

Death Effects

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Warning: this video contains flashing images, most notably at 9:11, 10:04, and 10:49.

Abstract

From slaying enemies to the trial and error of navigating fatal landscapes, video games ask us to confront death more than any other medium. And with every death, players endure “death effects.” Death effects encompass the aesthetics of a character’s death (including visual and sound effects) and the affect of experiencing death (how, for instance, death is crafted to translate viscerally to players). Death effects are important because they not only articulate aesthetics with mechanics but also reveal the values and cultural formations at play in a game’s treatment of failure, mortality, and rebirth. Despite their critical significance to ludology and narratology, death effects are mostly overlooked in Game Studies. In fact, this video may be the first essay to engage with them at length. In it, I explore death effects across four platforming games: Maddy Makes Games’ *Celeste*, Team Cherry’s *Hollow Knight*, and Moon Studios’ *Ori and the Blind Forest* and *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*. Each game prompts distinct affects that shape a player’s repeated experience of death. By analyzing these games, I establish death effects as a framework for critical analysis, raising questions about where we might go from here.

Transcript

Note: this transcript was written by the author, and it was not copy-edited by *The Digital Review* or the Praxis Studio for Comparative Media Studies.

From slaying enemies to the trial and error of navigating fatal landscapes, videogames ask us to confront death more than any other medium. These deaths can be devastating, funny, or deeply infuriating in a way words cannot express. And although death is a part of almost every video game genre, death functions as an integral mechanic in platformers. Platformers rarely have another way to constitute failure other than death, with the player-character's loss of life serving a didactic purpose for players to hone their skills. And if you've ever played a platformer, or watched someone play a platformer, you know that players watch their character die over, and over, and over, all in the pursuit of progress. But, what happens when we watch death again and again? Players have long accepted death as an inevitable part of gameplay, yet scholars have long neglected the design of what I call "death effects."

Death effects encompass the aesthetics of a character's death, including the accompanying visual and sound effects, and the affect of experiencing death. "Affect," as defined by Steven Shaviri, "is a visceral experience that's not consciously recognized"¹, such as the visceral experience of hairs raising on the back of one's neck, or a burst of laughter. "Humans," Anna Gibbs says, "react physiologically to images faster than we can cognitively process and make sense of them"². Affect, in these terms, precedes, exceeds, or escapes verbal communication, and serves, in this context, to describe the feelings that aren't cognitively recognized during a character's death in video games.

Unlike other mediums that expose audiences to the idea of death, "games add," in Karin Wenz's words, "the observation of one's own death"³, which makes videogame deaths that much more personal to the player's experience. And yet, given the sheer frequency of death in

¹ Steven Shaviri, "Affect vs. Emotion" (The CineFiles, 2016).

² Anna Gibbs, "Affect Theory and Audience." (The Handbook of Media Audiences, 2011), 3.

³ Karin Wenz, "Death" (The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies, 2023), 389-90.

platformers, death is easily overlooked by players and normalized by the genre. Death effects are important because they not only articulate aesthetics with mechanics but also reveal the values and cultural formations at play in a game's treatment of failure, mortality, and rebirth.

In this video essay, I explore death effects over four different platforming games: Maddy Makes Games Inc's *Celeste*, Team Cherry's *Hollow Knight*, and Moon Studios' *Ori and the Blind Forest* and *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*. Each of these games prompts distinct and different affects that shape the player's experience of death. As players, we have the unique position of having 'culpability' within a story, and so these depictions of death become much more personal. Death and grief are such visceral, real-lived experiences, and yet can become moments to brush-off in video games – a complex contradiction.

The goal of this video essay is to establish death effects as a method for critical analysis, and prompt where we might go from here.

So, let's start with *Celeste*. Madeline, the player character, attempts to scale a mountain while struggling with mental illness. One might think that a protagonist's death would evoke a strong reaction from a player, but *Celeste*'s death effects tell a different story.

