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Good Frustrations: The Paradoxical Pleasure of Fearing Death in *DayZ*

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ABSTRACT

The design of modern digital games has become increasingly oriented towards providing players with positive experiences such as fun and flow, and reducing negative experiences such as frustration and anger. *DayZ* is one notable exception, where negative experiences are central to its design. When a player is killed in *DayZ*, they lose their character with all its advancement, often equivalent to weeks of play, which can be an enormously frustrating and demoralising experience. However, the majority of its players view this as a positive and attractive feature, and one of the keys to the game's appeal. In this paper, we draw on 1,704 responses to a player motivations survey to unpack the complex player experience of permanent character death and demonstrate how this moment of negative affect contributes to the positive experience of *DayZ* more broadly.

Author Keywords

Affect; death; character death; permadeath; *DayZ*.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - Games.

INTRODUCTION

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end. – David Hume, “Of Tragedy” (1758, p.129)

Avatar death may be almost ubiquitous in digital games (Carter et al., 2013), but the spectre of losing real progress due to death has been a declining feature in games over the past two decades. Since the end of the arcade era, the broad trend in game design has been towards casualisation, an ethos that seeks to make games more accessible by removing perceived barriers, penalties and frustrations for players (Juul, 2013). Paralleling this trend, player experience research has typically framed the

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goal of game design (excluding the category of “serious games”) as the creation of positively valenced emotions (Mekler et al., 2014). This focus on positive affect at the expense of the possibilities for negative affect has been considered overly reductive by some scholars, and increasing recent research has examined “positive negative experiences” in games (e.g. Montola, 2014; Brown, 2015; Björk, 2015; Carter, 2015).

The multiplayer first-person shooter *DayZ* is a notable example that goes against the trend towards casualisation, instead configuring death as a high-consequence, negative experience. In this post-apocalypse zombie survival game, characters begin with only a few rudimentary items, having to scavenge weapons, food, and water to survive (see Carter, 2015, for a rich description of this experience). Unlike the vast majority of games where death is a minor setback, *DayZ* features *permadeath*, defined as “the permanent loss of a character with no option to respawn or retrieve the character in any way.” (Copic et al., 2013, p. 1)

In this paper, we discuss the seemingly paradoxical attraction of this harsh configuration of death, where the game places enormous emphasis on survival and the development of a character that can be killed at any moment, eliciting strong negative emotions such as frustration and fear. Based on 1,704 responses to a player motivations survey, we discuss how character-death is received positively by players, and a death is only considered negative when judged to be “meaningless”.

This paper provides substantive evidence of the complex relationship between positive and negative experiences in games, and the critical role of meaningfulness in players' engagement with digital games. In doing so, it challenges the common practice of distilling player experience to simple binary measures such as affect and valence.

RELATED WORK

To our knowledge, this is the first large-scale survey of players' attitudes towards and experiences of permanent character death. There is only a small body of prior academic research on the role of death in games, as noted by Copic et al. (2013) in their review of the literature.

The most substantive prior study of character death in games was conducted by Carter et al. (2013), and also focuses on *DayZ*. From an analysis of online communities and interviews with players, they conclude permadeath increased players' sense of personal investment in their character, invoked moral dilemmas for players due to the consequential nature of their decisions, and intensified social interactions between players in-

game. Carter et al. note a lack of prior academic work on the subject of in-game death, with the notable exceptions of Klastrop (2007, 2008) and Flynn-Jones (2013, 2015).

Writing about death in the online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, Lisbeth Klastrop (2007, 2008) notes that “in most game worlds, dying is an activity similar to a number of other repeatable activities that occur as part of the everyday life in the world [...] a risk-free endeavour” (2008, p. 144). Klastrop draws a distinction between the fact of avatar death in itself and the penalty the player pays for dying. She points out that the latter is what truly informs the experience, and cautions game designers to ensure character death is not so harsh that it discourages players. This has become an increasingly orthodox view in game design. Emily Flynn-Jones notes that in the vast majority of games avatar death is often “the most effective way of finishing the game” (2015, p. 50) through failure and repetition. In his review of Klastrop’s (2008) chapter, Bartle notes that “the word *death* is merely the label that has, for historical reasons, become attached to the condition of ‘mini-game over’ ... their version of ‘death’ has none of the anguish or gravitas that accompanies real-world death” (Bartle, 2010).

