing to offer their lives in order to save the group of which they are part. A player-made movie such as *My Life For the Horde* [2005, <http://www.machinima.com/films.php?id=1614>] about a *World of Warcraft* horde character who dies after slaying a so-called boss monster which threatens the horde world, is a story both typing the avatar in question as a hero who is both an independent spirit (setting out to kill the monster in only the company of a faithful friend) and a hero willing to give his life to serve the group, in this case "his people".²

It seems clear that the combination of the players codependence in big raids or battles (where dozens of players need to fight together to slay elite monsters or characters of another realm or faction) and the "pre-mass destruction war" culture of the online worlds seem conducive to the creation of heroes. In gameworlds it is possible to still appear as the heroes of the "old-fashioned" wars of olden, golden times when valourous man-to-man combat was still an essential part of the war experience. Some players attitude to death in fight intriguingly resonate some of the ideals of glorious death that could, for instance, be found in the early writings about World War I. In an illuminating article on the conception of war and death in modern Britain, D. Cannadine, in order to capture the early war spirit of death, quotes a heroes last words from a contemporary novel:

"To die young, clean, ardent; to die swiftly, in perfect health; to die saving others from death..." [Vachell in 3: p. 220]

Although the language is different, the heroic notions expressed here are similar to that of the lore of the gameworlds: being prepared to die and doing it willingly for ones group is what can make a hero of the dedicated player. This belief in the social importance of this sacrificial attitude is also predominant in this story, which one of the survey respondents tells about a smaller raid in *Dark Ages of Camelot*:

²A boss monster is particularly difficult to slay and often appears at the end of a quest or level

.Oh, by the way, I was the ONLY one dying, because I was highest level, and drew an ex-orberant amount of aggro to me. Kinda saya it all about my death stories. As long as we reach our goal I dont care if Im killed. Or how many times Im killed. If we dont reach our objective, when everyone was clearly set up to succeed, well then that is my MOST annoying death. Everytime. [S2, M, 26- 30].

9 Conclusion: What “Death” Can Teach Us about Player Experience

“Be prepared to die. YES DIE! Often times, as much as half a raid can be killed when attempting a difficult monster. This is part of the process of obtaining things for everyone. One day, those same people will die against some mob to help you.” [Thousand Suns Raid Bible for EverQuest, <http://www.naturesong.com/Tsuns/bible.html>]

In his discussion of the function of social types, Klapp states that the general function of the hero is “to stimulate people to do better” [9: p. ix], pointing to the fact that “social typing” (casting other people or oneself in the role of hero, fool or villain) is needed.

“..in a mobile society where status is insecure, identities are uncertain, and people do not know each other well ..[since social typing] provides us with a convenient precis of the one with whom we wish to deal” ([Kla62]: p.4)

Klapp wrote this text long before online worlds became part of our popular imagination, but his description of what he saw as then state of American culture; seem oddly fitting for online worlds which are very much mobile societies with a constant flux of new and unknown players. Death and the way avatars deal with death help form the social system and the social norms of the online worlds, and the “heroic” approach to death as it is indirectly and directly enforced by player culture and player stories may serve as a guide to new players, teaching them how to “do better” both as social players and gamers. Thus, the stories and lingo dealing with death, as respectively part of the everyday grind of life in the world, and respectively part of

the potential glorious adventures of ones avatar, help create the social player and teaches her how to perform her avatar successfully in interaction with other players. At the same time, the immediate consequence of death informs the game experience of the individual player, and one will typically learn during the course of ones online game experiences, that mastering when and how to die will make one a better gamer. From a general perspective, and seen over time, both the staging and markers of death, and as the death penalties help remind the players of the gameworld, that despite its transient and repetitive nature, death in a social world can still be a serious matter. Players will learn that how they deal with, and embrace “death”, will help define what and who their avatars will become.

10 Lessons for the future

This brief overview of some of the many aspects of the avatar death experience in online worlds demonstrate that design choices regarding the implementation and presence of for instance death not only informs the stories that are going to be told about life the world “post-facto” the experienced events, but also help define the emerging social system and a player’s potential roles in it. Whether death is experienced as “heroic” and interesting or as a trivial non-event seem to be very much dependant on context, at least this is so far also confirmed by many of the responses to the survey. Thus a majority of the stories submitted focus on various form of death in a social context.

The experience of the worldness of a particular online world thus seem closely related to the interplay between avatars, but is also bound to the way death is stated and made manifest in for instance the visual design of the world.

The accumulated experience of worldness does therefore both depend on design choices made long before the avatar entered the world, but are also shaped by the emerging social contexts in which the player chooses to enter - or not enter. The apparently unnecessary likeness in the staging and implementation of death across worlds indicate that designers prefer to follow genre conventions, rather than break the rules and innovate or challenge the death experience. This is most likely because they want to avoid giving the players an experience that will scare them away or make them not “understand” the world. Perhaps designers in the future should not be so afraid of different

death(s) when they are designing persistent entertainment worlds. So far the survey presented in this article indicate that players are willing to think about death differently, if they are given a chance. If design experiments were possible, it would be fruitful to look even more closely at how the presence and staging of death, of making the context and consequence of death an occasional nontrivial experience, can encourage heroic, social and yet individualising behaviour. There is still much to explore if the research community wants to understand what, at the end of the day, lends narrativity and excitement to the life - and deaths - of on-line world avatars, and what precisely is the best way to design for the kind of engaging and unforgettable experiences, all designers would want their players to have.

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