Madeline's death effects have no corporeal qualities. They are very videogame-y; the game's art style is pixelated, and the death effect follows this same style. When Madeline dies, there is no blood, gore, or visual indication of injury. Instead, she transforms into a white floating circle surrounded by other red, pink, and blue blinking circles. These bright colours create a lighthearted tone and distract from any negative indicators that Madeline has died. This animation continues until she reappears at the beginning of the level, which makes death to respawn and back again feel like a continuous system rather than distinct states of dead and alive. Moreover, Madeline has no hearts or health points, or HP. The lack of visual indicators

that acknowledge her mortality produces an aura that she can't lose her life, because there is no symbolic representation of her "lives." The only visual indicator of danger or harm is terrain that is safe or unsafe. Each type of terrain is visually distinct, making the correct path to traverse easily identifiable. Smooth is safe. Spike is bad. These visual guidelines for success produce security with every attempt, because players understand the goal and the tools to navigate toward it. This means every death feels like progress rather than "permadeath" or the loss of a player character. When Madeline respawns, the sound effect resembles a vacuum or teleportation device, as if she hasn't died but was merely transported. The boom before she respawns is the only 'negative' sound of death. However, no sound effect is tied to Madeline herself; the sound of death is non-diegetic or external to her. It's a sound intended for the player.

So, what does this all mean? For one, *Celeste*'s death effects create an affect disassociated from the bodily realism of death. An affect of player frustration emerges rather than an affect of terror, grief, or mourning. The quick transition sequence reinforces the notion that Madeline did not experience a death. Instead, death "cuts" to the beginning of the scene. Moreover, the duration of the death effect is only 2.17 seconds, making it a fairly seamless event to witness over and over. So, dying feels less like failure, and more like retrying. *Celeste* doesn't want players to ever feel like the protagonist has died; rather, the death effect wants players to feel like climbing to the summit—an allegory for mental health struggles and Madeline reconciling her trans identity—is difficult, but struggle does not indicate an end.

In contrast to *Celeste*, consider Team Cherry's *Hollow Knight*. A small but mighty insect, set to save the infected lands of Hallownest, will likely meet death many times along the way. And does.

The initial impact of the death blow sounds like bones breaking. This audio makes the Knight's death feel palpable. The sound effect afterwards resembles a wave of wind, which swallows the soundscape of the game. It's as if death takes over everything. Death is overwhelming, just as the sound effect is. This point is proven further when—only after the Knight loses their head, and death is complete—can the ambient sounds be heard again. Meanwhile, the visual effects of Hollow Knight's death expand the length and width of the entire screen. Death is big. The scene pauses when the initial death blow hits, highlighting the exact moment of death and making it seem like death supersedes any other action. Leaves and a black substance shoot out of the Knight like projectiles until their head pops off. The Knight's death looks visceral on the screen and feels visceral to players. Everything about it is dramatic. It becomes the focal point of the player's experience. It's also long, at 4.07 seconds, and players must witness it in its entirety—exploding, decapitation, and the manifestation of the Knight's apparition—every time they die. The apparition that appears following the Knight's death also becomes a physical threat in the world after respawn. This all makes death feel like a punishment in *Hollow Knight*.

The apparition in particular makes every death an enemy and a lingering reminder of failure. As Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic explain, “the harsher punishment of death in video games draws the player's attention to the avatar's vulnerability”⁴. This punishment means that an affect of fear surrounds the Knight even when they're healthy, and players, with every jump and enemy encounter, become acutely aware of death and try to avoid it at all costs. There isn't a sense of trial and error, as there is in *Celeste*. For Hollow Knight, death is devastating.

⁴ Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic, “Saved Games and Respawn Timers: The Dilemma of Representing Death in Video Games” (University of Bucharest Review: Literary and Cultural Studies Series, vol. 2, 2018), 32.

Now, take Moon Studios' *Ori and the Blind Forest* and *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*. Ori, the player-character, is a young being set forth to save the life of the forest and those they care about along with it.