In a personal reflection of a permadeath playthrough of *Minecraft*, Brendan Keogh echoes the conclusion of Carter et al. (2013) that permadeath has a sustained effect on the player’s sense of personal investment and the weight of their decisions: “the true effect of perma-death is not simply in the character’s death, but in how it drastically alters the player’s lived experience of the character’s life” (2013, p. 2). In this sense, a feature that may in fact never come into play (Keogh retired from his *Minecraft* playthrough without his character dying) can nevertheless radically alter the tenor of the game.

METHOD

We deployed a survey replicating and updating Yee’s (2006) template to suit the affordances and player practices of *DayZ*. Our final questionnaire included 41 questions addressing the player’s enjoyment of or behaviour towards game elements and situations, each asked on a five-point Likert scale. A further 10 open-response questions were included that asked players to elaborate on favoured and disfavoured aspects of *DayZ*, and to describe player interactions they had experienced. We found respondents to be surprisingly generous in the detail of their responses.

The survey received 1,704 completions from 64 countries. Of these, 98.4% were male (the highest gender bias we are aware of in a games studies survey). The average age was 23.3 years ($SD=6.4$), with 28.8% of participants selecting “18” as their age; the lowest option available in the survey, which was intended and advertised for players over the age of 18 due to human-research ethics requirements. Less than 30% of the sample was over 25 years old.

For this paper, the first author conducted a thematic analysis of the open responses, which was then reviewed and updated in consultation with the second and third authors. To identify differences in player preferences with

regard to character death, each player’s responses were cross-referenced against their answer to the quantitative question: “When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?”

FINDINGS

Several themes were apparent in how players described their experiences with character death in *DayZ*. In summary, players talked about character death in two common and distinct ways. The first addressed the moment of dying and its immediate consequences. The second and more common theme addressed the constant awareness of the permanent consequences of dying, and its effect on gameplay. In simple terms, the former was considered negative while the latter was considered positive, but a closer analysis complicates this reading.

Players liked permadeath even if they did not enjoy it

The permanence of character death received overwhelming support from players (see Figure 1).

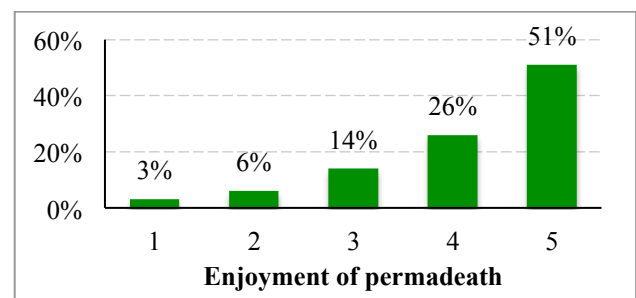


Figure 1: Likert responses to “When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?”

Interestingly, of the players who rated their enjoyment of permanence of character death at 1 out of 5 (“Not enjoyable at all”), most still described it as an essential and positive feature.

The consequence of death is what makes day-z what it is. It is what makes it exciting, the thought of having to get all of your gear again is what gets the heart pounding in a dangerous situation and makes the game tactical. (England, age 20, permadeath rating: 1/5)

Remarkably, some of the group that enjoyed permadeath the least nevertheless nominated it as their favourite feature of *DayZ*, reflecting a sense of its positive contribution to the overall game experience.

Character death caused frustration due to loss of loot

When referring to instances of character death, players consistently highlighted a feeling of *frustration*. This frustration was associated with the loss of equipment (“loot”) they had gathered, and the need to redo this work with a new character.

it's so frustrating to have to look for a Canteen, Backpack and Can Opener every single time. (Colombia, age 27, permadeath rating: 2/5)

Players were clear that death was something to be avoided strenuously, rather than something to accept as “just part of the game” and move on.

There is no worse feeling than spending 4 hours gather loot just to be killed. This makes me be VERY careful, and honestly i get really paranoid and jumpy when i don't want to die with good loot. (USA, age 19, permadeath rating: 5/5)

This frustration could be intense. For some respondents, it was enough to prompt them to stop playing *DayZ* temporarily, indicating the unpleasantness overcame their broader enjoyment of the game.

when I die i stop playing for a couple weeks as it is frustrating. But I do come back after awhile (USA, age 27, permadeath rating: 4/5)

In contrast to the universal frustration at losing loot, few respondents described a sense of loss for their slain character itself. Those who did so described a sense of *sadness* at losing the character, as opposed to their frustration at losing the items.