As Ori dies, a burst of red light flashes across the screen, then quickly recedes into a small ball of white light that dissipates into sparkles. This visual makes Ori's deaths feel ethereal, or even magical, even though players recognize that Ori is capable of being physically harmed. The explosion of red and Ori's yelp function mechanically to cue to players that Ori died and connotatively to communicate a negative affect surrounding Ori's death. However, what's left of Ori after death is purely light. Even without any external connotations, the game conditions players to associate this light with regeneration, skill advancement, and revival. All these associations, built from significant game moments that feature light, make Ori's death subconsciously feel positive. Furthermore, Ori's death effect is only 1.06 seconds. Death is quick and quickly recovered from. Especially in *Blind Forest*, Ori has a lot of agency over their death. Given they have the resources, players can create a respawn point almost anywhere in Nibel. Ori's death is often not felt as a punishment because players have control over their respawn, and therefore the severity of the repercussions that follow death. Just as The Knight's vulnerability arises from death's harsh punishments, Ori's feeling of invincibility comes from the lack of; Ori feels in control of death because they have agency over death's consequences. And again, visually, the death effect is beautiful, with an explosion of colours and twinkling lights. It's weird, really, because I don't want to say that Ori's death effect feels good; but, as an affect, it doesn't feel bad. Ori's death effect is not meant to shine a spotlight on Ori's mortality, rather, it's meant to acknowledge player failure while recognizing Ori's ability to persist past death. Furthermore, Ori never loses their final health cell when they die. The cell fades but remains a

darker shade than the health cells that were actually lost. Ori truly never loses all their lives; even in death they remain at one health.

Ori's death effect in *Will of the Wisps* is the shortest death effect at just 1.05 seconds. The game wants players to spend as little time as possible feeling Ori's death. Of all the death effects I've addressed, this one also feels the softest. When Ori dies, the white light doesn't even reach the edges of the screen. Death feels contained to that moment, and that location. Similar to *Blind Forest*, once Ori dies all that's left is light. The associations with this light accumulate over two games; players see a beauty and magic in this light. Similar to *Blind Forest*, Ori's death effect in *Will of the Wisps* contains no recognition of Ori as a corporeal being. Again, this makes Ori's death's feel ethereal, or even magical, even though players recognize that Ori is a physical being. Ori's yelp sounds cute yet distressed, as if they're aware of the pain causing them death. However, the remaining sounds of the death effect resemble an exhale, making Ori's death feel like a sigh. This audio carries connotations of relief and implies that players shouldn't stress over Ori's death: that dying is okay, and not to carry frustrations into the respawn. The sound design makes Ori's death feel subdued. And without any sound, it's very difficult to tell whether Ori has died at all. They could have just as easily teleported or cast a spell.

So where can we take these analyses next?

Death effects, as a method, has the capability to encompass more. There's room to expand the definition of death effects with controller haptics. And although this wouldn't be applicable to every player experience, haptics are a fascinating element of a character's death because it's what the game physically wants you to feel when the player-character experiences death. And in tandem with death: respawn. I touch on it in *Celeste* because the death effect to respawn is one continuous animation, and I touch on it a little bit in *Ori*, but by analysing not

only death, but the conditions of respawn, can tell us even more about what death and life means within games. Respawn can reveal the consequences of death, and also act as a foil to the affect of a character's death.

But perhaps the most glaring expansion of death effects, is that death is not always isolated to the player-character. All in-game deaths, or lack there-of, speak to a larger necropolitical system within each game. Necropolitics, in this context, positions the game as a state power, and refers to how the game “[dictates] who will live, who will die, and under what conditions”.⁵

As Bo Ruberg explains, “[Games function] like a state power, with [their] own systematized conditions for determining which players live, which players die, when and why”.⁶ How games structure death for players, player-characters, and non-playable characters is situated in a larger necropolitical system embedded within the game. And “those structures,” of who dies when, “affect the experience of gameplay, but they also communicate social meaning that extends beyond the game”.⁷ And these necropolitical systems, defined by death effects, are often unapparent to players during playthroughs.

These games create worlds where death is not death. Instead, a persistence of life, and of being. Where death is a sacrifice, each one significant and enduring. Where there is agency and revival within death, but only for some. There is so much more for death effects to tell us about the games we play, and in turn, about the world we live in.

⁵ Bo Ruberg, “Permalife: Video games and the Queerness of Living” (Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017), 161.

⁶ Bo Ruberg, “Permalife: Video games and the Queerness of Living”, 162.

⁷ Bo Ruberg, “Permalife: Video games and the Queerness of Living”, 162.

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Music

Delta City - Karl Casey @ White Bat Audio

Impala - Karl Casey @ White Bat Audio

Iridium - Karl Casey @ White Bat Audio

Lexicon - Karl Casey @ White Bat Audio

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