You also gain a kind of attachment to characters, so having one die is not just frustrating because you've lost everything, but it's also kind of sad. (UK, age 19, permadeath rating: 5/5)

This latter quote supports observations made in Carter et al. (2013), who suggested that character death encourages role-play, as each “character” dies, allowing a new one to be played by the player in their next life.

Awareness of risk provided an adrenaline rush

A remarkably high proportion of respondents referred to adrenaline when describing their enjoyment of *DayZ*, stimulated by the heightened awareness that character death had permanent consequences.

When your character is in danger you feel in danger. Your heart races and you get an adrenaline rush. No other video game does this. (USA, age 18, permadeath rating: 5/5)

Many players spoke of an adrenaline rush that came not during combat, but upon encountering another player. This was attributed to the unpredictability of that situation and the potential for danger, when waiting to see whether the other player would prove to be friendly or hostile.

Encountering another player is a massive adrenaline rush, especially when that player has a weapon out and appears to be a threat. (USA, age 18, permadeath rating: 5/5)

Players described a heightened state of engagement with the game when feeling this adrenaline rush. The effect was characterised as a strong sensation of immersion, or feeling like the game situation was more real.

It adds to the adrenaline response to combat/stressful situations, it really tricks your brain into thinking situations are real and brings you away from the screen and into the game world. (Sweden, age 29, permadeath rating: 5/5)

Numerous respondents referenced the lack of these experiences in other first-person shooter games.

Awareness of risk imbued actions with meaning

Although *DayZ* has no real structured goals, players ascribed a rare sense of meaningfulness to their actions within the game, attributed to the permanent consequences of their actions.

The death being so real, as far as it can be in virtual reality, makes the game seem more real, makes the fear real and the adrenaline real. (UK, age 31, permadeath rating: 1/5)

The sense of meaningfulness was particularly strong with regards to interactions with other players. The high stakes of each interaction made the outcomes seem unpredictable and important, and therefore exciting.

Human interaction leads to unpredictability; and the possibility to make moral/immoral choices; and explore social consequences to survival situations. (UK, age 29, permadeath rating: 5/5)

Players were keenly aware that the sustained feeling of meaningfulness to their actions in *DayZ* was built upon a pattern of smaller moments, each one of which taken in isolation could be a negative experience.

The prolonged periods of boredom from running and anger from death make the moments of glee like finding a nice gun all the sweeter. (UK, age 19, permadeath rating: 4/5)

Players frequently credited *DayZ* with providing *unique* experiences, in the sense of situations and emotions that were distinctive and unlike what was found in other games. The uniqueness of the experience was attributed to its combination of an unstructured “sandbox” environment and the heightened emotional state due to permanent character death.

Only “meaningless” death was considered a negative

An exception to the generally positive acceptance of character death was dying in a way that was considered meaningless, or no fault of the player. Most commonly, this was down to glitches or bugs in the game, but for some players it also included “kill on sight” attacks by other players.

It [permadeath] makes you care about your character more, but it also makes it one of the most tense games out there when bullets start flying. Unfortunately, it makes death by bugs, glitches and random players all the more frustrating. (Netherlands, age 26, permadeath rating: 5/5)

We note the survey was deployed in January 2014, early in *DayZ*'s alpha release. Many of the players' complaints about bugs were tempered by an expectation that they would be fixed in later updates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The survey responses describe the distinctive, overriding experience of *DayZ* as one of tension, anxiety and fear, centred on an anticipated sense of loss. Players tried strenuously to avoid the actual experience of loss, and yet connected that same negative experience with the core attraction they felt towards playing *DayZ*, pithily expressed by one player:

Without the knowledge that if you fail, you lose everything, what are you risking by taking action? What would motivate you to keep playing? (USA, age 27, permadeath rating: 5/5)

The apparently paradoxical attraction of negative affect is an old question in aesthetic theory. We began this paper with a quote from David Hume pondering the “unaccountable” pleasures of sorrow, terror and anxiety in fiction in 1758, and more recent scholars have wrestled with the seeming paradox of the popularity of horror fiction (Bantinaki, 2012; Gaut, 1993). Berys Gaut (1993) disputed the assumption that negative emotions are necessarily unpleasant, since some experiences of negative emotions are demonstrably desirable, and therefore in some sense, pleasurable. Gaut’s argument is consistent with the responses to our survey, which often cited the sensation of fearing loss as the primary motivator that kept them playing *DayZ*. Yet this leaves us with no mechanism for understanding why this negative experience should be pleasurable or motivating.

A possible clue lies in the common reference players made to adrenaline, and the thrill of the potential for danger, which suggests that a heightened state of arousal is the appeal, even though the arousal is in response to a negative stimulus. This corresponds to the *excitation transfer effect*, a phenomenon first detailed in psychology by Dolf Zillmann (1971), in which physiological arousal from one stimulus can carry across to a second stimulus, but remains open to being (re-)interpreted as pleasant or unpleasant depending on the assessment of the second stimulus. So for example, the audience of a horror film sees the killer appear, which increases their arousal due to fear; but before that arousal fades, they see the protagonist escape from the killer, and the heightened arousal is transferred to a positive feeling, experienced as relief. In our case, players appear to seek out situations in which the fear of losing their character’s progress gives them the feeling of adrenaline, and their relief when they survive converts this into a highly positive experience.

The fear of coming across other players is something I always liked about the game. (USA, age 19, permadeath rating: 5/5)

Indeed, the connection has been made before between the attraction of negative affect in fiction and in play. In “The Paradox of Horror”, Katerina Bantinaki (2012) explains the attraction of horror fiction as an analogue of risk play: the natural tendency for people, and in particular children, to seek out forms of play that risk physical injury, such as climbing and fighting, allowing them to test their boundaries and learn about risk and confrontation.

Perhaps (against what the modern culture of fear instructs) we need the challenges that fear-eliciting situations provide, especially when we can experience them in small, controllable doses, so as to become more able to deal with fear when it matters most. (2012, p. 390)

Regardless of the psychological mechanism by which it occurs, what this research shows is that it is not sufficient to say that negative and positive affect are not mutually

exclusive. Rather, we have a clear case in which the positive experience of playing is directly created by the negative experiences that form the core of the game: fear of loss, fear of ambush, anxiety about unpredictable and potentially violent strangers.

To understand the symbiotic relationship between negative and positive affect, it is also necessary to recognise how players think about negative experiences. Moments of negative affect were not taken in isolation, but were instead understood as a necessary constituent component of a broader experience, without which the game would not be as enjoyable or even functional. Many players acknowledged that they were in a sense willingly playing against their own desire to survive and accumulate, as the fulfilment of these wishes would not make a satisfying game:

You hate to lose gear but love collecting it and are bored when you have it all. (UK, age 19, permadeath rating: 4/5)

Taken together, these conclusions complicate what it means to talk about negative and positive experiences. If the death of a character causes a short-term spike in negative affect and a feeling of frustration, but a longer-term increase in positive arousal, and is consciously recognised as both a positive component of the game and something to be avoided in future, any simple assessment of the experience on the grounds of its “positivity” or “negativity” is inadequate and misleading.

That is not to say there is no such thing as a simply negative experience. Character death due to bugs or glitches was universally agreed to be a frustration without an upside, and to a lesser but still substantial extent, being “killed on sight” by another player (often referring to situations where the deceased player didn’t even see the aggressor, who may have killed them from a distance with a powerful sniper rifle) was viewed the same way. It is instructive to consider what sets these negative experiences apart from other instances of death and loss in *DayZ*. The common theme in the descriptions of these incidents was meaninglessness; the events were “random” or didn’t “make sense”, they had “no reason” or happened “with no explanation”. These deaths left players with little ability to respond or to incorporate the lessons of the experience into their subsequent decision-making; as well as no entertaining experience to recall or share with friends. Hence, they were meaningless – and this was the distinguishing factor for pure negative affect experiences.

Inverting this equation reveals something about the attraction of character death in *DayZ*. It is the possibility of losing everything and learning from the experience that, in the words of one respondent, “makes the game mean something.” To understand the appeal of risk in games, therefore, one must look beyond a binary affect-based understanding of the player’s response and consider the meaning that is created through the experience of play.

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